

FREE
TO EXIST

LGBTIQA+ YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

🗨️

Young people continue to experience and also to witness alarming rates of homophobia/biphobia/transphobia in sport and movement settings. 53% of LGBTIQA+ young people have witnessed discrimination and 40% have experienced discrimination, mostly through verbal vilification. 76% of gay men, however, reported witnessing homophobia, and 63% of gay men had experienced homophobia.



Although these rates show improvements from the Out in the Fields Study (at around 80% in 2014, and other studies in Australian Sport in 2017 at 75%), this is a slow and stubborn decline over a ten-year period. This suggests that an increase in targeted LGBTIQA+ diversity work is having a positive impact on levels and the prevalence of homophobia/biphobia/transphobia, but work needs to continue, especially against a backdrop of resistance and backlash to LGBTIQA+ equalities. Unfortunately, however, there has been no decline in the prevalence of homophobia reported by gay men.



Young people continue to have negative experiences in school-based sport settings, which directly impact their engagement and involvement with sport and physical activity throughout adolescence and into adulthood. Participants reported limited understandings of LGBTIQA+ student needs in schools, and stories of discrimination and hostility from other students.



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



While active engagement in sport and leisure activities was shown to be a significant driver of perceptions of belonging for LGBTIQA+ adults, findings indicated that this is not the same for LGBTIQ+ young people. In other words, LGBTIQA+ young people do not experience a sense of belonging through participation in sport.



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%. Data indicated that there has been a drop off in sport participation in recent years and post COVID-19 pandemic; 47% of LGBTIQA+ young people were registered to a sports club in 2019, 2020, 2021, or 2022, 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 (this group is comprised of only 15% gay men, 15% lesbian women, 8% queer, and 9% bisexuals who participate in sport, with the majority of those who play and engage in sport indicating a straight/heterosexual sexuality).



FREE TO EXIST



A dominant theme across focus groups was young people's desire to be themselves and 'just exist'. 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'. The freedom to be able to exist and not have their identity challenged, questioned, ridiculed, resisted, or invalidated whilst navigating movement spaces was discussed extensively.



Data indicated 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 37% play social sport and 33% play competitive sport. In comparison to comparable data from AusPlay, this indicated that this population group engage with and play less sport than the wider population.



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



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



The biggest enablers of participation for this group were friend referrals (57%), welcoming and affirming culture of LGBTIQ+ people (45%), and LGBTIQ+ specific come and try programs (42%).



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



Since Symons' influential and important research in 2014, which examined the negative impact of homophobic bullying and discrimination towards LGBTIQ+ young people, our data confirmed that apart from overall levels of discrimination declining, little has changed, and sport is still a concerning site for discrimination of LGBTIQ+ youth.



Our data showed that targeted efforts and programs are urgently needed to ensure sport and movement settings do not continue to cause harm and force LGBTIQ+ young people to drop out and remove themselves from sport and movement settings. Men's sport spaces reported the biggest concerns, and highest levels of homophobia.

