



# FREE TO EXIST

Documenting participation data  
on LGBTIQ+ young people in  
sport and physical activity.

**VicHealth Research Impact Grant Recipient 2022-2024**

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# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Cisgender:** when a person's gender identity and gender expression aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.

**Gender diverse:** is an umbrella term that includes all the different ways gender can be experienced and perceived. It can include people questioning their gender, those who identify as trans/transgender, genderqueer, non-binary, gender non-conforming, agender (having no gender) and other such terms.

**Homophobia:** is the prejudice, discrimination, harassment or acts of violence against those who are same gender attracted (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, MSM [men who have sex with men]); or are perceived to be by others, based on their sexuality. Biphobia refers to the same concept, but specifically direct to bisexual people.

**LGBTIQA+:** is an inclusive term used to represent several of the distinct identities and categories of people within the sexuality/ gender/ sex diverse and queer community, including (but not limited to) Lesbian, Gay Bisexual, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual. The plus (+) denotes all other identities that exist across the communities.

**Non-binary:** refers to when a person's gender identity does not align with binary gender, male/female. Non-binary people may identify as gender fluid, trans masculine, trans feminine, agender, bigender, gender queer and a multitude of other such terms.

**Sexuality:** is the way people experience and express themselves sexually. Sexuality encompasses who a person may be attracted to romantically and sexually.

**Transgender:** (often abbreviated as trans) refers to people whose gender identity is different from the sex they were assigned at birth. Sistergirls are First Nations women assigned male at birth, and brotherboys are First Nations men assigned female at birth. In some regions, sistergirls (sometimes Yimpininni in the Tiwi Islands) and brotherboys have distinct cultural identities and roles.

**Transphobia:** refers to a range of negative, stereotypes, feelings or behaviours towards anyone who is transgender or gender diverse, which often leads to prejudice or discriminatory actions or abuse.

**Heteronormativity:** refers to the ways in which everyday interactions, practices and policies constitute heterosexuality as 'normal' and 'natural', whilst rendering non-heterosexuals as abnormal and unnatural.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LGBTIQ+ issues in sport and movement settings have become common place (Storr, 2021), and regularly get reported and discussed across global media platforms. There is a substantial body of evidence in Australia which identifies that sport and movement settings are unwelcoming and hostile to LGBTIQ+ communities (Storr et al., 2021). Further, the impact of this discrimination in sport and movement settings, most common in youth environments, has significant short- and long-term impacts on young LGBTIQ+ people's health and wellbeing (Symons et al., 2014). There are currently no Australian data that documents the participation rates of LGBTIQ+ communities in sport and physical activity, nor data on what types of activities LGBTIQ+ young people want to participate and engage with, or facilitators of their participation.

The aim of this mixed-method research project was to collect participation data on LGBTIQ+ young people (aged 16-25) in sport and physical activity, whilst exploring the experiences, needs and engagement of LGBTIQ+ young people in sport and movement settings. In total, 20 young people aged 16-25 years participated in 5 focus groups, and 506 LGBTIQ+ young people participated in a quantitative survey.

# KEY FINDINGS

1

Young people continue to experience and witness alarming rates of homophobia/biphobia/ transphobia in sport and movement settings. 53% of LGBTIQ+ young people have witnessed discrimination and 40% have experienced discrimination, mostly through verbal vilification.

2

Experiences of witnessing discrimination is comparable across LGBTIQ+ young people living in metro and rural areas. However, the experiences of being discriminated against is higher for LGBTIQ+ youth living in rural areas (44%) compared to those living in metro areas (35%). However, belonging is greater on average for LGBTIQ+ young people living in rural areas compared to metro areas.

3

Participation rates in sport for young people are complex. The engagement rate of LGBTIQ+ youth participating in at least one competitive or social sport (one or both) is 54.2%. Data indicate that there has been a drop off in sport participation in recent years and post COVID-19 pandemic; 47% of LGBTIQ+ youth were registered to a sports club in 2019, 2020, 2021, or 22, but currently only 37% play social sport and 33% play competitive sport. However, the rates of participation in competitive and/or social sport for 'out' respondents is comparatively lower (specifically, this group is comprised of 15% gay men, 15% lesbian women, 8% queer, and 9% bisexuals, and with the majority indicating a straight/heterosexual sexuality).

4

Young LGBTIQ+ people are engaging with gyms and leisure or fitness facilities at higher rates than with sport, highlighting the future challenges for the sport sector on losing a generation of young people who see gyms and leisure spaces as alternatives to sport participation.

5

When LGBTIQ+ young people do engage in sport and physical activity, their biggest motivations are for physical health and fitness (62%), fun and enjoyment (60%), and mental health (37%).

6

The biggest factors with potential to encourage participation for this group are friend referrals (57%), welcoming and affirming culture of LGBTIQ+ people (45%), and LGBTIQ+ specific come and try programs (42%).

7

Young LGBTIQ+ people have strong views towards pride efforts in sport. They emphasised the challenge of rainbow washing from sport organisations. Further, participants discussed the negative impacts on their mental health, including ongoing debates and discussions of LGBTIQ+ people's lives through the medium of sport (including trans athletes and pride games).



**53%**  
of LGBTIQ+ young people have witnessed discrimination



**44%**  
of LGBTIQ+ young people living in rural areas experienced discrimination compared to **35%** in metro areas



**33%**  
of LGBTIQ+ young people currently play competitive sport. **37%** play social sport



LGBTIQ+ young people engage with gyms or fitness facilities **more than** sport



**62%**  
of LGBTIQ+ young people play sport for physical health and fitness



**57%**  
of LGBTIQ+ young people suggested friend referral or support would encourage participation

# QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FOCUS GROUPS IDENTIFIED SIX KEY THEMES:

- 1. The impact of early school and sport experiences:** This theme related to the impacts of early youth and school experiences in sport, when young people participated in school-based sport and community-based settings.
- 2. Personal circumstances and stories:** This theme relates to personal circumstances and stories of the participants, reflecting the rich diversity across the sample of young people in the LGBTIQ+ spectrum.
- 3. Navigating LGBTIQ+ identity through movement spaces:** This theme relates to how LGBTIQ+ young people navigate their identity through movement spaces, and the processes associated with 'coming out' or disclosing their identity within those spaces (with coaches, teammates etc).
- 4. Representation and visibility:** This theme relates to the concept of how LGBTIQ+ youth are represented and visible across sport and movement spaces.
- 5. Safer spaces in movement settings:** This theme relates to young people's perceptions towards creating safer spaces across movement spaces, and how organisations can provide safety for young people.
- 6. Attitudes towards pride efforts:** The final theme is associated with young people's attitudes towards efforts to promote and enact LGBTIQ+ inclusion across sport and movement settings.

Quantitative and qualitative data paint a concerning picture of young LGBTIQ+ people's participation in sport and physical activity, with lower rates of participation and engagement than the wider population and high rates of discrimination when they do engage. However, more promising, are the perspectives of young people who want to engage in sport and movement, and their motivation for sport and movement spaces to do more to be inclusive.

Our data highlight the need for policy makers, sport managers, and physical activity providers to undertake targeted LGBTIQ+ diversity and inclusion work to ensure that LGBTIQ+ young people can access safe, inclusive, and equitable environments that are free from discrimination. Ongoing education, training, and development related to LGBTIQ+ inclusive practices are important to ensure sport environments are inclusive of LGBTIQ+ people. The consequences of not doing this work are far reaching and may have significant long-term impacts and consequences for LGBTIQ+ people, including trauma, and physical inactivity throughout their life course.

Ensuring young LGBTIQ+ people have positive experiences through adolescence and youth is crucial to encourage lifelong participation and to develop positive relationships with physical activity; sports and physical activity providers must make authentic commitments to ensure that sport and movement spaces are safe and inclusive for LGBTIQ+ young people. Young people want to see authentic pride efforts that engage all sections of LGBTIQ+ communities, efforts which attempt to address ongoing discrimination and hostility towards LGBTIQ+ people.

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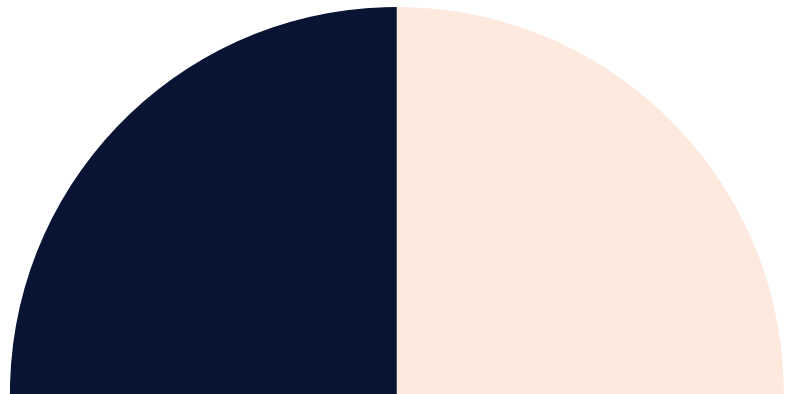
# INTRODUCTION

LGBTIQIA+ issues in sport and movement settings have become common place (Storr, 2021), and regularly get reported and discussed across global media platforms. This has occurred at the grassroots community setting, including discussions around pride rounds and inclusion campaigns, and at the elite level with transgender sport policies and participation attracting significant media coverage. Such topics and debates have thrust LGBTIQIA+ rights into the global spotlight and forced sports clubs and organisations to engage with LGBTIQIA+ inclusion as a diversity management practice. However, the voices of LGBTIQIA+ people are often not represented in discussion or policy decision making circles, despite experiencing ongoing discrimination and vilification across sport and movement settings throughout their life (Storr, Jeanes, Rossi, Lisahunter, 2022; Dennison, Bevan, & Jeanes, 2022).

Young people under the LGBTIQIA+ umbrella are also often neglected by sport organisations, and there has been a lack of targeted action in Australian contexts, to ensure that young LGBTIQIA+ people have safe and inclusive experiences when playing sport and engaging in physical activity (Storr et al. 2022). The experiences of young Australian LGBTIQIA+ people in sporting contexts were first investigated by Symons, who found that homophobic bullying in sport and Physical Education (PE) settings led to significant poor mental health outcomes, such as stress, depression, and anxiety (Symons et al. 2010, 2014). LGBTIQIA+ young people are at significantly greater risk of mental ill-health than their peers, largely due to discrimination, bullying and prejudice based on homo/bi/ transphobia (Robinson, et. al., 2013). However, how the discrimination and exclusion impacts on the participation of LGBTIQIA+ young people in sport and physical activity is relatively unknown.

Involvement in sport and physical activity has been identified as having positive outcomes for young people, such as increased social skills, a sense of belonging, and improved mental and physical health and wellbeing (Bailey, 2005). Ensuring young people have safe and inclusive experiences in sport and movement settings, free from discrimination and bullying is paramount. Research shows that if young people have positive experiences during their youth and adolescent with sport, they are more likely to continue it later in life (Bailey, 2005; Armour, Sandford, & Duncombe, 2013).

There are currently no Australian data that documents the participation rates of LGBTIQIA+ people in sport and physical activity. Furthermore, there is no data on what types of activities LGBTIQIA+ young people want to participate and engage with, or who facilitators that participation. This lack of data is challenging for those attempting to create or improve policies, practices, and processes to address health inequalities for LGBTIQIA+ communities through the medium of sport and physical activity. The aim of this mixed-method research project was to collect participation data on LGBTIQIA+ people in sport and physical activity, by exploring the experiences, needs and engagement of LGBTIQIA+ young people in sport and movement settings.







## AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### The key aims and objectives for the project include:

1. Measuring and documenting participation rates of LGBTQIA+ young people in sport and physical activity
2. Documenting the current levels and prevalence of discrimination within sport and movement settings amongst LGBTQIA+ young people
3. Exploring the experiences in sport and movement settings of LGBTQIA+ young people,
4. Identifying barriers and facilitators to sport and physical activity for LGBTQIA+ young people

### The associated research questions were as follows:

1. What are the current participation rates of LGBTQIA+ young people in sport and physical activity?
2. What are the current levels and prevalence of discrimination in sport and movement settings amongst LGBTQIA+ young people?
3. What are the current experiences of LGBTQIA+ young people in sport and movement settings?
4. What are the barriers and facilitators for LGBTQIA+ young people wanting to engage in sport and physical activity?

# BACKGROUND

This project builds on pilot study research (conducted by the lead author) which explored the experiences and attitudes of LGBTQIA+ young people in sport and school settings in New South Wales. LGBTQIA+ young people experience significant discrimination and barriers to participation in youth sport and school settings (Storr, Robinson, Davies, Nicholas, & Collison, 2020). Despite the discrimination and barriers, results showed that young LGBTQI+ people want to access the benefits of sport and movement, such as mental and social health, friendships, and social support.

In Victoria, a number of key policy imperatives to address the social, legal, and health inequities of LGBTQIA+ communities have emerged. 'Pride in Our Future', Victoria's whole-of-government LGBTQIA+ strategy, outlines the Victorian Government's plan to drive equality for LGBTQIA+ communities for the next ten years. Further, Health Promotion organisations and Local Government Areas have also made public and policy commitments to increase physical activity in LGBTQIA+ communities. This research provides important data for LGBTQIA+ Victorians to local and state government departments, as well as local, state, and national sport and physical activity providers. The sport sector, however, has been slow to respond to efforts to address discrimination for LGBTQIA+ people, and engage in LGBTQIA+ inclusion (Storr, 2021).

Increasing physical activity amongst Australian populations has been a focus for many years. A recent National Health Survey (2022) found that 23.9% of people aged 15 years and above met the physical activity guidelines for their age group (ABS, 2022). For people aged 15-17 years, the proportion meeting physical activity guidelines was 5.6%. Overall, 19.5% of 15-17 years met the strength-based guidelines 22.4% of adults aged 18-64 years met physical activity guidelines. Our research aims to provide insights into levels of engagement in physical activity and sport participation for LGBTQIA+ young people.

## Project Partners

This research project was a collaboration and partnership between the investigating team and community and policy partners, as per the guidelines of the funding application and the nature of translational research. With both the community and industry playing an active part in the research process, maximum impact of the research was ensured. The project partners were as follows:

### **Proud2Play** (Community Partner)

Victoria's peak organisations for LGBTQIA+ sport and active recreation.

### **VicSport** (Community Partner)

the peak body for sport and active recreation in Victoria.

### **Thorne Harbour Health** (Policy Partner)

the peak LGBTQIA+ community-controlled organisation working to deliver effective community-driven health and wellbeing programs.

### **Sport and Recreation Victoria** (Policy Partner)

The Victorian State Government department dedicated to supporting Victoria's sport and recreation sector.



# SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS LITERATURE AND DATA

In line with the research questions and aims of the project, an overview of the relevant literature and previous research related to LGBTIQIA+ young people in sport is presented. More specifically, participation rates in sport and physical activity, levels of discrimination in sport, young people's experiences in sport and movement settings, and barriers and facilitators to young people's engagement are explored. There is a significant body of scholarship on LGBTIQIA+ young people, primarily in school sport and Health and Physical Education (HPE) (Landi, 2018; Landi, Flory & Storr, 2023). From a methodological perspective, it can be challenging for researchers to document the full breadth of engagement and participation in sport contexts, due to young people not yet being out or affirming their gender or sexuality, and thus declining to participate in research projects. For the purpose of this report, the literature on young people is the main focus.

## Participation rates in sport and physical activity

**There is no conclusive Australian data that documents the prevalence of sport participation or physical activity of LGBTIQIA+ Australians, at all ages.** Several studies have explored the experiences of LGBTIQIA+ Victorians who have engaged in sport (Fletcher, 2014; Symons et al 2010), however these studies lacked participation numbers. Additionally, sport participation data from the ABS, and Sport Australia's AusPlay data do not include sexuality or gender identity. However, there is some evidence to suggest that beyond school PE, LGBTIQIA+ participation is lower than the wider population (Symons et al., 2014). Recent American research was able to capture LGBTIQIA+ inclusive population data that revealed youth team sport participation is almost half that of heterosexual youth (CDCP, 2016). Although there is no current data on sport participation of LGBTIQIA+ youth in Australia, US data (the only comparable data available) suggests it is well below that of heterosexual and cisgender peers. Additionally, Kulick et al. (2019) also found that US "LGBTIQIA+ high school students play sports at a significantly lower rate compared to straight students, and among those who play sports, LGBTQ respondents felt significantly less safe compared to straight and cisgender students" (p.939).

AusPlay (2023) data identified 60% of the 15-19 young people age group participating in sport-related activity once a week, but the activity type was not specified in a time frame for participation. Further, Victorian Government data indicated that only 16.5% of LGBTIQIA+ adults in Victoria were a member of a sports group (Victorian Agency for Health Information, 2020). However, there is a lack of consistent data collection towards LGBTIQIA+ people with a focus on sport rather than on physical activity and recreation.

## Discrimination in sport and movement settings for LGBTIQIA+ people

There is a substantial body of evidence in Australia which identified that sport and movement settings are unwelcoming and hostile to LGBTIQIA+ communities (Storr et al., 2021). Further, the impact of this discrimination in sport and movement settings, most common in youth environments, has significant short- and long-term impacts on young LGBTIQIA+ people's health and wellbeing (Symons et al., 2014). Equal Play found that homophobia and transphobia communicated to the students that 'they are not welcome here,' forming a life-long barrier to participation in sport. If LGBTIQIA+ youth face negative experiences of physical activity in sport and PE, this can be detrimental to not only their mental health but also their short- and long-term physical health (Symons et al., 2014). A decrease in sporting participation in adolescence occurs in young people aged between fourteen to eighteen years (VicHealth, 2018); this is also the period in which LGBTIQIA+ young people become more disengaged with sport in comparison to their heterosexual, cisgender peers (Symons et al, 2010; 2014; CDCP, 2016).

In 2014 the levels and prevalence of homophobia were documented in a landmark Australian study by Denison & Kitchin (2015). 'Out in the Fields' revealed that 80% of participants had witnessed or experienced homophobia in sport, and 50% of lesbian and gay participants had been personally targeted. According to Storr, O'Sullivan, Symons, Spaaij, & Sbaraglia (2017) 75% of people involved in Australian cricket had witnessed or experienced homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia. These findings were confirmed in a South Australian study which revealed 80% of LGBTIQIA+ participants in sport had experienced or witnessed discrimination, with verbal homophobia being the most prominent form (Drummond et al. 2019).

A recent synthesis of data on discrimination in sport for LGBTIQIA+ people found strong evidence that discrimination is still common in sport, and that sport managers and administrators have been slow to respond to addressing the problem (Denison, Bevan, & Jeanes, 2022). Further, the authors stated that the "consistent evidence that LGBTQ+ people continue to experience discrimination and exclusion in sport supports the need identified by UN agencies, public health agencies, and scholars for urgent, collaborative, solution-focused research to identify ways to stop discriminatory behaviours and mitigate any harm being caused to members of this population" (2022; 407). LGBTIQIA+ young people may also choose to not come out or disclose their sexuality, over fear they will be targeted with homophobic abuse. For example, research showed that when LGB young people came out to their teammates in sport, they were more likely to report being a target of homophobia (Denison et al., 2021).

In further support of these findings for the Australian context, Storr and colleagues, in their analysis of five research projects exploring LGBTIQ+ inclusion in Australian sport, found that discrimination is still common and that the recent rise in targeted LGBTIQ+ diversity work suggests that efforts to address anti-LGBTIQ+ discrimination in sport have failed (Storr et al., 2022).

### Experiences of LGBTIQ+ young people in sport

An overview of the relevant literature related to LGBTIQ+ young people in sport and physical activity was provided in the final report of the pilot study, along with academic publications (Storr, Robinson et al., 2020; Storr, Nicholas et al., 2022). In this current report, recent additions to the field are discussed. For example, Landi, Flory and Storr (2023) edited a special edition in one of the leading journals *Sport, Education and Society*, on "LGBTIQ+ topics in physical education". They outlined four key streams of research related to physical education in school settings: 1) Attitudes, perceptions, and climate of physical education for LGBTIQ+ people, 2) experiences of LGBTIQ+ teachers, 3) Physical Education teacher education, and 4) LGBTIQ+ student experiences. Landi, Flory, and Storr (2023) identified that LGBTIQ+ students continue to experience challenges and ongoing discrimination, and this causes ongoing stress, poor mental health, and exclusion from these spaces.

Research on the importance of understanding different social and political climates and how these impact LGBTIQ+ young people, has been published in various countries all over the world. Recently German researchers explored how sexual and gender diversity in schools is perceived from the perspectives of PE teachers, and the lack of acceptance and tolerance towards LGBTIQ+ students (Muller & Böhlke, 2023). In Spain researchers found that traditional gender roles and stereotypes were reinforced in PE, which caused LGBTIQ+ students to disengage, from being mocked and insulted in classes (Hortigüela-Alcala, Chiva-Bartoll, Hernando-Garijo, & Sánchez-Miguel, 2023). The authors also highlighted the impact of such negative experiences on the young people's families, drawing attention to the need for policymakers and schools to consider the wider repercussions for exclusion. The ongoing heteronormativity of PE and the 'deeply rooted gendered practices', which lead to long lasting trauma for LGBTIQ+ young people were reported by Lynch and colleagues in UK research (2023).

Trans and gender diverse young people's experiences in PE and school sport spaces have also been investigated in recent years (Devis-Devis et al. 2023); a systematic review documented cis-heteronormativity showing that it is still present in schools resulting in trans students' negative memories of PE (Sáenz-Macana, A. M., Pereira-García et al. 2023). In particular, "toilets, swimming and certain gender, polarised PE activities are sites of intense discomfort and distress, while changing/locker rooms are experienced as particularly 'traumatic spaces' for many LGBTIQ+ young people" (Neary & McBride, 2021; p. 45). Drury and colleagues (2023) argue that researchers need to consider that LGBT young people's experiences differ from trans students' experiences, and that each group needs to be considered in its own right. Overall research has found that PE and school sport spaces continue to be problematic for LGBTIQ+ young people and causing impacts on their involvement in later life. This research will investigate the current experiences of young LGBTIQ+ people in sport and physical activity, and explore the impacts of ongoing discrimination in sport participation and engagement during youth and early adulthood.

## METHODS

A mixed methods research design was used and the research was given full ethical clearance with low risk, from the Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee - Ref: 20226670-11572. The research team guaranteed that research sensitivities and ethical principles were carefully followed throughout the whole research process, to ensure that by participating in the research, young people were not potentially outed or put in positions which jeopardised their safety. For example, young people aged 16-18 were allowed to provide informed consent to reduce the risk of their LGBTIQ+ identity being disclosed to friends or family members.

The research team collected data at a variety of LGBTIQ+ specific community events, in addition to online and recruitment via social media. The survey design borrowed tools validated from the AusPlay survey (to compare sport participation and physical activity rates, 'Out in the Fields' research (Denison and Kitchin, 2014, and other research focused on discrimination of LGBTIQ+ people in sport). The focus group interview schedule was based on research and literature exploring youth engagement in sport and physical activity. The semi-structured interview schedule focused on attitudes towards and experiences of sport and physical activity, and the gathering of data on improvements and suggestions for more inclusive sport and movement spaces for LGBTIQ+ young people.

## Survey

The survey was distributed online and across social media channels, with the support of our community and industry partners. The research team used paid advertising via Facebook and Instagram to promote the survey and reach the target populations. Because it was important to reach LGBTIQIA+ communities not using online spaces, and also because of the risk of dismissing the survey because they did not participate or have a good relationship with sport, the survey was framed around finding out how LGBTIQIA+ people keep active. The research team also attended some key events to increase participation in the survey, for example, Melbourne's Midsumma festival and associated events, which form part of the LGBTIQIA+/Pride festival. The Pride festival runs from mid-January to Mid-February and is a collection of public events, celebrations, and activities designed to promote and celebrate LGBTIQIA+ communities across Victoria. The flagship event is carnival day, which takes place in central Melbourne, and allows LGBTIQIA+ sports clubs, organisations, charities, support services, to promote themselves to all LGBTIQIA+ communities.

During the festivals and events, the research team handed out QR codes to enable people to access the survey. The research team also attended 'Victoria's Pride' which is a similar event, in Northern Melbourne, and centres around a large street festival. The research team worked alongside Proud2Play at this event, and set up tables and chairs with physical copies for patrons to complete. Participants were incentivised by being able to receive a range of LGBTIQIA+ stickers (such as pride flags/ bi flags/ non-binary flags) when they completed the survey. This was seen as a thank you to participants for taking the time to complete the survey. Throughout the day researchers were able to have conversations with people and discuss their experiences of sport and physical activity.

Prior to analysis, the data were cleaned. This process included discarding any duplicate or inauthentic responses to ensure accuracy and integrity. As part of this process, the research team decided that heterosexual respondents were to be maintained in the sample. As data collection happened at LGBTIQIA+ major events, which are open to all including LGBTIQIA+ people, allies, and the general population, the research team decided to collect data from all people who consented to participate, regardless of identity and sexual orientation, or if they identified with the term, LGBTIQIA+.

This decision was made for two key reasons. First, research has shown youth are still exploring their identity and even while aligning with the LGBTIQIA+ population they may not yet identify outside of the 'heterosexual' sexuality grouping, or they may disregard a need for a definitive label of their experience.

As such, the descriptor, heterosexual, was provided as an option in the survey. Cis-gendered men in particular are known to distinguish between their experiences of same-gender attraction and their identity as heterosexual, as observed by Persson et al. (2019).

Given that sexual identity and gender identity are often experienced as distinct from one another, it is possible for gender-diverse and gender-questioning people to identify as both heterosexual and trans/gender diverse.

Second, without knowing their history or background, the research team did not have the right to exclude participants based on sexual orientation, and every participant self-selected to complete the survey. It is not uncommon for a high percentage of respondents to identify as heterosexual also, with a high percentage of Drummond et al. (2019) identifying as heterosexual.

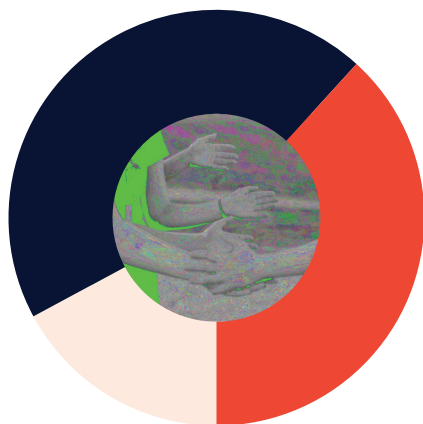
The cleaned dataset was used to conduct an in-depth examination of LGBTIQIA+ youth participation in sport and leisure activities. Analysis focussed on how participation varied according to different levels of engagement, types of activities, and across various gender and sexuality identities. Additionally, the research team assessed the prevalence of discrimination witnessed or experienced by respondents based on their identity. The investigation also extended to outcome measures that encompassed feelings of acceptance, belonging, and involvement, dissecting these sentiments across the aforementioned groups; this provided a more nuanced understanding of respondents' experiences in sport and physical activity participation.

## Focus Groups

Five focus groups were conducted. Three of the groups included young people who currently play and engage in sport and physical activity, and two included young people who did not currently participate and engage in sport or physical activity. Recruitment was conducted via an email and poster, which shared information about the research project and focus groups. The recruitment was done at an arm's length process, through our industry and community partners. Proud2Play, VicHealth, and Thorne Harbour Health, shared the information on the social media channels and sent to their mailing lists.

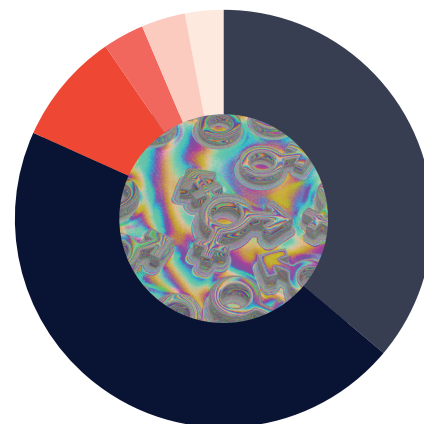
The research team also posted across their social media platforms inviting other LGBTIQIA+ organisations in Victoria to share the research opportunity. In total, 20 young people aged 16-25 participated in the focus groups, and each focus group size varied between 3 to 5 participants. The focus group interviews were transcribed using the transcription software Otter, and then later checked and verified by the research team. The transcripts were then analysed and coded, via a coding framework, using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

# KEY FINDINGS: QUANTITATIVE RESULTS



Engagement type

● Complete engagement	196	38.70%
● Leisure only engagement	130	25.70%
● Sport only engagement	44	8.70%
● No engagement	136	26.90%



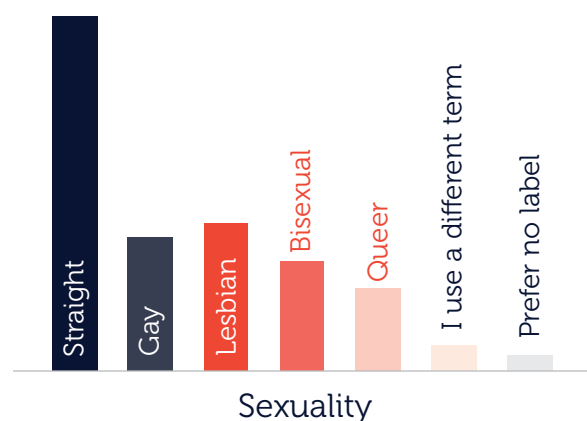
Gender

● Male or Man	183	36.2%
● Female or Woman	231	45.7%
● Non-binary	44	8.7%
● Trans Woman	16	3.2%
● Trans Man	17	3.4%
● I use a different term	14	2.8%
● Prefer not to say	1	0.2%

## Respondent characteristics

In total, 506 participants completed a survey, and that data were included in this report. Respondent characteristics were examined to assess variations in gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status, cultural and linguistic diversity (CALD), and Indigenous identity. In addition, to assess the extent of their engagement in sport and physical activity, LGBTIQ+ youth respondents aged 16-25 were grouped into mutually exclusive categories, including Sport-Only Engagement (exclusive participation in competitive or social sport), Leisure-Only Engagement (sole engagement with fitness facilities), Complete Engagement Group (participation in both sport and fitness facilities), and the No Engagement (no participation in the specified activities).

The findings showcase diversity within the LGBTIQ+ community sample. Overall, a notable portion of the respondents identified with diverse backgrounds: 42.7% identified as culturally or linguistically diverse (CALD), 16.4% as having a disability, and 36.6% as Indigenous. Disaggregating this by sexual orientation, higher disability rates were observed among queer (25%), lesbian (20.93%), bisexual (21.88%), and gay (23.08%) respondents compared to heterosexuals (7.77%). CALD status was higher among gay (53.85%) and heterosexual (56.31%) respondents, contrasting with lower percentages in queer (20.83%), lesbian (34.88%), and bisexual (25.56%) individuals. Indigenous identity is notably higher among gay (52.56%) and heterosexual (49.51%) respondents than among other sexual orientations. These findings underscore the importance of inclusivity and the acknowledgment of diverse identities within the LGBTIQ+ community, highlighting the varied experiences and backgrounds that influence participation in sports and leisure activities.

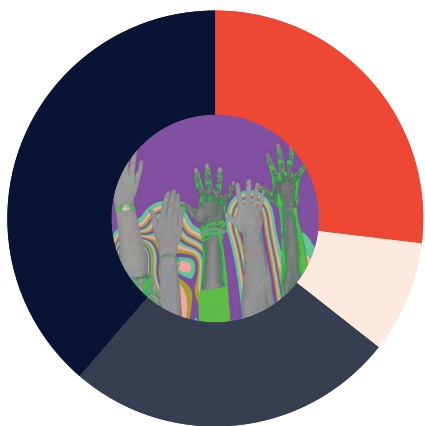


Sexuality

● Straight (Heterosexual)	206	40.7%
● Gay	78	15.4%
● Lesbian	86	17.0%
● Bisexual	64	12.6%
● Queer	48	9.5%
● I use a different term	15	3.0%
● Prefer not to have a label	9	1.8%



## KEY FINDINGS



Multiple lived experiences

● Disability	16.40%
● CALD	42.70%
● Indigenous	36.60%

Table 1: LGBTIQ+ respondent intersectionality

	Gay	Heterosexual	Queer	Lesbian	Bisexual
Disability	23.1%	7.8%	25.0%	20.9%	21.9%
CALD	53.9%	56.3%	20.8%	34.9%	25.6%
Indigenous	52.6%	49.5%	6.3%	34.9%	12.5%

# LGBTIQ+ YOUTH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION

Participants were asked to self-report whether they had participated in any physical activity (including active recreation and sport) within the last 12 months, and on how many days in an average week (last 3-month window) that they had engaged in at least 30 minutes of moderate or vigorous intensity physical activity. Overall, 91% of respondents engaged in at least one type of physical activity within the last 12 months. When examining engagement in moderate or vigorous physical activity, 21% of participants reported engaging in less than the recommended 2.5 hours/week for adults. While our research focused on the types of engagement in sport and physical activity by LGBTIQ+ youth, it is critical to monitor physical activity levels in line with guidelines thresholds for health outcomes.

These data showed that the greatest regular participation in active recreation activities occurs through informal channels (53%), followed by playing social sport (37%) and muscle strengthening or fitness/aerobic exercises or classes at home (34%). This supports a movement towards flexible activity solutions that cater to individual schedules and preferences. However, this does not negate more structured engagement, with 47% of respondents reporting they had been registered players with a sport team or club in either 2019, 2020, 2021 or 2022 and 64% of respondents indicating that they currently use a gym or a form of fitness/leisure centre.

## Key Statistics:

**47%** respondents were registered players with a sport team or club in either 2019, 2020, 2021 or 2022.

**64%** of respondents currently use a gym or a form of fitness/leisure centre.

**Table 2:**  
LGBTIQ+ respondent engagement

Active recreation (e.g. walking, cycling)	<b>53%</b>
Play social sport	<b>37%</b>
Muscle strengthening exercises, or fitness / aerobics exercises or classes at home	<b>34%</b>
Play competitive sport	<b>33%</b>
Muscle strengthening exercises, fitness / aerobics exercises or classes at a facility, gym, or centre	<b>29%</b>
Compete in events	<b>21%</b>
I coach, umpire or administrator	<b>17%</b>

Considering the types of organisations or venues where activity took place, public spaces for informal sports or leisure (40.5%) were the highest proportion, closely followed by gym or fitness club attendance (39.7%). This reflects the appeal of accessible and flexible activity options. Participation at sports clubs (30.6%) and recreational clubs or associations (23.9%) remains significant, indicating that communal and competitive venues are still valued, although to a lesser extent and utilisation. Of note, 21.1% of participants reported engagement in events such as fun runs, highlighting the role of organised, community events in promoting physical activity engagement. Less common are engagements with private studios (20.6%), indicating a niche preference for specialised fitness classes. These insights emphasise that flexible, inclusive, and accessible options could further engage the community and support continued participation in different types of physical activity.

**Table 3:**  
Organisations/venues where activity took place

Sports club or association	<b>30.6%</b>
Recreation club or association (e.g., social club, abseiling association)	<b>23.9%</b>
Gym/Fitness club/sports/leisure centre	<b>39.7%</b>
Private studio (e.g., dance, yoga, Pilates)	<b>20.6%</b>
Individual personal trainer or coach	<b>15.4%</b>
Public space (including park, oval, beach etc)	<b>40.5%</b>
Events (e.g., fun run or Parkrun)	<b>21.1%</b>
Work	<b>9.1%</b>
Educational institution	<b>13.8%</b>
Community-run programs	<b>7.5%</b>
Other	<b>2.8%</b>

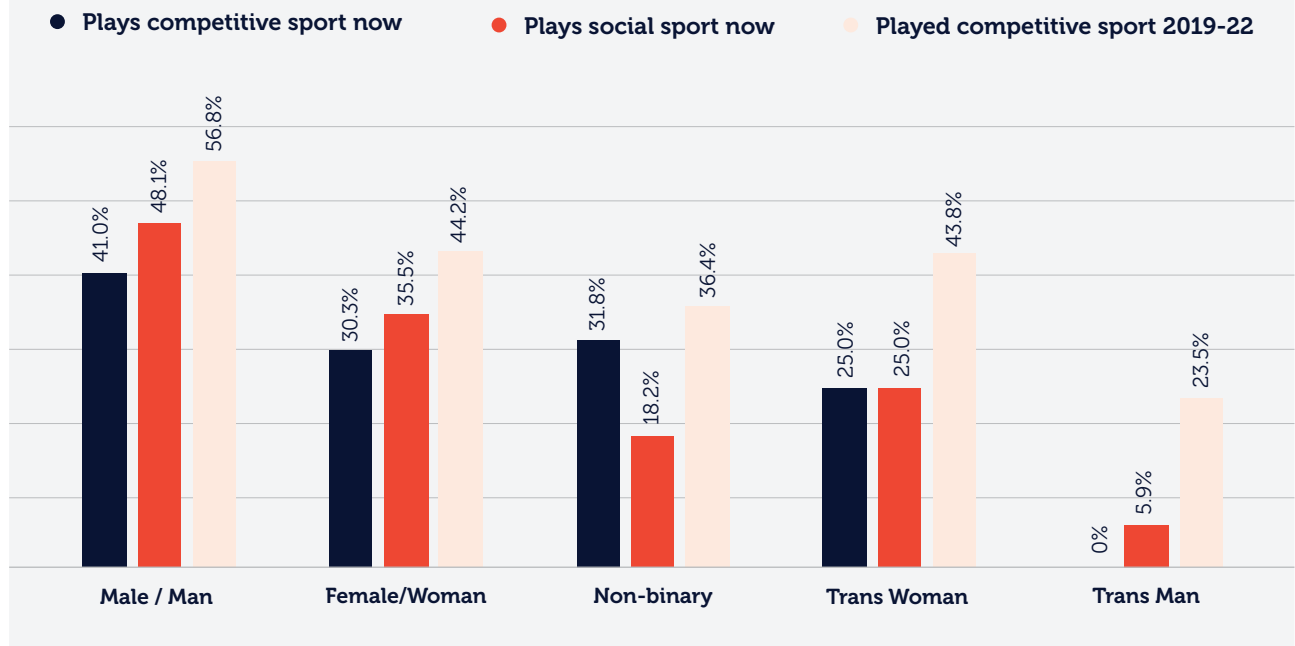
Data indicates that there has been a drop off in sport participation in recent years and post COVID-19 pandemic; 47% of LGBTIQ+ youth were registered to a sports club in either 2019, 2020, 2021, or 22, but currently only 33% play competitive sport. This shows a reduced continuing engagement with sport across competitive avenues. However, this difference varies greatly according to gender within the sample. For example, while the comparison between historical and current participation rates in competitive sports indicates a decline across all gender identities, transgender groups show the largest decline; trans women respondents from 43.8% historically to 25.0% at present and trans men from 23.5% to no current participation.



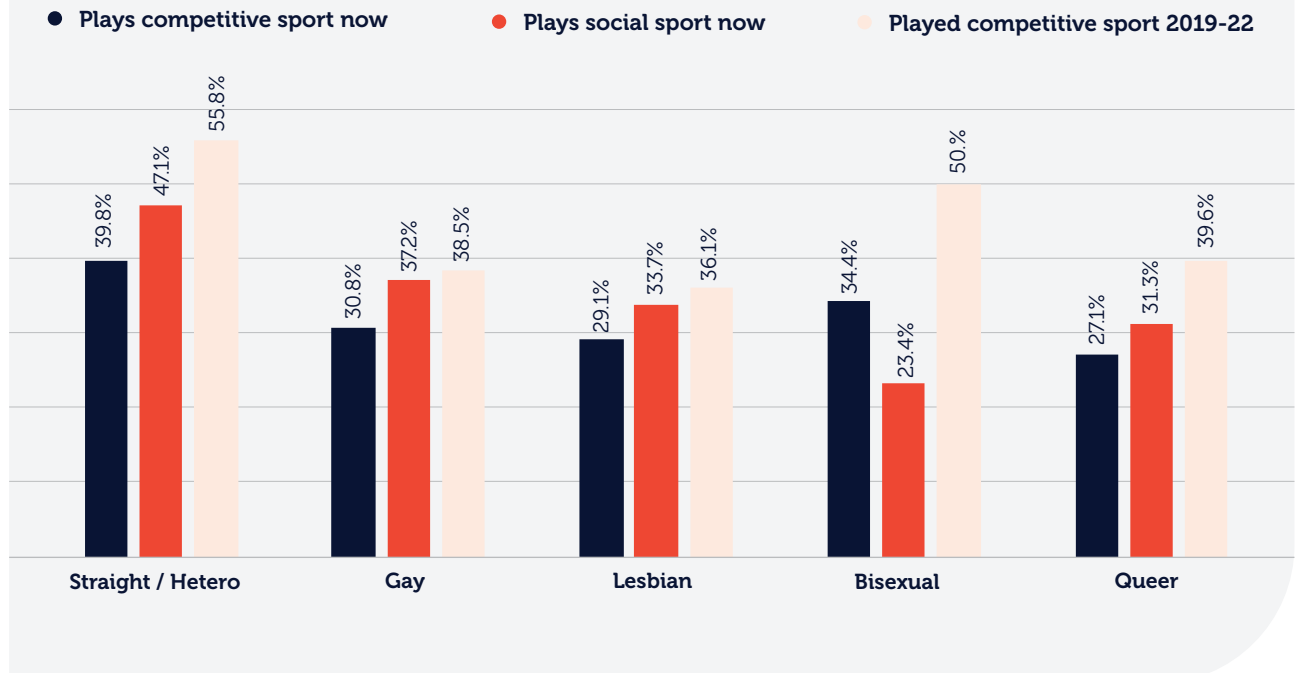
The data also shows that participation rates in sport for young people are complex. The engagement rate of LGBTIQ+ youth participating in at least one of competitive or social sport (one or both) is 54.2%. However, the rates of participation in competitive and/or social sport for 'out' respondents is comparatively lower (specifically, this group is comprised as 15% gay men, 15% lesbian women, 8% queer, and 9% bisexuals, and 50% indicating a straight/heterosexual sexuality).

The engagement rate of LGBTIQ+ youth participating in at least one of competitive or social sport (one or both) also can be compared with broader national data, such as the AusPlay research. AusPlay reports 60% of 15-19-year-olds participating in sport-related activity at least once per week, without specifying the nature of the activity. Findings support that LGBTIQ+ individuals aged 16-25, despite being a larger sample of ages, engage with sport activities (54.2%) to a lesser extent than the general population (60%).

**Figure 1: Participation rates in sport by gender identity:**  
Proportion of each group engaging in competitive and social sport activities



**Figure 2: Participation rates in sport by sexuality:**  
Proportion of each group engaging in competitive and social sport activities



Of those LGBTIQ+ youth respondents playing competitive and social forms of sport, the greatest participation numbers were evident for badminton (16%), basketball (16%) and Australia Rules Football (15%). However, these levels of participation did not necessarily translate into feelings of acceptance by participants. Specifically, badminton was associated with an average score of 4.92 on a 7-point scale, where 1 = not at all accepted and 7 = completely accepted. Feelings of acceptance in basketball and Australian Rules Football were 4.86 and 4.53, respectively. Only moderate acceptance was reported for those sports with greater levels of participation.

### Discrimination and Vilification

Experiences of homophobia, biphobia, or vilification based on identity were reported by 39.6% of LGBTIQ+ youth respondents, with 52.9% witnessing such acts. These data suggest that respondents with no engagement in sports or leisure activities reported the lowest levels of witnessing (32.4%) and experiencing (16.2%) homophobia, biphobia, or vilification based on their identity, compared to those in other engagement groups. Conversely, those fully engaged in both leisure and sports activities reported witnessing and experiencing such negative incidents at much higher rates, with 58.2% and 50.5% respectively saying they had witnessed or experienced such behaviours at some stage. Interestingly, more respondents in the leisure only engagement group reported experiencing such behaviour (47.7%) compared to the sport only group (36.4%).

### Key statistics:

**53%** of respondents have witnessed homophobia, biphobia or any vilification based on their identity.

**40%** of respondents have experienced homophobia, biphobia or any vilification based on their identity.

**Table 4:**  
LGBTIQ+ respondent sport registration and feelings of acceptance

	Registration	Feeling of acceptance
Badminton	16%	4.92
Basketball	16%	4.86
Australian Rules Football	15%	4.53
Football/Soccer	10%	4.92
Athletics	9%	5.00
Other	8%	4.90
Netball	8%	5.08
Swimming	8%	5.29
Golf	7%	4.71
Rock Climbing	5%	5.00
Cricket	5%	4.54
Tennis	5%	5.33
Hockey	4%	4.80
Bowls	4%	4.48
Roller Derby	3%	5.27
Gymnastics	3%	4.88
Sailing	2%	5.57
Rugby Union	2%	4.44
Rugby League	1%	4.00
Volleyball	1%	-



Gay men report the highest rates of witnessing homophobia at 76.62%, and 63.64% of gay men experiencing homophobia.

**Table 5:**  
LGBTIQ+ respondent instances witnessing or experiencing discrimination by sexuality

Sexuality	Witness		Experience	
	No	Yes	No	Yes
Heterosexual (straight)	62.25%	37.75%	68.63%	31.38%
Gay	23.38%	76.62%	36.36%	63.64%
Lesbian	43.02%	56.98%	54.65%	45.35%
Bisexual	37.50%	62.50%	59.38%	40.63%
Queer	39.58%	60.42%	66.67%	33.33%
I use a different term	46.67%	53.34%	80.00%	20.00%
Prefer not to have a label	55.56%	44.44%	77.78%	22.22%
Prefer not to say	0%	0%	0%	0%



**Table 6:**  
LGBTIQ+ respondent instances witnessing or experiencing discrimination by gender

Gender	Witness		Experience	
	No	Yes	No	Yes
Male or man	46.96%	53.03%	56.35%	43.65%
Female or woman	49.13%	50.87%	64.78%	35.22%
Non-binary	31.82%	68.18%	52.27%	47.73%
Trans woman	56.25%	43.75%	56.25%	43.75%
Trans man	58.82%	41.18%	70.59%	29.41%
I use a different term	35.71%	64.29%	57.14%	42.86%
Prefer not to say	100.00%	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%



**Table 7:**  
LGBTIQ+ respondent instances witnessing or experiencing discrimination by category

Gender	Category	Complete	Leisure only	Sport only	No
		engagement	engagement	engagement	engagement
Witnessed homophobia, biphobia or any vilification based on your identity	No	40.31%	38.46%	36.36%	67.65%
	Yes - once	32.14%	36.15%	22.73%	18.38%
	Yes - often	25.00%	24.62%	36.36%	11.03%
	Yes - always	1.02%	0.77%	4.55%	2.94%
Experienced homophobia, biphobia or any vilification based on your identity	No	47.96%	52.31%	63.64%	83.82%
	Yes - once	25.00%	30.77%	15.91%	9.56%
	Yes - often	22.96%	14.62%	15.91%	2.94%
	Yes - always	2.55%	2.31%	4.55%	3.68%

47%

Respondents were registered players with a sport team or club in either 2019, 2020, 2021 or 2022.



## Barriers to engagement

LGBTIQ+ respondents perceived a number of barriers to engagement in sport and physical activities as significant. Safety in public facilities was rated as the most significant barrier (5.1/7), followed by the gendered nature of sport and activities, lack of appropriate or inclusive facilities, homophobic or transphobic discrimination and lack of a safe place (all scoring an average of 5.0/7).

Conversely, when ranking barriers according to the extent to which the respondent had been personally impacted, differences emerged and overall, a contrast between respondents' lived experience and their perception of significance was evident. The gendered nature of sports and activities and lack of social interactions or community received were perceived to have been most impactful to the respondents' ability to engage in sport and physical activities.

## Outcome Measures

To measure belonging we employed a 4-item scale. This scale included measures for respondents' perceived connectedness with their social networks and community belonging, inspired by existing social connection and belongingness measures. Trust in others was evaluated, as well as the sense of safety and security. Responses were gathered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). The findings demonstrated a moderate role of sport and leisure activities in feelings of belonging (4.6 out of 7) in our LGBTIQ+ youth respondents.

Involvement was operationalised within our findings through the psychological continuum model (PCM). Three fundamental constructs were incorporated into the PCM: pleasure, centrality, and sign. When applied to sport and leisure contexts, these constructs depict involvement as the extent to which individuals derive hedonic value or enjoyment (pleasure), symbolic value through self-expression (sign), and the level to which the sport and/or leisure activity assumes a central role in an individual's life (centrality). A moderate level of involvement is evident for LGBTIQ+ respondents aged 16-25 years with an average sign of 4.5 out of 7, pleasure of 4.9 out of 7 and centrality of 4.4 out of 7. A more detailed breakdown of involvement items showed respondents reporting as follows: 'I undertake sport and physical activity because I like it' and 'I really enjoy undertaking sport and physical activity' an average score of 5.0 out of 7.

**Figure 3:**  
LGBTIQ+ respondent perceived significance of barriers to engagement



**Figure 4:**  
LGBTIQ+ respondent personal impact of barriers to engagement



**Figure 5:**  
LGBTIQ+ respondent sense of belonging



**Figure 6:**

LGBTIQ+ respondent level of sport involvement (PCM)



When examining belonging and involvement, leisure only engagement demonstrated the greatest averages compared to other levels of engagement, followed by complete engagement. This is interesting, because in broader population samples we would expect outcomes to increase as engagement increases; here that is not the case. As is expected, the no engagement group exhibited the lowest outcome averages across metrics.

The no engagement group included a high proportion of females (43%) and trans men (9%) respondents compared to other groups. Compared to other groups a high number of respondents identifying as 'queer' (17%), made up the no engagement group. This group was also least likely to have witnessed and/or experienced homophobia, biphobia or vilification as previously asserted.

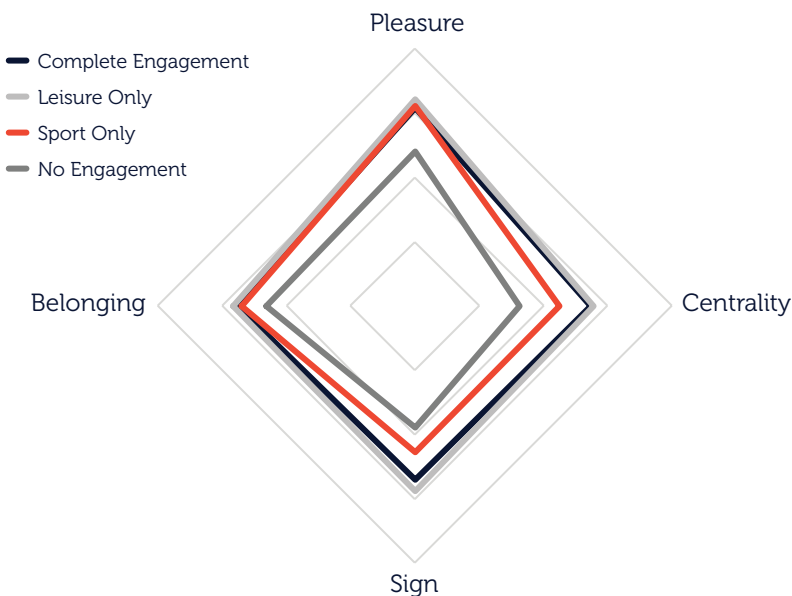
**Table 8:**

**Summary of belonging and involvement across LGBTIQ+ engagement groups**

	Complete Engagement	Leisure Only Engagement	Sport Only Engagement	No Engagement
Pleasure	5.08	5.21	5.11	4.41
Centrality	4.74	4.78	4.25	3.63
Sign	4.70	4.88	4.28	3.89
Belonging	4.76	4.83	4.69	4.31

**Figure 7:**

**Comparison of belonging and involvement across LGBTIQ+ engagement groups**




# KEY FINDINGS: QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Analysis of the qualitative data identified 6 key themes. The themes had a number of associated secondary themes (3-5) depending on the theme. The key primary themes, and associated secondary themes are as follows:

- 1 The impact of early school and sport experiences:** This theme related to the impacts of early youth and school experiences in sport, primarily when young people participated in school-based sport and community-based settings. Unfortunately, many participants had negative experiences and these experiences had long lasting impacts. The associated secondary themes were discrimination in school sport, limited understanding of LGBTIQ+ student needs, type of school and culture, and family support and influence.
- 2 Personal circumstances and stories:** This theme related to personal circumstances and stories associated with participants, reflecting the rich diversity across the sample of young people and LGBTIQ+ spectrum. The associated secondary themes were Trans and Gender Diverse (TGD) specific barriers, motivations to develop healthy habits, physical activity on own terms and schedule.
- 3 Navigating LGBTIQ+ identity through movement spaces:** This theme related to the how LGBTIQ+ young people navigate their identity through movement spaces, and the processes associated with 'coming out' or disclosing their identity within those spaces (with coaches, teammates etc). The associated
- 4 Representation and visibility:** This theme related to the importance of LGBTIQ+ people being seen across sport and movement spaces. Young people spoke of the importance of role models, and increased visibility through pride games and campaigns. The associated secondary themes were importance of role models, need for greater representation, visibility of LGBTIQ+ people.
- 5 Safer spaces in movement settings:** This theme related to young people's perceptions towards creating safer spaces across movement spaces, and how organisations can provide safety for young people. The associated secondary themes were gender inclusive sport, gym culture and spaces, and factors promoting inclusive spaces.
- 6 Attitudes towards pride efforts:** The final theme was young people's attitudes towards pride efforts across sport and movement settings. Young people had strong views to these attempts, and why they were needed, and the impact on themselves and other young people. The associated secondary themes were impacts of debates and hate speech, (toxic) culture of sport, tokenism and rainbow washing, and impacts of pride rounds and activities.

secondary themes were free to exist, adolescent and youth transition, feeling out of place, and informal leisure and activities for mental health.






## The impact of early school and sport experiences

Participants in the focus groups spoke about the impact of their experiences in school and youth sport settings. The majority of participants had witnessed or experienced some type of discrimination through homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia, and participated in sporting cultures which were indifferent or apathetic to LGBTIQ+ identities. As Symons's (2010; 2014; 2017) identified, negative early youth experiences in sport and PE, can have detrimental and long-lasting impacts on LGBTIQ+ people. Bullying, discrimination, and hostility to LGBTIQ+ young people can lead to them dropping out of sport, often for a lifetime. The trauma from these experiences can stay with them, and they actively remove themselves from these environments, to protect themselves from triggering such experiences and feelings of isolation.

The associated secondary themes were as follows: discrimination in school sport, type of school and culture, limited understanding of LGBTIQ+ student needs, and family support and influence. Firstly, discrimination in school sport was reported by many participants. Their love of sport however, meant that many participants endured hostile environments and sometime put up with abuse or discrimination. For example, one participant (lesbian/ woman) explained:



*"I started playing footy in Tassie. And the first time I expressed interest as a teenager in wanting to play (Aussie Rules) I was like, late primary school. It's like a memory burned into my mind because I mentioned it to someone and they're like, oh, like, only lesbians play AFL. And there was only one out woman on my football team. And I remember another teammate, like making a comment about feeling uncomfortable about being around a lesbian, like in a contact sport. I think it wasn't really like, this isn't really related to sports, but I feel like it's really hard for people from places like that to come out until they move away. Like most people I know, move to Melbourne, and then come out when they're from Tassie. So, I was never really comfortable to kind of like, talk about, you know, how I felt, or anything like that until I moved".*

Moving to more populated and metropolitan regions, often for university or employment opportunities, was discussed by several people in the focus groups. However, although there has been significant progress towards LGBTIQ+ inclusion within both society and across sporting environments, early negative interactions which placed shame and stigma onto sexual identities stayed with participants into early adulthood. In the example above, the participant stated the memory is 'burned' into their mind, highlighting the weight of that particular encounter. For a young person navigating their sexuality, it can be difficult to make sense of such an interaction. To suggest that a player may be uncomfortable around a woman, because it is implied or assumed that she is a lesbian for playing a certain sport, speaks to the stigma and shame attached to women and girls playing sport.

Other scenarios which evoked anxiety and concern related to locker rooms and changing rooms, where many young people were forced to get changed in open spaces. One young gay man spoke of his anxiety when trying to re-engage with swimming after the COVID-19 pandemic:

*"I've recently tried to start [being active] towards the end of last year, I started to try going to the pool again, like pool was this massive anxiety thing for me it was like, almost worse than the gym because I'm like, oh my gosh, I'm gonna be half naked, swimming. And then I've got the locker room scenario like back to the football days. So, like it was like a nightmare to get back into that. And then but I've only just first gone properly this year yesterday. I haven't really been doing much at all physically".*

The participant spoke of his experiences in school and having to get changed in locker rooms with other boys, and how this caused him so much anxiety every time he got changed for PE and sports. Another gay man spoke about the homophobic remarks he used to get during PE:

*"Because I'm an effeminate gay man, so I did get some like passing comments about like, how I look, how... like my mannerisms, all of that. So, for me, I usually associate like sport and PE with something a little bit negative, and then something a little bit too, like hetero [sexual]. So even though when I got a little bit older, even in high school, even though I wouldn't face the same kind of like homophobic remarks, I still feel a little bit reserved to be fully committed to the PE classes and sport".*

The heteronormative and homophobic culture of PE is well documented (Sykes, 2011; Landi, 2018), and, as the participant above described, the impacts are long lasting. Similarly, another participant explained that many of their LGBTIQ+ friends at university did not play sport, and that LGBTIQ+ people and the world of sport are two different worlds:

*"I understand that sports and club sport clubs are quite big at [university] but that isn't something I've been involved in. And none of my friends are really sports people. So, it's like two different worlds!"*

With negative experiences in sport and PE, it is not unsurprising that LGBTIQ+ people stop participating in sport. The binary nature of sport and PE classes meant that for trans and gender diverse young people, it was an uncomfortable experience, with many citing that they felt out of place. As one participant described:

*"It was less the kids and more the schools. That was kind of the issue. And then we had things like indoor school sports is when the issues really arise because I was only allowed to play on the girls team. So, here's someone who's on hormones, who presents and looks like a guy playing with a girls team. It was very awkward or uncomfortable. But the kids were good. It was more the school that was the issue for me".*

When other young people were not the source of the problem for LGBTIQ+ young people, it was the schools and teachers. This leads into the next secondary theme, which focuses on the limited understanding of LGBTIQ+ student needs.

Many of the participants identified that schools and teachers had little to no understanding of the needs of LGBTIQ+ students, especially trans and gender diverse students. For example, one participant stated:

*"It was more just not thinking through how to accommodate and support a trans person. So, there were lots of issues from that side of things".*

Furthermore, a lack of knowledge, through training and development for teachers, was seen as a significant barrier in facilitating inclusive experiences and opportunities for young people. Another participant explained:

*"I feel like it needs to be happening, like the teachers need to be taught, like when we're having PE when we're running sport lessons, how to conduct those in a way that isn't reaffirming these weird ideas about gender or being reductive or potentially harmful to any queer people, that they might not realize are in their class. And I think like, that's the biggest thing, because I think if you start young, feeling included in those spaces, stepping into those spaces as an adult, is a lot less scary".*

Teachers and those working in school and youth sport environments are crucial in facilitating inclusion, and data indicates a gap in inclusive service provision. This then leads onto the next secondary theme, which focuses on the type of school and culture where sporting opportunities occur.

The third secondary theme is type of school and culture, where participants spoke about the differences in their experiences. For example, some religious institutions were identified as a challenging place. Someone explained:

*"Primary School was all good. I was sporty, but it was kind of fine, no big deal. High school, I moved to a Christian private school. And that was a bit of a shit show. So PE was something I managed to get out of, I slightly pulled the trigger on this quite a few times. But that was mostly because they couldn't deal with it. And I didn't want to be put in that situation. So as a whole, I avoided it".*

Other stories involved experiences of bullying or being made to feel out of place and unwelcome when participating in sport and HPE. When young people did participate and continue to stay in sport, it was because their families introduced them and encouraged them to play their particular sports. This is the final sub-theme in this section.



**Gay men report the highest rates of witnessing homophobia at 76.62%, and 63.64% of gay men experiencing homophobia.**





# Z

Those participants in our sample who currently played sport from a young age, were introduced to their chosen sport through their family. As one participant explained:

*"The only reason I play hockey is because of my parents. They met playing hockey, it's adorable. We love it. They still play hockey, our entire family plays hockey. And they were traveling an hour to the hockey field anyway, and I had to go so I may as well play because it's there. And I don't want to just sit in the car for two hours to not play anything. So yeah, I started playing hockey and haven't stopped since. It's their fault. We blame them".*

Parental and family support was also important for those young people who pushed against traditional gender norms in sport, where there are expectations for some genders to align with certain sports and activities. One trans participant stated:

*"My parents put me in classic ballet and dance when I was little, hated it. And after a very short period of time, they stopped sending me that because they could tell I wasn't interested. And then ever since then, it was up to my choice, I wanted to do karate. So, I did karate. I wanted to do scouts, I wanted to do softball, they would take me hours on Saturday mornings to the different sites. So, they never really pushed it, they kind of followed my lead. I came out as trans when I was 12. So, I think after then they backed off because they knew what sports I like".*

Allowing young people to explore and sample a range of sports is important for LGBTIQ+ young people, and for families to support their chosen interests. Theme two is now discussed.

## Personal circumstances and stories

The second major theme relates to the diversity in stories and the personal circumstances within our sample. Every young person had a different story associated with their sport and movement experiences, and their personal circumstances impacted their experiences and engagement. For example, with the focus on youth in our sample, young people discussed the challenges in navigating adolescence, their sexual and gender identity, studying, access to facilities and location, and their mental health. The LGBTIQ+ community is rich in diversity, and this was reflected in the data. Each young person is different, with different histories and experiences, and this impacted their engagement in sport as young people. The associated secondary themes were as follows: TGD specific barriers, motivations to develop healthy habits, physical activity on own terms and schedule.

Young people in our sample who identified as trans or gender diverse, spoke to unique barriers and challenges they experienced as a community. One young person identified the positive role that sport can play for trans masculine people, and the need to ensure they can access it:

*"I think as a trans masculine person, sports is often pushed as a way to alleviate dysphoria. Because like, you can build muscle, like help fat distribution, stuff like that. So, I do think that that can be a motivation for, I don't want to speak to say all trans people, but like trans guys specifically, can be a common way to alleviate dysphoria, and kind of help build a body shape that you feel more comfortable in".*

Trans young people also experience unique barriers, especially when affirming their gender identity and the different journeys they embark upon. One participant explained:

*"Sports, I used to be an avid softball [fan], played, coached, and umpired. I don't play anymore. During school, I would be on every single sports team and be like the coach, and other sports I used to do a lot, but then that all changed and being on testosterone means clubs, sports is not an option for me. So, the main form of sport, physical exercise, I used to do a lot of hiking, canoeing, climbing, abseiling, caving, but my physical health means I can't do any of that anymore. So, the main stuff I do now is more gym and swimming and wheelchair basketball, which is a lot more trans friendly than non-disability sports".*



40%

**of respondents have experienced homophobia, biphobia or any vilification based on their identity.**

The quote above draws attention to the challenges for young people who medically affirm their gender and take gender affirming hormone treatment (GAHT), and how they navigate this process. Some participants also spoken about specific challenges associated with chest binding too. The intersections of multiple identities also came through in the data, as the above participant highlights with their trans and disability identity. Our sample of young people also spoke of their motivations to develop healthy habits for their health and wellbeing, which is the next secondary theme.

Similar to the pilot study (Storr, Nicholas et al, 2020), young people expressed a desire to engage in sport and physical activity, primarily to develop what they called 'healthy habits' around movement. The participants understood the benefits of regular physical activity, especially in the context of their mental health. One participant stated:

*"I think because I do have a couple of friends that do go to the gym, or that do go on runs or something. Doing it with them - I've thought about like reaching out to them and being like hey, is there any chance I could come in for a free trial with you or something or, hey, next time you go rock climbing, do you mind if I tag along, but also that kind of fear of, I'm really bad".*

Having social support and a friend to participate with was discussed by several participants, and the increased motivation knowing that their friends were going to certain activities. Furthermore, developing healthy habits was seen as something that could positively impact their sense of self and mental health, as a young gay man expressed:

*"I wasn't like confident with like my body at all, I had become very insecure, I didn't want a lot of photos and because in like a couple of years I had put on at least over like 20 kilos. And so, there was like a big, for me it was a big weight thing. And then I just got to this point where I was sick of it like I, I wanted, like I wanted more people to potentially feel attracted to me, I wanted like to be more comfortable in photos. I just felt like I just it was like, I'd be happier kind of thing".*

Body image and how young people feel about themselves and their relationship with physical activity was discussed in all focus groups. Many identified the established norms associated with gay communities, and the over emphasis on body image and 'being lean'. However, many young people pushed back against these norms, and articulated the reasons why they wanted to engage in movement activities. One participant described:

*"I'm currently trying to build a bit of a healthy routine and build some healthy habits. Right now. It's, it's playing netball once a week with some people I met through the grad program at work. And that's actually really fun. There's a few great people in the team. So that's really good. Otherwise, I have a dog. So go for walks couple of times day, and I'm trying to, because I don't really want to head to the gym, probably just start doing some like home workouts because it seems more affordable and accessible. But yeah, kind of just trying to build healthy habits at this point".*

Other participants expressed a desire to play sports socially to meet people and connect with like-minded people, in search for a sense of community. The final secondary theme describes the flexibility expressed by participants in wanting to engage with movement.

Nearly all the young people interviewed, especially those in the non-sport focus groups, expressed their desire to engage with physical activity on their own terms and schedule. For many who had large commitments at school or university, whilst maintaining an active social life with friends, finding time to play sport or exercise was challenging. Therefore, young people need to be able to engage with movement as and when it suits them. One participant explained:

*"I would like to go back to the gym. It's definitely something that I want to do at some point, but it's just finding this middle ground between the cost and if you're spending that much money, like I said, I think mine was like \$600 for a year, for an adult, is a lot of money. And then if I'm working four or five days a week and not utilizing that, you know, if you're spending that much money, you want to be going four or five times a week so that you're getting your money's worth. But I would like to get back into it. I enjoyed going to the gym when I went".*

# 3

Costs of gym memberships and sport clubs was discussed as a barrier, especially for a section of the population who were not in full time employment, but who were studying full time. Many of the participants spoke of the difficulty in balancing a significant workload and schedule involving studying, employment, relationships (romantic and others). Financial barriers was a recurring theme too, as another participant outlined:

*"And it's too expensive I find, to do the gym or any of these locations like an Anytime Fitness, with a 10% discount for being a concession student just isn't enough to cover my base wages, especially if you're on welfare".*

When young people went the gym, for example, courtesy of family memberships or reduced fees, it suited their lifestyle and time commitments, because many gyms were open 24 hours, and they could pick and choose when they went. Furthermore, there were no repercussions, for example, letting team mates down, if they missed sessions, when attending the gym in contrast to participating in sport teams and clubs:

*"I mainly did soccer and basketball, but currently just do gym because it's hard to get a weekly commitment in with sports clubs and stuff.*

A common narrative for many of our participants, was that they used to play certain sports, but stopped due to hostile environments and experiences of discrimination and chose to go to the gym in early adulthood due to the accessible nature around their schedule. The broader sport sector needs to consider how it can retain young people by offering accessible, user-friendly opportunities, which involve little commitment or more flexible commitment (for example not needing to attend every training night to still be considered for a team). Otherwise, the sector will lose a whole generation of young people. The next primary theme is discussed.

## Navigating LGBTIQ+ identity through movement spaces

The period between adolescence and youth into early adulthood can be a complex and challenging time for young people to navigate. In addition to this, navigating one's sexuality and gender identity adds complex layers to this navigation. Navigating this period through movement spaces can be even more tricky, especially when young people are finding where they fit in society and how to interact with others. For some young people movement and sport spaces can be an opportunity to flourish, act as a coping mechanism to work through such complexities, but for many, it can alienate them and make them feel isolated, excluded, and feeling out of place. These secondary themes that this section explored are free to exist, adolescent and youth transition, feeling out of place, and informal leisure and activities for mental health.

The initial secondary theme is free exist. This secondary theme was one of the most profound and significant themes to arise throughout the focus groups. Nearly every young person who was interviewed, when asked what they would like from their sport and movement engagement, was the opportunity to be themselves and just 'exist'. To be able to exist and not have their identity challenged, questioned, ridiculed, resisted, or invalidated whilst navigating movement spaces was discussed extensively. As one young person explained:

*"Inclusion for me is in regard to all my identities, regardless of what that space is intended as, but everything is already filled out. It's kinda like I just get to exist and enjoy and kind of do what those who don't have my identities do in their space, is kind of the best way to put it. So, it's a feeling, it's through policy as you can see it. But it's more of a gut feeling. the best way to explain it is like my hyper vigilance decreases. And I'm just like, at ease".*

Young people with lived experience of multiple diverse identities, such as having a culturally diverse background and/or living with disabilities (a large number of our participants), often had negative experiences which made them hyper vigilant and they always anticipated some kind of problem, for example, discrimination, casual discrimination, or overt vilification. Having to contend with this, and call out this behaviour, and advocate for themselves, was a common and exhausting experience.



One young person explained:

*"I think, inclusion, I think the best way to put it is that I don't have to advocate like, policies are already put in place, I don't have to push for them, I don't have to think about these things. They... someone's already done it, it's already been organized. I just get to exist and be me in a space, which is very, very hard. It doesn't happen very often. But I think that's it's like, it doesn't matter if you've got a cool rainbow flag, I always feel more comfortable if there's a rainbow flag in the building. But it's about me just getting to exist and be me and not have to fight or advocate".*

The young person in the above quote stressed the need for inclusive policies and practises in movement spaces, as well as the need for allyship. Minority stress and having to advocate for your rights to be included within society takes a toll on LGBTIQ+ people, especially at a critical period of identity development. Some participants, predominantly in university sports clubs, did speak to some positive experiences and a club culture which affirmed LGBTIQ+ people. They outlined that the club had received training and education, support from the university, and held a successful pride themed game which helped introduce positive conversations around sexuality and gender into the club. One young lesbian participant explained:

*"Like the key thing is like having those programs [pride rounds] because then we get the choice of like, deciding what we do, and deciding what we show, and don't show. And like the fact that I can come here knowing full well that I am entirely welcome and like supported if I need, and like the fact that we've got mental health - to like pride round - to everything else. It's just... it's nice to know that I have the option and I don't have to go around shouting it from the rooftops, or whatever, but I'm happy to just exist here knowing that if I would ever like to bring up about my sexuality or gender identity - it's just such like an okay conversation or statement to make, because you have autonomy over that here. And like, you get to determine yourself in this club, which is really nice".*

The participant again echoed the point that young people just want to exist and play sport as themselves. This speaks to the need for clubs to create positive cultures and affirming environments for LGBTIQ+ young people, so they safe to come out and share their identities if they choose to do so. Another participant explains the importance of sporting spaces, especially competitive ones, to allow young people to play without limits or labels:

*"But at least for me, this space gave me the flexibility to be who I am without a label. So like, there wasn't the assumption that I was straight. And there also wasn't the assumption that I was gay because I, if I was in the closet, I'd be really scared about joining footy if it meant people were going to assume I was gay. Because I want to be in control of that. Yeah. But like, I think it's gonna really differ by sport. I think women's football, it's the inverse of most things. People will assume your queer if you play women's footy, which is like a stereotype in itself. But, you know, other sports and men's sports as well. I think there's the assumption that you're straight unless otherwise indicated".*

Another young lesbian woman explained the positive role Aussie Rules Football had on her in the absence of pressure for her to come out:

*"And I like this is the first space that I've never felt like I've had to come out. And like it was the first place that I felt, I could just be myself and people could assume what they would want it to, but it actually didn't bother me. Whereas like, prior to that every space I was in, like even joining like a pride group or something. Because I was closeted. I was like anxious about it. Because I was like people will know, like, there's no way for me to just be in this space without having to define myself. Whereas at this point in club, I think it's like, partly due to the diversity around like, diversity of gender, diversity of sexuality, there's not just like one type of queer person. And like, I knew that no one was going to assume, because kind of a lot of people at the club had no intuition".*



The next secondary theme is adolescence and youth transition, and how young people managed their identities and experiences through their sporting engagements. Prominent in some of the focus groups, was the challenge of navigating one's sexuality as a young woman. Some young people spoke of their journeys which involved exploring with multiple genders, and exploring their bisexuality and pansexuality (attracted to a person rather than a gender):

*"Yeah, when I moved here, I was in a long-distance relationship with a boy. And I felt, at first, quite like unsure if I should tell my teammates that I had a boyfriend because I knew that that was like the minority. I guess fast forward. When I started dating women, that situation changed, and I was very open about it. And I didn't feel like I had to necessarily come out to anyone. It was just kind of like, regular sort of being. Yeah, it was a really weird switch. And I guess I've matured a lot in that time. So I'm not sure if it's because of that. But I definitely wasn't sure at first if I should say that I was dating boy".*

In some women's sporting spaces, sexuality and gender diversity can be very normalised, with high visibility of LGBTIQ+ women and gender diverse people. This can lead to some people feeling like they may be in the minority, and how to deal with that and their teammates can be challenging. This secondary theme summarises the positive role that sport can play for young people who are navigating their identity, but also the critical need for these spaces to be inclusive and affirming – due to the associated challenges of being LGBTIQ+ and being a young person.

For some young people, who played competitively and from an early age, sport played a critical role in their emotional, social, and physical development. One young participant stated:

*"I can't imagine my life without sport. I think that if I didn't have sport, I would just not like live in my like, my room would be where I am situated. I would not go anywhere else, because I would have no reason to because all of my friends are through sport, all of my social activities of sport. It's just like, it's kind of just who I am at this point.*

Apart from those participants who played competitive sport, such stories were scarce. However, it shows of the promise, potential, and opportunities that the medium of sport can offer a young person. As the review of literature and established body of evidence demonstrates, sport has historically excluded and marginalised young LGBTIQ+ people. For other young people though, the complexities of traditional gender norms enforced on them, specifically masculinity and femininity, proved to be challenging to navigate. One young person explained:

*"Like, you're a guy, you should be good at this, which, certainly made it a bit daunting when coming into it. Like, there was one kid who everyone thought was gay, and he wasn't, he just didn't like sport. And so, everyone was like, oh well, like he must be gay. Like, he hangs out with the girls all the time. And he's like, I'm not, and turns out, he was actually a little bit homophobic. Which, yeah, but it was, it was like, because he's not, because he wasn't sporty, and he was a guy, he must have been gay. But I think back and I'm like, that is a horrible idea to have that like, Oh, if you're a girl, it's okay. If you don't like sports, but if you're a guy, you have to like it, or else you're gay. And it's like that shouldn't be the idea".*

The concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) is relevant here, where the participant outlines the unhelpful stereotypes associated with sport, and that if a boy does not like sport, he is thought to be gay. This then leads onto the next secondary theme, feeling out of place.

Stereotyping and other exclusive practices associated with sporting cultures meant that for many young people, they felt out of place in school sport and sport teams. As one young participant explained, LGBTIQ+ people leave sport throughout their adolescence and youth, many of whom never return:

*"It just needs to happen like, the conversation. I think the reason so many of us leave sports is because we don't feel safe or accepted or understood in any way. Like, I don't think I necessarily felt like I was being pushed out of sport, but I didn't feel a connection to it. At like that age group that I was in like that 16- to 20-year-old stage, I was kind of like, what's the point? I think, yeah, the conversation just happening, where you just bring up, the fact that LGBTQ+ people exist would be a nice start. And then I feel like, even that is enough to make someone feel a little bit more inclined to maybe be active and do something that makes them happy.*

The participant draws attention to the need for sports organisations to create environments that affirm and celebrate young LGBTIQ+ people, and help them develop a sense of connection and belonging to their club or team. Another young person outlined the need for intersectional approaches within LGBTIQ+ diversity work, to reflect the rich diversity of young people across LGBTIQ+ communities:

*"I'm also from a migrant background. I'm Iranian, so add culture into the mix too, whereas, like migrant communities and CALD communities, we have a lot of work to do towards LGBTQIA+, and our attitudes as a collective whole. So, I never felt my identity valid there. Queer spaces, I love them but they're very ableist and they're also very white. So, I didn't feel safe there - the microaggressions I experienced. The disability space love it, it's also very white, I have found them to be very queer friendly, compared to the other two, which I have largely accounted due to the intersections between queerness and neurodiversity. That often disability spaces I find, covers that intersection the best, compared to the other groups, but it's like, yay, community! But as a result, I also am left out and discriminated against with my other identities. So, it's always kind of like a toss and turn on the day. Which is why I'm spending a lot of time with those with like my intersectional identities, which is hard to find. But yeah, it's often a kind of pick and choose what form of discrimination I'm willing to put up with for that day, because there's not very many spaces that are accommodating for everything".*

The young person articulated the challenges for young people who do not neatly fit into a box related to diversity. The Victorian sport sector is now recognising intersectionality as a concept and set of practices (addressing systemic oppression). As the young person also described though, discrimination can be a daily experience, and for many young people, they look to use their leisure time and exercise to manage their mental health.

Doing informal leisure and activities for mental health is the final secondary theme in this section. Discrimination and exclusion in public institutions, such as sport, can lead to poor mental health outcomes for LGBTIQ+ young people (Strauss et al., 2017). As a young person explained, young people often know that exercise can help manage their mental health:

*"I think for them doing it, it's because it's a physical thing that connects with mental health. And so, I find that people usually like stuff that has an overlap between the two. They use physical exercise as a way to help their mental health. And otherwise, it's not a standalone thing about camaraderie and stuff, especially as we get more and more into generations where esports are becoming more accessible, more inclusive, and more easier. And you don't have to sweat at your seats.*

For many young people, navigating adolescence and early adulthood can be difficult. Some look to more informal leisure practices to help cope with the challenges of growing up. One young gay man explained:

*"I kind of hit a point where it's like I needed like to change, like I was, I was getting quite overweight. And then I was not doing exercise. And I've been told like that for years that would help like my mental health and everything. So, I kind of hit like that point where it's like, okay, I needed to start something. So that's why I've got a mental health like point of view, I wanted like endorphins being released during the exercise, like I just wanted that because it can help a lot. And then also from like a losing weight perspective as well. That's kind of why I started but even after I reached like a certain weight goal, I do want to keep exercise up for, just maintaining weight and like from a mental health perspective. But why I started was for like, mental health and weight loss".*

Similarly, another young person also explained:

*"So, I guess, one of my biggest motivations is I definitely want to be like healthy, and keep like fit, I guess, because obviously after, like the whole pandemic situation, and I feel like I need to do more in order to make, help myself not get into this situation. And also, I feel like, I need to do something outside of my house because I'm working from home. So, it's definitely an excuse for me to get out the house to do something different. And to not feel like get stuck inside".*

# 4

The young people in the above quotes spoke about the appeal of leisure and doing physical activity, for example, walking or biking, because they were less likely to experience discrimination. This demonstrates that young people are trying to address mental health challenges through exercise, but fear doing some sports may actually contribute to making it worse. A young person with lived experience of being trans and living with a disability described this well:

*"I enjoyed [sport] it because it was something fun. It was structuring my week, something to look forward to. I didn't like school as a kid. So, it was just something good. But the main reasons I do physical activity more so now is, as a wheelchair user, I don't get much exercise. So, I need to make up for it in other ways, which is kind of a huge motivation, but also like going to the gym building muscle helps with my gender dysphoria. As well, it also means that I can push my wheelchair better, I can do a lot more independence as well. I work from home too. So, I might spend all day on a screen. So, it's just a structured way to get me out of the house. Not so much socializing because I'm happy to socialize through the screen, but just get a break and I exist a lot in the advocacy space so it can be very stressful, very intense".*

For young people who may lead sedentary lifestyles due to their work and study commitments, being able to access sport and leisure provision is imperative for them to maintain good health. But again, as the young people discussed in the focus groups, they do not see sport as accessible and something that may contribute to better health outcomes and therefore, choose to do leisure activities or go to the gym instead. This represents a significant challenge for the sustainability of the sport sector: young LGBTIQ+ people are choosing physical activity, gym, and leisure activities over sport. This was also reflected in the quantitative results, with gym use higher than formal sport participation. The next primary theme is discussed.

## Representation and visibility

The next primary theme is associated with measures to improve participation and engagement in sport and movement settings for LGBTIQ+ young people. The associated secondary themes were importance of role models, need for more representation, visibility of LGBTIQ+ people.

Firstly, young people discussed the importance of role models in sport settings. One young lesbian soccer player woman, said:

*"I really look up to the people in my team, currently, and on the outside, like celebrities like Sam Kerr and her girlfriend, and Meghan Rapinoe. And people like that, who really do outwardly express themselves in their relationships. Because, yeah, I think it's really like nice to see and, like, helps if, you know, you're in that situation as well".*

Having role models on the global stage, who unapologetically live their lives and are open with their relationships and sexuality, was significant for young people we spoke to. 'You can't be what you can't see,' is appropriate and being able to see a reflection of themselves in sport roles is inspirational. Furthermore, the participant above, seeing other older players in her team being open about their relationship helped her come to terms with her own sexuality, and feeling comfortable to share information with her other teammates. Another participant spoke of the importance of role models:

*"Yeah. And then in my club, it was a bit different, like I have role models, I'd say. And I think that people that you look up to, or you know, that are queer, that are LGBTQ, and you see them, and you idolize them a bit. So, I remember, like 15,16, I joined my first women's soccer team. And my captain, and the vice-captain, we're both gay. So like, I just, I think subconsciously, I just looked at them. I was like, they are so cool. Like, I love them as people like they're such good humans. And so like, I didn't actively associate them being about sex and lesbians. But like, again, it was just normal. It's like, you know, what they like, love who you love".*

Here, the participant explained how the normalisation of lesbian relationships and out athletes, provided a role model to look up to. Further, the normalisation of diverse sexualities and genders is seen as crucial to building respectful and affirming sport environments. A participant outlined:

*"Well, I think a lot of it is actually seeing yourself in it. So having coaches that are a bit diverse, and they don't have to be tokenistic and like, Hi, I'm gay, and I'm your coach, but just having it there, your coach, and they happened to be queer, and they happen to be, you know, maybe they're non binary, or maybe they're also a girl with short hair, someone that you can kind of look up to".*

The participant focussed on the importance of diverse role models playing too, and the need for a diverse workforce that reflects diversity in sexuality and gender. This then leads to young people seeing viable options and pathways into non-playing positions such as coaching and leadership. This is an under explored area with LGBTIQ+ sport scholarship, and our data suggested that young people notice the lack of LGBTIQ+ representation in coaching and administration in sport. This then leads onto the next secondary theme, associated with the need for more representation and visibility of LGBTIQ+ athletes in sport.

Participants spoke of the need for more representation across sport and movement settings, and especially in men's sport spaces. A young person explained:

*"Representation, like, it's so hard for people to participate in sports like that, if they can't see themselves, you know, that if you can't see somewhere, you can like progress to get to you're not going to want to participate".*

Young people spoke in depth about the lack of role models and representation across the sport sector, especially trans and gender diverse young people. With many trans athletes being banned from professional sports, they spoke of the devastating impact this has on their outlook in sport, and the message it sends to young people. Further, some sports appear to have better representation, according to our sample of young people:

*"I think also, having a lot of openly queer people in like, women's soccer, like professionally, has also made it a bit easier for some people [to come out] as well. But yeah, I think for basketball, I didn't know many who are like, openly queer, on my team".*

Data indicated that having out role models in sport, predominantly women, has a positive influence on young people and their relationship with sport. This is why young people value visibility of LGBTIQ+ people, which is our final secondary theme in this section.

Witnessing LGBTIQ+ athletes as visible and celebrated for their sporting achievements and was seen as affirming and liberating for young people. A young person explained:

*"And you can't understate how important like visibility and acceptance like that is when people were actively celebrating something like that no matter whether they're queer or not. I think that's like, incredibly crucial".*

In recent years, more LGBTIQ+ athletes have felt comfortable to come out on the world stage, with the recent Olympic and Paralympic games having the most out athletes recorded at a mega sporting event. The recent Women's World Cup in Australia had several out lesbian and non-binary players too. These professional athletes serve as role models to young people who would like to come out. Therefore, it is important to ensure that sporting environments are safe, for LGBTIQ+ young people, as one participant shared:

*"So yeah, I've always felt like it's a safe space in the sense of like, being comfortable, and everyone's just nice to each other and supportive of each other. And it's always a good, very good environment. But the same time I've never, so I didn't actually kind of accept my own queerness or come out at all, until years after high school, A couple years after high school. I think a lot of it has to do with lack of representation, because I just did not see anyone, like, no one, zero people who were openly queer, whether it was who I played with, or yeah, like in any of my teams, or in one of the professional sport - I would watch men, and none of them were openly queer. So yeah, I think in just that lack of representation, meant that even though sport was such a safe space for me, and I loved it so much, and I felt so myself, that I still was hiding this huge part of myself".*

The above quote is a powerful illustration of the impact that the cultures of professional sporting environments have on young people. Although there has been progress and more LGBTIQ+ athletes coming out, men's sport is still underrepresented. In sporting cultures where LGBTIQ+ athletes are not visible or out, it sends a message to young people that LGBTIQ+ identities are invisible. They fear being treated differently by coaches, worry about being overlooked, or their teammates behaving differently towards them. Therefore, creating and sustaining safer spaces for young people is crucial.





## Safer spaces in sport and movement settings

The concept of safer spaces was predominant within our focus groups, with young people identifying that safer spaces were paramount for young people to engage with sport and movement spaces. The associated secondary themes were gender inclusive sport, gym culture and spaces, and factors promoting inclusive spaces.

Gender inclusive sport is the first secondary theme in this section, and describes the hope that young people can engage and play sport outside a rigid gender binary, and that all genders can play together, for fun and social benefits. Many young people questioned the need for social sport to be divided into boys vs girls, and men vs women, excluding trans and gender diverse people, and reinforcing outdated and traditional gender norms. A young gay man explained:

*“And then often a lot of times like, some players can be quite homophobic, like, I’ve just noticed that a lot of guys that are really into sport, like, in my experience have a higher chance of them being a little homophobic then guys that aren’t like, obviously it’s not the case for all guys like at all. But that’s just my experience. So, I think just there should be more mixed sex options. I think there’s too many sports that divided by sex. And I think a lot of people might feel more comfortable in maybe like a mixed sex one”.*

The quote spotlights the prevalence of homophobic attitudes and cultures prevalent in men’s sport in particular, and how young gay men can feel unwelcome in men’s team sports. The prevalence of homophobia in men’s sport spaces is also reflected in the quantitative data. Further, mixed gender spaces and opportunities allow for young people to be with friends, and for their non-binary and gender diverse friends to feel included and welcome. For some young girls and women too, a lack of opportunities and team/club availability meant that they had to stop playing sport due to strict single gender teams:

*“We would go to my brother’s games on the weekends. And there was one girl who would always play, and she was amazing. She was, you know, kicking goals, literally and figuratively. And then it got to under 16’s, and then they told her you can’t play anymore. And I remember being so confused. I was like, well, she’s a better player than some of those other guys”.*

The reinforcement of a strict gender binary within schools too, was problematic for all young people, but especially trans and gender diverse young people, as one highlighted:

*“When I was in Year 10, I’d started to transition a bit. My teachers were really great at accommodating for that. They were like, okay, no worries, instead of splitting you up into boys and girls, we were split up into more aggressive players and more, you know, those who just want to play for fun, which then did end up being mostly girls and mostly boys, which didn’t really solve the problem. And like the times that I had the most fun was when we weren’t split up when we just played all together, and something that I think my teachers tried to do to try and get everyone more included was like, oh, you know, if boys score, it’s one point. But if girl score, it’s not, it’s two points, and were like, that was horrible. And I hated that”.*

The participant reported the positive element of allowing people of all genders to play; young people just want to have some fun when they participate in sport. They also reject gendered stereotypes associated with boys’ and girls’ bodies, and what they can and cannot do. Other young people in the focus group expressed disappointment around occasions when scoring was done in such ways, suggesting that girls were inferior to boys. The next secondary theme is gym culture and spaces.

Many young people spoke about some form of engagement at gyms, whether that was current, or in the past. Conversations focused on the cultures of gyms, with some participants describing them as ‘bro cultures’, which they associated with a hyper-masculinised space where men would lift heavy weights and dominate certain parts of the gym. This was seen as off-putting for participants, especially when they may feel intimidated for not knowing the correct exercises or how to lift weights with the correct technique. This was more prominent within the gay men interviewed. One young trans man explained:

*“Let’s say for me, I go to the gym six to 10 sessions a week. Because I’ll sometimes like double up and do two, I like the classes. I find the gym floor intimidating. But I find the gym classes, because the gym classes are mainly women, and they’re really sweet. They’re really nice. Everyone just thinks I’m a gay guy. Which is a bit funny. And I’m not questioning or arguing with them. Whereas the gym floor, I’ve had bad experiences before I passed, with a lot of the men. And you could tell they’re looking at you and it’s either like, is that a gay slur? Or is that an F slur and it was like not safe, I didn’t feel safe. But in the classes I love them so I’ve often paired up on a weights class, and then a cardio class and then a swim session”.*



Interestingly, the presence of women in the classes made the participant comfortable and feel an element of safety, reflecting the need for gender inclusive sport and movement opportunities. Another key part to this conversation though, was the appeal of gym spaces for young people to be able to do what they needed to do, in a space which allowed them a level of privacy without interruption. Many participants explained that they liked the gym because they could go in, put their head down and their headphones on, and do their exercises. One participant shared:

*“Going into the gym, I can have my earphones in. And for the most part, it's like that nobody cares what I'm doing, people are there weightlifting, like they do not care about me. So I feel like it's just less intimidating, I feel like going into a class would be something that would be very overwhelming for me”.*

This young person took the opposite view of the above participant, finding the group classes overwhelming. Overall, gyms and movement facilities provided young people with diverse opportunities to do exercise or active recreation, in a context that worked for them. Sporting clubs and teams often did not allow for this, which is why young people are gravitating towards leisure and active recreation as a medium to keep physically active. The next theme focuses on factors promoting inclusive spaces.

This theme attracted rich commentary from the young people in our sample, so more quotes have been presented. It is important to include the voices of young people in research, and allow them, in their own words, to offer practical steps that organisations can take to promote inclusion for LGBTIQ+ young people.

Most of the young people spoke of experiences playing and engaging in sport, but one young person spoke about their experiences working in a community Aussie rules football club. In the quote below, the young gay man explains the camaraderie and friendships he created through his employment, but also the dangers associated with the space:

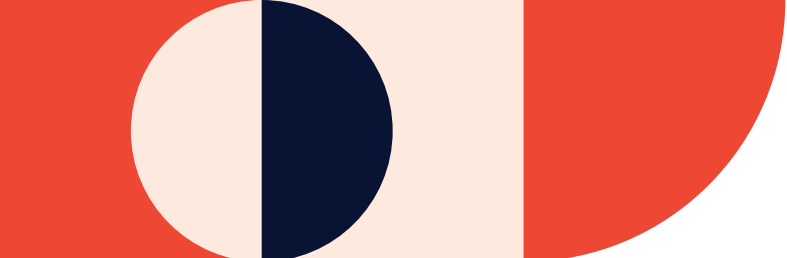
*“No matter what, no matter what harassment we dealt with, we were all there for each other. I'll give you an example, one of my female colleagues at the bar got hit on by someone and I was able to look out for her and then vice versa when I was getting hit on by a straight girl - they had my back. When I was working as an umpire, I used to take on the Friday and Saturday night games. And they were probably one of the most spirit breaking experiences. Alcohol. Alcoholism was rampant, people were getting wasted. Some people even threw glass bottles at me when the result wasn't overturned, because of that.”*

*Like, obviously, as a 17-year-old, having glass bottles thrown at you from an inebriated person isn't ideal. So, there was, it was that security risk, and because we were just a small community-based thing, the only thing we could do was we would stop the game midway through, and we would basically have to take a quarantine shelter and wait for the police to arrive. So, the police would never like show up until like an hour after that”.*

Sport organisations must not allow young people to feel unsafe in employment, or when participating. The young people's physical and psychological safety must never be put at risk. Unsafe experiences leave a lasting impact on a young person, and make them averse to future participation. Organisations and administrators must also understand the sensitivities around young people disclosing their sexuality and gender identity. A young person outlined the risks associated with coming out to new teammates and coaches:

*“Since I've been here and joined new teams, like, I'm definitely more reserved in sharing my sexuality straightaway. So, I refer to terms of like, partner. I mean, I've been with my girlfriend for like, nearly six years though. So like, I'd feel a bit weird saying, girlfriend anyway, it seems a bit more casual. But I definitely, like more consciously now say, partner, to limit the fact that I'm immediately letting someone know that I'm in a gay relationship. And I don't know why. Because I think it's almost like a self-creating stigma, because I don't necessarily always perceive someone's judging me. But I just don't want to risk that”.*





Connected to the previous primary theme, navigating LGBTIQ+ identity through sport and movement spaces, young people need to feel comfortable in such spaces and come out when they are ready. Processing your identity and contending with stigma, or elements of internalised homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia causes stress and anxiety. This is why creating safer spaces, where people feel comfortable and confident, is paramount. Another young person explained:

*"I think having those like stickers on the door from like the outset. So you know, that like this is a safe environment, but particularly in a gym environment, or something, or like a class where you maybe need to go to the trainers and say, 'can you help me with this', or you're having discussions with them, I think the pronoun pins is just a great, very subtle, friendly way to assert that this is a safe space. But I feel like if you see that, and you do have fears about being queer, and being visual, visibly queer in these environments, seeing that would at least make you feel a little bit, hopefully safer, that it's not an environment where, regardless of how you look, or how you present or whatever, they're just going to help you".*

This quote not only reinforces the previous theme that young people want to 'just exist' in these spaces, and highlights the need for intentional inclusion and the creation of safer spaces. Young people can experience stress when interacting with sport and exercise professionals, therefore people working in the industry need professional development and inclusion training. A young person explains what a safe space was for them:

*"So for me, a safe space is definitely just a space of existence where you know, that you don't have to hide any part of yourself, whether that be your cultural identity, or an expression that you have, or maybe the way you want to dress but that you know, in that space, no one's going to tell you, tell you things to put you down based off the way you're expressing who you are. I think that safe spaces, obviously you can keep people held accountable if they're like, you know how harmful to themselves or others you can still be accountable to them to get that place safe, but you're not imposing on their freedom of expression".*

In the above quote, the desire for young people to just be themselves and express themselves in their own way, without judgment or comment, is repeated. There was some insightful discussion in the focus groups too about rainbow flags or signs in windows, similar to the LGBTIQ+ safe space stickers. On the one hand, some young people expressed their concerns around performative allyship and people and organisations just putting flags up without doing the associated diversity work to accompany the action. However, some had the view that it still demonstrated that LGBTIQ+ people are welcome and assured a level of inclusion:

*"Look like I even love when you go into like a store or business, and they've got like a pride flag at the door. Like a little pride like sticker or something, because if you are overtly homophobic or transphobic, you wouldn't have that. So at least they know that you're either neutral or positive. Yeah. And so, it's like a kind of safety thing like, Okay, if I say something, or if I do something, I'm safer than I would be in other places".*

The participant reflected on the practicalities of LGBTIQ+ visibility and stickers, and the message it sends to communities. Visibility and messaging is important, as identified by previous research conducted by the first author on LGBTIQ+ tennis communities in Australia. Unless affirming messaging is communicated through stickers, visible markers, and pride themed activities, LGBTIQ+ people will assume they may not be welcome and 'stay in the closet' (Storr & Richards, 2022). Another participant reflected on young people who might not have come out or disclosed their sexuality or gender identity, and the need for work to happen beyond 'putting a rainbow banner up':

*"I think also like, creating a safe and inclusive space, especially for young people, like 16- to 25-year-olds who might not be out yet. So, for them to come to this sporting club in that first safe space where they might, their parents might not be supportive, or might not know, or friends at school might not know, like, your club can be such an important outlet, not only for like your identity, but you know, mental health and things like that. So like, that's a complicated thing. It's not just like put up a banner. But I think it's like a cultural thing. So, whether that is like even something like a government funding program to allow community clubs to host pride rounds, or host education events, and make sure that the people that make up those clubs are educated on queer youth and the issues they may face so that they can do what they can to create safe spaces and be there for their mates".*

# 6

This young person articulated the type of things that can help to promote inclusion for young people, and the need for targeted LGBTIQ+ diversity work to foster cultures which affirm and welcome them. A young non-binary person further reinforced this point, and that many young people must navigate different places and cultures. For some, they may be out and open with their identity in parts of their life, but not in others:

*"I think that's kind of a really big thing when it comes to safe spaces because for me, like I'm studying a STEM degree and so I can't really, you know, go with they/them pronouns to a lot of classes just because it's not the safe space from just the way people talk about it, I know that I'd be treated differently and stuff like that. So, I know that can be quite a closed off space. But in places like when I was playing soccer, I knew that if I just was like, Oh, by the way, I go by they them pronouns, no, Double Take it or really, like, think anything bad of it. And it just, it was just more open for me to just exist really".*

Again, the narrative, 'existing,' was discussed often and is a common thread in the qualitative data set. Additionally, the above participants emphasise that for some young people, the sport space may be the only context that they can be out and open about their identity. Therefore, sport can represent a valuable opportunity for self-expression for many LGBTIQ+ young people. A final quote reflects this sentiment, allowing young people to be themselves:

*"Let's just let people have fun and play what they want to play. And, whatever your, your body type. Also, the uniform, so that's a great point. I think even I had like this major aversion to netball as a kid because, I've never actually played the sport before, but I just saw that you had to wear skirts. And I was like, no, never going to try it. Yeah, so just like, breaking down those like, those big sort of outdated stereotypes and rules of who should be playing what sports".*

A key message to emerge from analysis of the data in this theme, was that young people know exactly what they want from their sport and movement spaces, and for organisations grappling to make their cultures, facilities, and spaces more LGBTIQ+ inclusive, they must engage with young people. The young people in our sample were articulate and considered in their recommendations and feedback to foster safer spaces. A key recommendation for the sport and movement sector is to listen to these voices and engage them in their decision-making processes.

## Attitudes towards pride efforts

The final theme to arise from analysis of the data was young people's attitudes towards pride efforts. Young people spoke candidly and passionately about their feelings towards sports organisations engagement in the pride space. The associated secondary themes were impacts of debates and hate speech, (toxic) culture of sport, tokenism and rainbow washing, and impacts of pride rounds and activities.

Young people clearly expressed the impact that ongoing debates in sport, especially across media platforms and social media, had on them and their feelings towards sport. This was noticeable around the inclusion of trans athletes within elite sport, and the negative impact and message it sends to trans and gender diverse young people; they are not welcome in sport and there is no place for them. As one young trans person outlined:

*"I think sports as a whole doesn't feel specifically trans friendly given some of the recent policy changes that we have seen major sporting leagues do. I don't feel safe. I guess I can't participate in mainstream sports anyway now, but if I could, I wouldn't feel safe participating in any. It doesn't feel welcoming".*

Another young person explained their frustrations with the over emphasis of trans athletes in sport, and the demonisation of trans athletes:

*"Like around the Olympics and stuff, it's always trans people who are like villainised, they're like, Oh, well, you want you want to transition so you can play in this separate league. And I'm like, as a trans person, I can assure you, that's not why they want to transition. And hearing that, it's like, it feels like they're invalidating other trans people, because it's like it, they make it sound like they're using it as a tactical move, rather than someone who just wants to be themselves. And that's what really frustrates me about the whole thing, as well as it's like, these people they don't, they're not doing it to be better than everyone else. They're just doing it because they want to be themselves."*

Other young people spoke about the misconceptions and hostility towards trans athletes, based on misinformation and propaganda. The suggestion that trans people want to transition purely for competitive advantage and sporting success left young people frustrated, and as the quote above delineates, could not be further from the truth. A person affirming their gender is a deeply personal process, and sport can play a meaningful part of this affirmation journey. Instead, it adds to shame and stigma towards trans identities. Young people were aware of politicians and media outlets using the issue to create division and hostility. One young person articulated their disdain and frustration towards administrators and policy makers:

*"So it doesn't feel welcoming, and there is a lot of hostility as a whole towards us. To change it, I don't know, I think the first step is not getting the hatred and the attacks, which is that minimum of a request, really. But I think the only way we can actually begin like to move forward and to feel welcome and included is to at least stop. There's like backwards steps that we've been making recently. And then I don't know what solutions to come. But I guess, put in more effort to come up with some solutions. If you want to address the disadvantages to women's sports, maybe coming up with some plans that actually support and uplift everyone. I don't know what that would look like. But I would like to see a little bit more effort instead of chucking us in a box saying it's too difficult to work out. We're going to include you would be a good next step. But I think a lot of work needs to be done to feel welcomed again".*

The quote emphasises the challenges for administrators and policy makers, and the damaging and long-lasting impacts of such debates, and how this turns young people away from sport. Sport clubs and organisations need to assess the damage of such debates, especially in Australia, where at the last election, trans women in sport was discussed widely as a key election issue, and a bill introduced to parliament to limit and restrict the participation of trans women in sporting competitions. However, it is not only resistance to trans athletes that impacts young people, but backlash to pride attempts across Australian sporting codes. A highly publicised incident involving a NRL team and players refusing to wear a rainbow jersey during a pride game was also discussed by some participants. One young person explained:

*"I had to turn myself off, like offline once I started seeing that stuff, because it was just, I guess, triggering a part of me, but I would just say, the, I do think there's the importance of pride round".*

Self-care and monitoring social media engagement was discussed by many young participants. Unfortunately, sport has become a lightning rod and key medium for LGBTIQ+ rights and attracts mass media attention whenever there controversies arise. This leads into the next secondary theme, which is the (toxic) culture of sport.

Young people described the toxic culture of sport, linked to aggressive and expressive forms of masculinity, which sought to alienate LGBTIQ+ people. One participant outlined:

*"I think there's like little things like the language used by players and coaches, especially on field is really important, and I didn't realise how apparent it was, how like as to how inclusive our club was, until last year, I was training with another club. And the language just really stood out as quite abrasive when it was like, Oh, come on, girls. Well, let's man up it was kind of like, okay, I haven't heard that in a long time. I'm kind of uncomfortable now. So, I didn't I hadn't realized prior to that as to how much safer I felt in this space until I kind of realized what an unsafe place felt like".*

Hostile environments make LGBTIQ+ feel unsafe, and many chose to leave certain clubs or teams because of this or stop playing all together. From a fan perspective, one participant explained that they stopped going to watch AFL games because of the toxic culture:

*"Sport gives people a sense of, especially in Victoria for football, a sense of purpose. And religion gives people a sense of purpose. Like, if you're in a crowd full of all these, you know, masculine men, I stopped going to the football games. I was only going because it was one opportunity to see my parents. So, I kept going to the games when they came to Melbourne because that's when I would see them. But it's very aggressive, the football world is aggressive, like I think it is, and then add the alcohol".*

Creating safe spaces for everyone is important for people to want to attend live sports games, and there were many stories of young LGBTIQ+ people not choosing to go to live sports games due concerns for their safety and feeling uncomfortable. When sport organisations did make attempts to make environments more inclusive for LGBTIQ+ communities, some participants did question the authenticity of such efforts. This leads to the next secondary theme.

Tokenism and rainbow washing was discussed by several participants, in relation to LGBTIQ+ diversity work, specifically through pride games and pride efforts. Participants expressed frustrations towards organisations and companies who engaged in rainbow washing, especially during the pride season in Victoria, known as Midsumma festival. One participant explained:

*"There's so many examples. Midsumma had them. For Christ's sakes. I think it was CommBank that changed their logo. There's a few organisations that do it every single year. I don't really like rainbow washing. I mean, it's, it's kind of nice, but it's also not really, you know, it's incentivizing the purchase of our items... like we are a rainbow friendly organization. But no, I'm not really a fan".*

Another participant expressed:

*"Pride campaigns can feel, very like performative activism in a way".*

There was discussion amongst participants about pride rounds and some attempts by sports and clubs to engage with pride activities. Participants explained that it was noticeable when organisations and clubs had engaged LGBTIQ+ communities and organisations, and when efforts appeared to be authentic and credible. Tokenism was mentioned by several participants, as one outlined:

*"But yeah, it's kind of bit token [istic]. They are just kind of, at the moment, I still kind of see it as like a bit token. But then for younger people, like I can, if I was doubting [my sexuality] growing up, I think about that, rather than the context of where I come from, if I wasn't out and growing up, I think I'd want to see those games. So, there is that shift of seeing the younger queer people come through and like, be more comfortable. And so, I definitely think that does still play a part in it. And it creates conversations within the household, whether controversial or not. So, it also can create a safe space for that young queer person"*

Some young people expressed that attempts by some sports to engage with LGBTIQ+ whole heartedly fell short. One young person expressed their frustration with their sporting code, and lack of engagement beyond their annual pride game:

*"So [sport], currently, they have pride round, which they don't do anything for, except for Rainbow socks, and pride cup. But the problem is now they're sat back and are like 'we're done'. We've done it, we have conquered diversity, we're inclusive, queer people will come to us. No, they weren't there. So Oh, my gosh, oh, it's so annoying. Because they think that like, just because they have the round. And then this extra day that some sports don't even have, they're like, we're above it, we are doing the best we can. And they're not doing anything else".*

Alternatively, one participant explained an example of a club they support, and the club's ongoing and continued commitment to LGBTIQ+ inclusion:

*"I've noticed a lot of, certainly my team that I follow, which is the Tampa Bay Lightning, they will often put up something, especially if it's sports related, is 'sport is for everyone'. And they were like, we don't tolerate violence. We do not tolerate any of this sort of stuff. We do not tolerate any discrimination. And I like the fact that you're saying that, not only outside of Pride Month and outside of your pride games, means a lot. And I'm not even American like, and so seeing that, you know, the basketballer that came out, like the fact that he felt that he could do that is awesome. And even the pride games that are happening here in Australia, but the fact that I can say that, like, Oh, that's awesome. They're moving forward. To me. That's awesome to see".*

Both quotes highlight the complexities related to pride efforts, and specifically their execution and how they are delivered. However, as noted, participants spoke about their impact on young people and the broader community. This leads into our final secondary theme.

The impact of pride rounds and activities is the final discussion of this section. There has been a growing number of pride related activities across sporting codes in Australia, at both the professional and community level. Young people in our study spoke positively about pride related activities and efforts by sporting organisations, especially for what it would mean to young people who were grappling and coming to terms with their identity. One participant explained:

*“So it'd be really, really good to see sports, I think Lacrosse is doing a pretty good job, where they're like, bringing in LGBTIQ+ inclusion work, but the way they're bringing in policies and programs and resources to actually enforce inclusive environments and to like, create this environment that is just like, yes, if you join this sport, you will be supported”.*

The quote reinforces the need for a holistic approach to LGBTIQ+ inclusion, and the need for inclusive policies, programs, and processes. Where some young people spoke about the challenge of whether they disclosed their identity in some sporting spaces, the young person above points to the reassurance that young people can be provided knowing that they will be supported if they join a sport (via inclusive policies and programs). Another young person described their view towards pride games and efforts:

*“I don't see pride games as having a role of completely changing people's perspectives in isolation. I don't expect someone who's homophobic or transphobic, to watch a pride game be like, well, it changed my life. But I think, dedicating time on television or at a match to highlight, like it's a big problem that a lot of queer people face. And have a discussion. But also, there are players who have the opportunity to participate in a pride game, but are openly saying, No, I don't want to. I think that speaks more to the organization than the individual. Because the players, I hope have been informed and educated on why the pride game is even a thing. And if they feel the need to openly stand against it. That's on the individual”.*

This quote stresses the importance for ongoing and sustained commitment from organisations to ensure that pride games and activities are seen as one part of an arsenal of tools to combat homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in sport. If sport organisations lack authenticity, then it is likely that young people will see through this and be less likely to support the efforts or even attend the celebrations or events.



# DISCUSSION

Combining the quantitative and qualitative data paints a concerning picture of young LGBTIQ+ people's participation in sport and physical activity, with lower rates of sport participation and engagement than the wider population. Around 54% of the sample played competitive or social sport, with around 33% playing competitive sport and 37% playing social sport, with alarming rates of discrimination when they engage (around 50% have witnessed or experienced homo/ bi/ transphobia). Men's sport environments seem to be the most problematic, with gay men reporting witnessing the highest rates of homophobia at around 76%. More concerning is the prevalence of sport participation amongst gay men and lesbian women in competitive sport currently at around 30%.

However, more promising, are the perspectives of young people wanting to engage, and their motivation for sport and movement spaces to be more inclusive. In fact, young people have clear ideas and feedback for the sport and movement sector in how to encourage more young people to participate, and how to address the barriers they experience. For organisations wanting to improve outcomes for young people, they should seek to include young people in decision making processes making them central to LGBTIQ+ diversity and inclusion work. Each research question will be addressed and answered in the following section.

## 1 What are the current participation rates of LGBTIQ+ young people in sport and physical activity?

Our data indicated that 33.4% of LGBTIQ+ youth aged 16-25 years played a competitive form of sport regularly in 2023, whilst 37.2% played a social form of sport, and 54.2% currently engaged in some kind of competitive and/or social sport. However, an important piece of data to highlight is the comparison between current and historic rates of competitive sport engagement. Historically, 47% of the sample were a registered player with any sport team or club in either 2019, 2020, 2021, or 2022, whereas currently only 33% engage in competitive sport. This suggests that young LGBTIQ+ people have a high dropout rate from organised and formal sport through clubs. The COVID-19 pandemic would have also been a factor in this, especially in returning to play sport after the pandemic.

Additionally, the large number of respondents identifying as heterosexual has implications here. When the analysis of data for 'out' LGBTIQ+ respondents is isolated, the statistics are more concerning and show a much lower rate of engagement in sport. Specifically, the rates of participation in competitive and/or social sport for 'out' respondents is comparatively lower (this group is comprised of 15% gay men, 15% lesbian women, 8% queer, and 9% bisexuals, and 50% indicating a straight/heterosexual sexuality).

Our qualitative data supports this, with some young people in the inactive and non-sport focus group reporting that they left sport during the pandemic and returned to a gym setting or informal leisure activity (such as biking/ hiking) once restrictions eased.

Relating these statistics to AusPlay data, which indicated 60% of 15–19-year-olds "participate in sport related activity 1+ per week", our data suggested that LGBTIQ+ young people play and engage in sport less than their non-LGBTIQ+ counterparts. This is not surprising and supports previous research, such as Symons et al. (2014) and the US centres for Disease and Control (2016), which documented youth sport and school environments as having high rates of discrimination (homo/bi/transphobia), and lower levels of participation for LGBTIQ+ youth respectively. Moreover, the latter was specifically about young people who were members of a community or school sport team, and did not account for informal or unstructured sport. In the past five years our data also indicated a substantial drop out from both social and competitive sport for LGBTIQ+ young people. Our findings also reinforced findings from Kulick et al. (2019), who found that LGBTIQ+ students participate in sport at lower rates than cisgender and heterosexual students and raised concerns about their safety when playing sport.

The engagement rate of LGBTIQ+ youth participating in at least one competitive or social sport (one or both) is 54.2%; 37% play social sport, 34% participate in muscle strengthening exercises or fitness/ exercise classes, and 21% compete in events. This is an extremely conservative view of participation. This conservative number compares favourably with AusPlay youth engagement statistics (60%). However, caution is required when using this comparison for two reasons. 1) It is unclear what AusPlay has determined as sport - thus we have included social sport despite this being far more informal and 2) due to the marketing of this research active sport members and population was dominant, which may lead to inflated participation numbers.

For example, those LGBTIQ+ people who play sports and stay active were more likely to fill out the survey than those who do not engage. This was observed at some events, where patrons declined to participate in the survey because they did not play sport. An effort to further engage inactive populations is necessary for future research. Our qualitative focus groups also highlighted that more people engaged in physical activity and exercise than sport, and that the majority of LGBTIQ+ young people try and stay active, even if it through walking the dog or going for a bike ride.

Young people show a higher percentage of LGBTIQ+ individuals participating in competitive sport compared to adults (33.4% versus 23.4%). Interestingly, both age groups have shown a decrease in engagement with competitive sport (youth decreased by 14% and adults decreased by 23%).



Since COVID-19 youth have been more likely to resume their competitive sport participation, whereas adult participation rates dropped more substantially. Social sport (more informal and flexible) experienced less adverse impact.

## **2 What are the current levels and prevalence of discrimination within sport and movement settings amongst LGBTIQ+ young people?**

Data showed that 53% of LGBTIQ+ young people have witnessed discrimination through homo/bi/transphobia or vilification based on their identity, and 40% have experienced discrimination (homo/bi/transphobia). These findings are alarming, and although this suggests that discrimination has decreased (since the major 2014 study 'Out in the Fields', which reported 80%), and another study on the prevalence in Australian cricket (Storr et al. 2017) which showed rates of homo/bi/transphobia at 75%, 53% is still stubbornly high. This means that LGBTIQ+ young people have a 50/50 chance of witnessing or having to contend with some form of homo/bi/transphobia in a sport-based setting. However, gay men reported the highest rates of witnessing homophobia at 76%, and experiencing homophobia at 63%, which shows no real change since the Out in the Fields report. This is a worrying finding, showing little change in a ten-year period. Efforts to tackle homophobia in men's sport spaces are critical and should be an area of ongoing focus for sports administrators and policy makers. Our data indicated that this has a significant impact on their engagement and is a primary factor in their decision to drop out or stop engaging with sport. Qualitative data also stressed that even one incident can have long-lasting and far-reaching consequences, which young people carry with them throughout life.

When young people engage in sport, they have a much higher chance of witnessing or experiencing discrimination, thus increasing the likelihood of drop out. The higher rates of homophobia from those who identified as gay, supports previous research by Denison and colleagues (2021) who found that when LGB athletes came out to their teammates, reports of homophobic abuse increased, and they became targets of such abuse. To address this problem and encourage lifelong participation into adulthood especially, organisations and sporting bodies need to prevent discrimination in these environments for young LGBTIQ+ people.

Respondents from the focus groups, particularly lesbian sport participants, spoke of the ongoing challenges of balancing their love and passion for their sport, with challenges related to sexism and homophobia. In these instances, they had to make compromises to endure sexism and homophobia because of their love of sport.

The distress caused by discrimination can have lifelong consequences, impacting personal relationships, personal acceptance of their sexuality or gender identity, and stress responses (Symons et al. 2010; 2014).

## **3 What are the current experiences of LGBTIQ+ young people in sport and movement settings?**

Previous research has firmly established that young LGBTIQ+ people experience ongoing discrimination and challenges in sport and movement settings (Storr et al. 2022, Landi et al. 2024). Our own quantitative and qualitative data supports that research, both in the quantitative and qualitative data sets. Although young people reported positive experiences in their engagement, they clearly identified that they had experienced challenges, such as discrimination, and hostile environments at some point in their engagement as young people. The first three themes in the qualitative analysis speak to this specific research question. First, the impact of early school and sport experiences, with negative experiences in school leaving longlasting impacts, often leading to trauma. This means that many young people drop out of sport, or associate negative things with school sport and PE. Addressing homophobia/biphobia/ transphobia in school-based settings is paramount in ensuring future generations have positive and meaningful experiences in sport and physical activity throughout their adolescence.

Second, personal circumstances and stories, highlighted the uniqueness of young people under the LGBTIQ+ umbrella, especially for young people with multiple lived diverse experiences (for example those with diverse gender or sexualities and disabilities or culturally diverse backgrounds). It is important to acknowledge the rich diversity that exists across rainbow communities - the LGBTIQ+ community is not one large homogenous group of people, but a wide range of diverse individuals, each with their own lived experiences. Organisations and policy makers should factor this into future planning, and understand the differences amongst young people around boys/girls and gender diverse people.

Some of the young women and gender diverse people we spoke to in our study spoke about their unique needs and experiences, especially around safety. We now know that factors that may attract and encourage participation and engagement for young gay men, for example, may actually deter girls, women, and gender diverse people from participation. Third, navigating LGBTIQ+ identity through movement spaces, means ongoing challenges often forcing young people to engage in the practice of identity management. If they choose to come out to certain people, they feel the need to carefully monitor how teammates may respond or behave, disclose information to their coach, and so on.

A person first approach to LGBTIQ+ inclusion is encouraged in this regard, to understand that although LGBTIQ+ people will share some commonalities regarding access, safety and equity, they are not one large homogenous group and their experiences and requirements are not the same across different groups of LGBTIQ+ communities.

#### **4 What are the barriers and facilitators for LGBTIQ+ young people in sport and physical activity?**

There were significant barriers and facilitators identified by young people in the study, across the survey and focus groups. The key barriers embedded in structural discrimination and exclusive practices, included a lack of safe spaces and concerns around public safety, the gendered nature of sports and activities, and negative media attention and debates. The three key themes discussed above relate to barriers around discrimination also, but the most significant narrative which stood out in the focus groups was 'free to exist'. They described wanting to live their lives without restraint or restrictions, to be themselves in sport and movement spaces without being subjected to vilification, having their identity questioned or challenged, or their existence debated. This speaks to the importance and critical need for organisations and policy makers to ensure that these spaces are safe(r) and free from discrimination. It is a damning and illuminating reflection of the sector when young people are not able to be comfortable, relaxed and unguarded or 'free to exist' in a space.

More encouraging were the data about the clear messages young people reported in the changes they want to see across sport and movement settings, and practical ways that organisations could seek to include them and cater to their identities and needs. Top factors to encourage participation from the survey results included friend referral or support (56%), a welcoming and affirming culture of LGBTIQ+ people (44%), LGBTIQ+ specific come and try programs (41%), anti homo/bi/transphobia policies or initiatives (36%). The other three themes from the qualitative data analysis related directly to encouraging participation focused on representation and visibility, factors promoting safer spaces, and young people's attitudes towards pride efforts.

Young people see role models and the visibility of out LGBTIQ+ athletes as important in facilitating their participation, especially those who play competitive sport. Secondly, creating safer spaces in both physical and cultural spaces, through the public display of pride flags for example, was seen as an important way to attract and retain LGBTIQ+ people in sport and movement spaces.

Finally, ensuring that pride related efforts and activities are authentic and have engaged LGBTIQ+ communities throughout the journey, was seen as an important and influential facilitator for young people. Pride efforts need to be more than just performative, but they do play an important role in signalling a level of safety and inclusion for LGBTIQ+ people to engage.

The data discussed in this report draws attention to the need for policy makers, sport managers, and physical activity providers to undertake targeted LGBTIQ+ diversity and inclusion work to ensure that LGBTIQ+ young people can access safe, inclusive, and equitable environments that are free from discrimination. The consequences of not doing this work are far reaching with significant long-term impacts for LGBTIQ+ people, leading to trauma, and physical inactivity throughout their life course. When LGBTIQ+ people are still subjected to ongoing discrimination, sport and physical activity can be a pathway to deal with the associated mental health challenges, and a valuable opportunity to build social connections and support systems with peers.

Ensuring young LGBTIQ+ people have positive experiences through adolescence and youth is crucial to encourage lifelong participation and to develop positive relationships with physical activity; sports and physical activity providers must make genuine commitments to ensure that sport and movement spaces are safe and inclusive for LGBTIQ+ young people. The data show that more young people engage in movement settings, such as gyms and active recreation, over sport, which presents unique challenges and opportunities for both sectors. On the one hand, the sport sector risks a whole generation of young people switching off and disengaging with sport because of negative and traumatic formative years. But on the other hand, gyms/ active recreation/leisure providers have a unique opportunity to market to and attract a whole demographic of LGBTIQ+ young people, who want to be physically active, in environments where they can be themselves and not encounter negative and discriminatory cultures.

Future research should explore physical activity and active recreation within LGBTIQ+ communities, and how cohorts of LGBTIQ+ people are building their own communities and spaces to ensure all members feel safe and included.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results and findings from this research, the following recommendations are provided.

- 1 The development of national and state based LGBTIQ+ inclusion policies:** There is no national LGBTIQ+ inclusion policy, with a clear focus and strategy for how the Australian sport sector should approach their LGBTIQ+ inclusion work. The focus should be on attracting and retaining LGBTIQ+ people in sport and movement settings, and consider different approaches for diverse cohorts (such as lesbian women, gay men, trans and gender diverse people). It should also consider how to create and foster LGBTIQ+ inclusive and affirming cultures and environments. A national approach is needed so that a whole of sector approach is adopted, and every sport and organisation across the sector is clear on what needs to be done, and their role, in working towards a sector which is fully inclusive of LGBTIQ+ people. A policy approach should also be designed in Victoria, in collaboration between LGBTIQ+ organisations, VicHealth, and the State Government. The Rainbow Roadmap by Proud2Play and VicSport is a good example of the type of approach that could be adopted.
- 2 The development of anti-homophobia and anti-discrimination policies and campaigns:** Sports organisations should develop anti-homophobia/biphobia/ transphobia policies and action plans. Discrimination in sport is still stubbornly high, with a 50% chance that a LGBTIQ+ person will encounter or witness discrimination (and 76% chance for gay men in particular), and levels will not be reduced unless there is targeted action. Reviewing previous campaigns and efforts (such as Kick it Out in the UK, and US based campaigns) will help in this endeavour.
- 3 Engage young people in developing/testing solutions and co-design:** Youth environments and school sport continue to be key areas for discrimination, so young people should be engaged in the co-design of anti-homophobia and anti-discrimination campaigns and efforts. LGBTIQ+ young people could be on youth advisory boards, invited to participate in workshops and meetings with administrators to ensure their lived experiences and voices are central to this process. Data suggested that young people have insightful and practical suggestions and ideas to help improve outcomes for LGBTIQ+ youth.

- 4 Sport and movement professionals to commit to continuous professional development and education:** The qualitative data indicated that young people report sport and movement professionals, and teachers, have little or no understanding of the needs of LGBTIQ+ young people. In order to improve the experiences for young people in sport and movement settings, it is paramount that professionals and teachers understand the basics of LGBTIQ+ inclusion and practical actions to foster inclusive environments. Ongoing training and development are needed for everyone working across sport and movement settings. This is especially important from a safeguarding perspective, where organisations, clubs, and schools have a duty of care to ensure the welfare of LGBTIQ+ young people (especially under the age of 18). Our data suggested high levels of discrimination, which has negative impacts on their welfare and overall mental health.

- 5 Use data to develop participation strategies:** This report provides a snapshot into sport participation and physical activity in young LGBTIQ+ people, but more data and research about other age groups is needed to inform policy and programs. Nonetheless, based on the data in this report, it is clear that strategies are needed to increase participation and activity levels in settings free from discrimination. Organisations, including Local Government Authorities, State Government, Health Promotion Agencies, and National/ State Sport Associations, should develop or update inclusion and participation strategies. Explicitly focussed plans, based on up to date and evidence, should seek to specifically target and promote sport and physical activity for young LGBTIQ+ people, and ensure that those who currently play or participate, enjoy experiences which are free from discrimination. This also means that some approaches may target different cohorts, for example, gay men versus lesbian women. A broad generic approach appealing to all cohorts across the LGBTIQ+ spectrum will not always work. With current data suggesting that more young people are identifying under the LGBTIQ+ umbrella, and identifying less as exclusively heterosexual and cisgender, it is important to identify LGBTIQ+ young people as a priority area for the sustainability of the sport sector.

**6 Targeted work in PE and youth sport environments:** Notably, while school-based sport was outside of the scope of this project, a significant number of participants reported ongoing feelings of exclusion and marginalisation from sport that related to school-based experiences. A targeted national plan and anti-discrimination campaign/policy should be created to ensure that young people are not subjected to discriminatory and traumatic experiences in school-based settings. Until levels of LGBTIQ+ discrimination in school-based sport settings are reduced, LGBTIQ+ people will continue to remove themselves from sport and movement settings, and hold a negative view about something that should bring enjoyment.

**7 Develop allyship programs and active ally related behaviours:** In order to call out and reduce discrimination, LGBTIQ+ people need peers, coaches, and people alongside them to act as active allies. This might be through awareness campaigns, resources or infographics, and training on bystander intervention or responding to discriminatory events or incidents. This could be part of a broader program of allyship towards diverse groups, such as anti-racism and gender equity programs. In school-based settings, this could also link to gay straight alliances (GSAs), which have recently been established in some Australian schools.

**8 Funding to LGBTIQ+ initiatives, organisations and programs across sport and movement settings:** In order for the critical work in combatting LGBTIQ+ discrimination to continue, funding needs to be directed to organisations who are leading in this space. Funding should be tied to key outcomes, and any programs or initiatives should be appropriately evaluated to help establish an evidence base for the sector. LGBTIQ+ inclusion in sport appears to be less well funded compared to other areas of diversity and inclusion.

**9 Online spaces and club environments should be moderated:** Where possible, online spaces where LGBTIQ+ people engage, should be managed and moderated to ensure that young LGBTIQ+ people are not subjected to online abuse and discrimination. For example, club websites or social media pages, where members or individuals may leave comments about LGBTIQ+ related issues or topics, and young people who read them may be affected. Qualitative data highlighted that online debates and discussions related to LGBTIQ+ events across sports (sport stars using homophobic vilification, players refusing to wear pride jerseys, or sports creating policies which ban trans athletes from elite sport) have negative impacts on young people's mental health. Similarly, sports organisations should monitor and moderate their social media channels, for example, when posting about LGBTIQ+ events or days of significance, and if they are targeted with anti-LGBTIQ+ comments or extreme trolling.

**10 Policies and strategies focusing on retention of LGBTIQ+ young people:** Data showcased that there is a significant drop out for LGBTIQ+ young people, especially related to competitive sport. Organisations should consider how they can retain talent in the sporting ecosystem, and encourage young people to stay in the sector. This would mean more LGBTIQ+ people volunteering, coaching, and joining administration in the sector. LGBTIQ+ people need to be part of decision-making processes across all levels of sport, but if the sector is losing them at a critical time, then this has significant repercussions for the sustainability of the sector. This is similar to recent findings in a recent report by the Australian Sport Commission: the 'leaky pipeline' of women sport coaches, where the high-performance sport sector loses talented women sport coaches to other industries.



# CONCLUSION

In the context of sport and physical activity, LGBTIQ+ young people are one of the most marginalised groups in society. Young people are less likely to be physically active and play sport (especially as teenagers), and in addition to this, a range of factors and overlapping systems of oppression exist which actively contribute to block young people from accessing the benefits of sport and physical activity. Some of the factors include internal barriers such as navigating their sexuality or gender identity and the challenges that coming to terms with it brings. In addition, media and global media coverage suggest that promoting acceptance for LGBTIQ+ people is political and to push an agenda, with some sports actively banning trans people from competing.

Since 2014 when Symons et al. first examined the negative impact of homophobic bullying and discrimination towards LGBTIQ+ young people, little has changed, with sport still a concerning site and context for LGBTIQ+ youth discrimination. Apart from some pockets of the sector, the broader sport/leisure/active recreation sector (movement spaces) are not actively engaging in any form of inclusion and diversity management practices related to LGBTIQ+ inclusion. Therefore, as the data in this report showed, it is understandable that LGBTIQ+ people do not want to engage in sport, or look to physical activity and movement spaces as areas for keeping active so they can be themselves (free to exist). Significant and targeted gender and LGBTIQ+ equity work must be undertaken across the sport and movement sectors to remove barriers and facilitate young people, especially trans young people. This study represents one of the first pieces of Australian academic research to document the levels of engagement and participation in sport, and the results indicate that LGBTIQ+ young people have significantly lower levels of participation compared with their peers. This claim is supported by global research.

Only when young LGBTIQ+ people are given the opportunity to be their authentic selves so will they be 'free to exist' in sport and movement spaces, will they be able to access the physical and psychological benefits of sport. They will be encouraged by this to participate and engage throughout their life. Another critical finding in this research was the diversity across the sample, especially LGBTIQ+ people living with disability, being Indigenous, or being CALD. The large number of heterosexual identifying people in the sample also raises questions about how people describe their identities, and that they may be choosing to not come out due to fears they will be the target of homophobic abuse. This would support the findings of Denison and colleagues (2021) which found that when LGB young people do come out, they are targeted with homophobic abuse, but more research is needed into this.

Until targeted action across the sport and movement sectors is taken, young LGBTIQ+ people will continue to be subjected to environments which deny them basic human rights, promote a culture of hostility and exclusion, and cause ongoing and sustained trauma. Sport and movement have the power to positively enrich the lives of a marginalised and disenfranchised group in society, and the findings of this report highlight that the time to realise this potential is now.



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"I think sports as a whole doesn't feel specifically trans friendly given some of the recent policy changes that we have seen major sporting leagues do. I don't feel safe. I guess I can't participate in mainstream sports anyway now, but if I could, I wouldn't feel safe participating in any. It doesn't feel welcoming".

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All recommendations identified by the research team are based on data collected during the research, and this information is known to be correct at the time this report was prepared.

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