

Play to Lead:

The Generational Impact of Sports on Women's Leadership

Letter from the CEO

As the Women's Sports Foundation celebrates its 50th anniversary, we set out to examine the cross-generational impact that sports participation has had on girls and women, specifically in the area of leadership development. *Play to Lead: The Generational Impact of Sports on Women's Leadership* is a breakthrough study that examines the skills, traits, and experiences that develop through youth sports across seven generations, ages 20–80. It is the first study of its kind to explore the impacts of policy-driven changes, most notably the passage of Title IX in 1972, on girls and women both in and outside of the sports ecosystem. The study also illuminates the barriers that have impeded full and sustained sports participation across the decades.

For 50 years and counting, the Women's Sports Foundation has recognized the powerful connection between sport participation and leadership. This new report is vital because it proves why sports are not a nice-to-have but a must-have for all girls and women by providing insight into what can and will be achieved when they truly have equal access and opportunity to play at the youth level.

At WSF we strongly believe that girls do not have to go on to become elite athletes to reap the societal and cultural benefits of sports. By studying the leadership skills that emerge from sports participation at a young age and how they translate in adulthood, this report shines a unique light on the potential of sports to be an engine for full gender equality in leadership that spans across all sectors throughout the nation and globe.

Play to Lead is the latest proof point showcasing the critical need to ensure that all girls have equitable access to sport, but there is still a lot of work to be done. As outlined in our 2022 report, *50 Years of Title IX: We're Not Done Yet*, girls from marginalized communities — including girls of color, girls with disability, LGBTQ+ youth, and those from low socioeconomic households — face even greater obstacles to play. Our latest findings prove there is a dire need for all girls to participate in sports because it helps them develop critical building blocks that will propel them to lead throughout their lives. Simply put: when girls play, they go on to become leaders — in sports and beyond — and that means we all win!

The Women's Sports Foundation is deeply grateful to Earlystone for the generous lead donation it made in support of this study. We thank the Evelyn Y. Davis Foundation, whose major grant supports this and future critical research undertaken by the Women's Sports Foundation. Lastly, thanks to American Express for generously supporting the Women's Sports Foundation.

The Women's Sports Foundation is proud to be at the forefront of research and practice, and we look forward to working with experts across sports, youth development, education, medicine, business, and mental health to ensure that all girls have an opportunity to thrive in sports. By getting more girls in the game we can foster a vibrant pipeline of future leaders who are able to succeed beyond the boundaries of the playing field — empowering them to lead in communities, schools, and workplaces. All girls. All women. All sports® #KeepPlaying



Danette Leighton
CEO, Women's Sports Foundation

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EARLYSTONE

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Author contributions: Sharrow, Staurowsky, Davis, Strohman, and Burton all collaborated to generate the structure and content of the survey instrument. Sharrow coordinated with YouGov staff to field the study and direct initial analyses. Sharrow conducted additional data analyses and authored the report with support in the literature review from Staurowsky and Davis. Burton and Strohman authored the policy and practice recommendations.

The study was reviewed by the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office staff of the Institutional Review Board and was determined to be exempt.

About the Women's Sports Foundation

The Women's Sports Foundation exists to enable girls and women to reach their potential in sport and life. We are an ally, an advocate, and a catalyst. Founded by Billie Jean King in 1974, we are one of the *first* organizations to recognize the powerful connection between sports access, equity, and society. WSF has been changing the game for 50 years through its research, advocacy, and community programming, investing over \$100 million to help girls and women play, compete, and lead — in sports and beyond — without barriers. A leader and champion of the entire women's sports ecosystem, WSF amplifies the vital societal and cultural impact that is made when girls and women play sports. All girls. All women. All sports® To learn more about the Women's Sports Foundation, please visit www.WomensSportsFoundation.org.

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Executive Summary

Several generations of American girls have benefited from increased access to sports in their youth and adolescence. How have the resulting experiences impacted their ability and willingness to lead in adulthood? During the 50th anniversary year of its founding, the Women's Sports Foundation commissioned a nationally representative study of American adults who played girls' and women's sports between the ages of 5 and 26 ($N=2,886$) to answer this question. *Play to Lead: The Generational Impact of Sports on Women's Leadership* is the ground-breaking outcome of this research, focused on multiple generations of women to explore of how sports participation on teams for girls and women in the United States created adult leaders.

This work extends other research from the Women's Sports Foundation that consistently recognizes how participation in sports shapes the lives of girls and women for a lifetime. It explores how, across the American workforce and in communities around the country, the skills, traits, and experiences accrued in sports help girls become leaders later in their adult lives. With an eye toward leadership emergence as a developmental phenomenon, it attends to the changing circumstances of access to sports for girls and women over time, and particularly the passage and implementation of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Whether at work, in industries, in community organizations, in faith communities, in politics, or in movements for social change, the skills learned on sports teams shape girls into adult leaders. *Play to Lead* weaves together the threads of what is known about leadership development through sports in an intersectionally gendered lens to better understand *why* sports are important in the lives of girls, women, and gender-diverse people, and *how* policy and practice can best promote a gender-equitable future in sports and beyond.

While "leadership" (as a concept) can be notoriously difficult to pin down, this study considers leadership emerging from ordinary people who aim to motivate others to contribute to collective goals. Paths to leadership can be formal, as in a leader who is appointed or elected to a position, or informal, as in when someone in a group emerges because of a need or particular area of expertise. This study concerns leadership outcomes both in terms of formal roles (with and without traditional leadership titles, like "President" or "Manager") and taking charge of groups in informal ways. It adopts Burton et al.'s (2020) broad definition of leadership as "...an influence relationship aimed at moving organizations or groups of people toward an imagined future that depends on alignment of values and establishment of mutual purposes" (p. xi) in the ways it shows up across multiple venues in society.



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Organizations and groups need leaders to rally their members around a collective vision and a mutual purpose. This research studies how leaders are made, not born, and how formative experiences can teach individuals to collaborate in productive ways to accomplish a goal, to stand comfortably in the spotlight, and to serve as exemplars for younger generations. Focusing on the role of sports, it demonstrates how youth experiences help women and gender-diverse adults become such leaders across an array of sectors, prepared to shape the direction of our country and our democracy in times of prosperity as well as crises.

Survey respondents range from 20 to 80 years of age and were intentionally recruited in cohorts (ages 20–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–69, 70–80 during 2024). All played sports on girls' teams in their youth, most on organized teams, though older cohorts were also queried about their "pick up" sports experiences to account for the structural differences in opportunities before Title IX. Almost all (98.6%) respondents identify as women in their adult lives. This study design provides insight into the cross-generational impacts of sports participation on leadership in adulthood, particularly on the spillover impacts of the passage of Title IX across generations.

The survey collects information about respondents' sporting backgrounds during the formative years of 5 to 26; the skills, traits, and experiences it engendered; and the leadership roles they have taken on in adulthood. It also measures the barriers they experienced, both to accessing sports and staying engaged and to being promoted, nominated, and/or elevated

into leadership positions. The focus is dominantly on leadership outside the home (i.e., in the public sphere).

What emerges is a layered and nuanced picture of the ways in which sports for girls and women have, over the past 75 years, played a key role in socializing and preparing several generations to lead in various ways across their communities, workplaces, and elsewhere within our nation.

The conclusions offer insights into evaluating the micro-foundations of gendered leadership and the youth development institutions that fuel it. Because the study also investigates barriers to sports access and leadership emergence, it provides insights into how current practices and opportunities can be improved. The findings present novel insight into the impacts of Title IX beyond the playing fields, and point policymakers, coaches, current leaders in business and society, and parents to important lessons for the future.

This study offers new insights and a fresh litmus test into the impacts of Title IX, exploring how well policy implementation has operated to facilitate long-term, equitable outcomes across the life course that endure beyond mere athletic opportunity. It demonstrates that the expansion in school-sponsored teams for girls and women brought about by Title IX have correlated with increased adult leadership roles — an exciting new finding that reinforces the need for continued pressure to fully enforce Title IX.

Ultimately, this research provides a serious assessment of the role of sports in preparing girls, as community members and citizens, for engaged leadership. In an era where public and democratic institutions are increasingly in need of fulsome engagement from Americans of diverse and varied backgrounds, and when leadership grounded in neighborhoods, schools, faith communities, workplaces, local governments, and social movements is needed more than ever, the future health of our society rests on how well *common* people rise to lead in *everyday* challenges. To this end, understanding the successes from and barriers to youth sports as a developmental context for leadership may suggest ways to seed routine interventions in existing cultural institutions that can render significant impacts.

Finally, in a moment of multiple and polarizing national and global challenges, this research reminds parents, coaches, teachers, neighbors, extended family members, and elected officials that the possibilities for our collective futures emerge from how well we nurture our youth. Sports are more than play. The serious task of leadership development and cultivating confidence and self-reliance in the next generation of young girls can be tackled through maintaining accessible and healthy youth teams in communities nationwide. The lessons learned in everyday tasks shape the leadership possibilities for tomorrow. Indeed, our collective health and well-being depend on it.



Key Findings

- 1. Both early access to sports and participation during one's youth cultivate the skills that align with leadership emergence.** Respondents overwhelmingly credit the skills and lessons learned in sports for having a positive impact on their adult life, and many directly trace their leadership emergence to the lessons learned in sports. Two-thirds (67.0%) believe they have carried the skills and lessons from sports into adulthood. This highlights the significant role that sports can play in girls' personal development. Survey respondents who are in younger adult age groups are more likely to attribute these positive outcomes to sports than are older respondents (73.3% among those in their 20s and 30s versus 55.8% among those in their 60s and 70s). Half of women (48.6%) credit the skills acquired through sports for their leadership development.
- 2. Women across the generations report that sports provide the skills, traits, and experiences that align with the characteristics and demands of leadership.** Sports prepare women to lead. Seven out of 10 (73.0%) indicated that learning "teamwork" was their greatest takeaway for youth participation. Over half reported "learning from mistakes" (52.6%) and "handling pressure" (50.9%) as key lessons from youth sports, while nearly as many (46.2%) cited "pushing physical boundaries." Roughly three out of 10 reported developing skills in "decision-making" (36.5%), "goal setting" (36.3%), "responding to criticism" (34.3%), "problem-solving" (32.9%), and/or "effective communication" (32.3%).
- 3. Women who played sports fulfill a variety of leadership roles in adulthood across sectors.** More than two-thirds (69.1%) of the respondents identified themselves as "public sphere leaders," defined as having at least one formal leadership role outside of the family. Nearly half of respondents (48.0%), all who played sports during their formative years, have had a formal leadership role in the workplace. Among those with formal leadership roles, 70.7% had held at least one of the following leadership titles: Team Lead, Manager/Administrator, Director/Chair, Head of Staff, President, or C-Suite title (i.e., Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operating Officer, Chief Financial Officer). These represent 54.2% of respondents across the full sample. Those in their 20s and 30s are more likely to see sports as critical to leadership development and to attach their satisfaction and success in life to the skills gained through participation than older generations do.
- 4. There is a clear and positive relationship between years spent in youth and young adult sports and holding formal leadership titles in adulthood.** The longer respondents stayed in sports, the more likely they are to hold many public sphere leadership titles, compared to those who spent less time in sports. When titles are grouped into a more executive-focused group — C-Suite, Founder, President, Vice President, Director or Chair, Board of Directors/Advisory Board, Head of Staff — this group is significantly more likely to have spent higher numbers of years playing sports and to have held sports leadership positions on youth and young adult teams than those with other formal leadership titles. Respondents who reported formal adult leadership roles have longer average records of sports participation (8 years versus 6 years) than non-leaders. They also are more likely than those without formal leadership roles in adulthood to have participated in sports during adolescence (ages 14–17), young adulthood (ages 18–26), and beyond (ages 26+). Participation on coed teams is quite common in youth athletics among respondents (64% reported experiences with coed training and/or competition). Younger cohorts indicate the highest rates of coed participation (78% of those in their 20s, compared to 37% of those in their 70s). Those with formal adult leadership roles are less likely to have only played on girls-only teams (42.6% of those with formal leadership have girls-only team backgrounds, compared to 52.8% of those without formal leadership roles).



5. **The relationship between sports participation and leadership emergence holds constant across racial and ethnic groups.** Access to sport, duration of participation, and a high-quality experience within it are critical factors in ensuring equitable outcomes. The potential for sports to mitigate inequities as they relate to adult leadership is evident.
6. **The majority of women report that participating in sports during their formative years was an important part of life.** Sixty-eight percent of respondents indicated that sports were either “important” or “extremely important” in their experiences growing up. Over half (55.0%) indicated that sports played either a very big (19.5%) or big (35.5%) role in their personal or social development.
7. **Despite overall advancements in girls’ and women’s sports post-Title IX, barriers have hampered access and the likelihood of staying in sports over the decades.** Seven out of 10 respondents, all of whom played sports at some juncture in their youth, reported various barriers to full access (meaning they would have liked to play longer, more competitively, or additional sports). The most reported barrier is family finances (26.7%), a barrier that is more pronounced among younger groups (20s–40s) than any other age group (averaging 30% among those 20–49 compared to 22% among those 50–80). Lack of parental engagement (20.4%) is the second-highest barrier and is reported at a static rate across groups. The third-highest barrier is in opportunities to participate (20.4%), and this concern is distinctly generational. Twenty-seven percent of those in their 70s report this concern, revealing an awareness of their plight pre-Title IX as compared to younger generations (all other cohorts range from 17–21%) and their desire and/or longing for more formalized opportunities to play.

Other prevalent barriers to access cited include: Injury/health concerns (17.3%), a concern that is most pronounced among those in their 20s (27.6%); poor coaching (13.8%), again a concern more pronounced among younger respondents in their 20s (21.9%); and lack of woman role models (13.4%).

8. **Among the youngest group of women (20–29), there are escalating concerns around barriers to full and safe participation as a component of youth sports.** Those in their 20s, all of whom participated in sports, are statistically more likely to report barriers to their desired youth sport participation (eight in 10) than any other group. Three in 10 women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s reported financial barriers to participating in youth, a statistically significant difference from the older groups, underscoring the increasing costs and class disparities that now define access to youth/adolescent sports. Respondents in their 20s are twice as likely to report safety concerns from their youth sports experiences as those in their 40s, and 3–6 times as likely than older groups. Other barriers within the 20s age group include concerns about injury (27.6%), safety (18.9%), and poor coaching (21.9%).

9. **There remain critical differences in the rates, quality, and type of sports participation experienced by girls of color, immigrant girls, girls with disabilities, LGBTQ+ and gender-nonconforming youth, and girls from families with a lower socioeconomic status.** Racial and ethnic inequalities during youth were indicated as a barrier among 6–12% of each age group, with concerns growing among younger respondents. Yet, when young people from these groups participate in sport, they have an equal likelihood of developing leadership traits and participating in public leadership in adulthood. Thus, greater equity and investment here would likely have important implications for leadership becoming more representative of our diverse society with respect to gender.
10. **Women and gender-diverse people of every generation acknowledge the critical need to invest more in girls’ and women’s sports.** More than 80% of respondents see the need for increased opportunity, funding, pay, enforcement of Title IX, media coverage, and hiring of women coaches as important for the future. Older cohorts, particularly those in the 70–80 age group, are more inclined to see the importance of all factors when compared to younger generations, across all measures. Their views on the importance of financial investment in women’s sports, including equal pay and equal funding and on the key measures of Title IX — equal participation opportunities and full enforcement of the law — are particularly strong. Those in their 70s are distinctly likely to express that all of these factors are “very important,” with the highest support, above 50%, on all measures at a statistically significant level. Those who came of age before Title IX and were able to observe Title IX policy changes seem to see formal investments as key routes to expanded and more equitable access.



I. Introduction

“...In reflecting on my experiences with sports and leadership development, I’ve learned the value of teamwork, perseverance, and mentorship. Both arenas emphasize collaboration, resilience, and continuous improvement; shaping not just physical abilities but also mental fortitude, essential for effective leadership.”

– Study respondent, age 21

How has sports participation on teams for girls and women in the United States impacted participants’ leadership outcomes in adulthood? This report explores the answers to this question using a unique, original, multi-cohort, and nationally representative survey of American women and gender-diverse adults ($N=2,886$) who played sports on teams for girls and women when they were 5–26, and who were between the ages of 20 and 80 in 2024.¹ Herein, we weave together the threads of what is known about leadership development through sports in an intersectionally gendered lens to better understand *why* sports are important in the lives of girls, women, and gender-diverse people, and *how* policy and practice can best promote a gender-equitable future in sports and beyond.

This work extends the first 50 years of research from the Women’s Sports Foundation, which consistently recognizes how participation in sports shapes the lives of girls and women for a lifetime. It explores how, across the American workforce and in communities around the country, the skills, traits, and experiences accrued in sports help girls become leaders later in their adult lives. With an eye toward leadership emergence as a developmental phenomenon, we attend to the changing circumstances of access to sports for girls and women over time, as it was dramatically impacted by the passage and implementation of Title IX.

While there is an oft-repeated notion that leaders are born (Boerma et al., 2017), they are also made through access to opportunities that equip them to recognize when duty calls and to take action when action is needed. Formative experiences can teach individuals to collaborate in productive ways to accomplish a goal, to stand comfortably in the spotlight and serve as exemplars for younger generations, to support others

¹ As we detail, our study sample includes those who identify as women, as well as those who participated in sports programs designated for girls in their youth but who now hold an array of gender identities. We will use the term “gender-diverse” as an umbrella term to refer to the ever-evolving array of labels that people may apply when their gender identity, perception, or expression does not conform or align with norms and/or stereotypes, to capture and honor the gender diversity among our study participants (see also Mullin et al., 2023).

or lead behind the scenes, and to fulfill a host of other roles to make a difference in the world. Studying sports experiences in the lives of girls and women, and assessing the developmental role that sports can play in leadership development, helps to debunk notions of “zombie leadership” (Haslam et al., 2024) that might otherwise suggest that leaders are a chosen type, inherent among the social elite, rather than a malleable, emergent identity and/or practice inhabited by many of us in different roles across society.

While “leadership” (as a concept) can be notoriously difficult to pin down, we join cause with scholars and thinkers who see leadership emerging from ordinary people who aim to motivate others to contribute to collective goals (see discussion in Haslam et al., 2024). Organizations and groups need leaders to rally their members around a collective vision and a mutual purpose. We study the role of sports in helping women and gender-diverse adults become such leaders across an array of sectors in American society, shaping the directions of our country in times of prosperity as well as crises.

This report is guided by several main research questions that investigate:

- How do girls’ and young women’s sports participation between the ages of 5 and 26 impact leadership outcomes 1) among women and gender-diverse American adults, and 2) across age cohorts of adults who were in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s in 2024?
- How did changes to the public policy environment (i.e., Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972) affect the sports participation backgrounds of American girls in different cohorts?
- What were the barriers to sports access in respondents’ youth and young adulthood?
- How did such sports participation experiences impact the development of skills, capacities, and traits?
- What kind of leadership roles and experiences have former participants in girls’ sports assumed in their adult lives?
- To what extent did the skills, capacities, and traits developed in athletics for youth and young adults correlate with leadership in adulthood?
- What are the barriers to leadership emergence in adulthood among former girls’ sports participants?
- What are the opinions of former girls’ sports participants towards gender equality issues for the next generation of athletes?



In our survey, we collect information about respondents' "youth" sporting backgrounds; the skills, traits, and experiences it engendered; and the leadership roles they have taken on in adulthood. We focus on sports participation during the formative years of 5 to 26, commonly referred to as "youth" and "young adulthood." We also measure the barriers they experienced, both to accessing sports and staying engaged throughout their formative years, and to being promoted, nominated, and/or elevated into leadership positions, by others or through claiming leadership for themselves. We focus dominantly on leadership outside the home (i.e., in the public sphere), whether at work, in industries, in community organizations, in faith communities, in politics, or movements for social change, or as entrepreneurial leaders. What emerges is a layered and nuanced picture of the ways in which sports for girls and women have, over the past 75 years, played a key role in socializing and preparing several generations of adults to lead in various ways across their communities, workplaces, and elsewhere within our nation. The findings that follow present fresh insight into the impacts of Title IX beyond the playing fields, and point policymakers, coaches, current leaders in business and society, and parents to important lessons for the future.

A note on studying "women" throughout: Of course, to study "women" is to study a complex category, composed of many subgroup identities, each of which have distinct relationships to accessing potential economic, political, and social power

during both youth (as girls) and adulthood. We are careful throughout to acknowledge the important proportion of our survey respondent pool who do not identify as "a woman" in 2024, despite participating on teams for girls in their youth and/or teams for women in their young adulthood. (See Appendix A for information on the study sample.) Throughout, we aim to stay attentive to subgroup dynamics and potential variations in experience (within sports) along lines of race, age, and class, while also acknowledging other important dimensions of identity like disability status, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, citizenship status, and others, that also define and shape experience. Although we do not measure or highlight all these subgroup dynamics in our data analyses, we follow generations of social science research and intentionally do not conceive of "women" (when we use this term) as an undifferentiated group (see, e.g., Bittner & Goodyear-Grant, 2017; Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 2000; Hancock, 2016). The stakes of being mindful of gender variance among adults are especially high given the ongoing efforts to ban transgender and gender-nonconforming athletes from athletic competition in many American states and athletic governance organizations (Blake, 2024; Movement Advancement Project [MAP], 2024). Most adults in our study population were likely limited in their access to athletic teams built for cisgender girls and women, irrespective of their personal relationship to an evolving gender identity during their formative years. We are careful not to erase the presence

of gender diversity through either our study design or in our discussion of the results in order to accord dignity and respect to all survey participants and the populations they represent.

Summary Report Outline: Since its founding in 1974 and in the 50 years since, the Women’s Sports Foundation has been at the forefront of influencing policy discussions regarding the essential benefits of sports in the lives of girls and women through research collaborations with experts from the U.S. and abroad. With a mission to be the “ally, advocate and catalyst for tomorrow’s leaders,” the Foundation “exists to enable girls and women to reach their potential in sport and life.” Herein, we contribute to this history. We begin by describing the purpose of our study and situating it in academic research. We then describe the methods we used to conduct our research. We report our findings and discuss their implications. Finally, we point to policy and practice recommendations to guide those committed to the future of gender equality on and off the field. When taken as a whole, this research documents the importance of sports participation and its attendant impacts on leadership as one measure of physical and mental health of girls and women of every age. It reflects on how addressing barriers to sports participation based on ability, age, gender, gender identity, race, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status can influence broader dynamics of social gender inequality. Finally, it provides new evidence on the long-term role of sports in empowering women and gender-diverse people in every facet of their lives, including as visionaries across society prepared to lead in venues both large and small.

Our conclusions offer insights into evaluating the micro-foundations of gendered leadership and the youth development institutions that fuel it, including both how they work and where they can be improved. Sports are central to the construction of our masculinist political and industry orders, and its rituals and practices are core to the constitution of social, economic, and political life (Burstyn, 1999), but they may also



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be key to its remaking. These insights provide leverage into possible pathways toward full gender equality; staying attentive to disability, racialized, and class-based dynamics in the micro-foundations helps to ensure that we accurately diagnose the problematic dynamics and leave no subgroups behind when designing policy and practice recommendations and solutions.

This study also offers new insights and a fresh litmus test into the impacts of Title IX, exploring how well policy implementation has operated to facilitate long-term, equitable outcomes across the life course that endure beyond mere athletic opportunity. To that end, what follows is a study that provides insight into what has and could come from improving investment in opportunities and institutions supporting girls and young women, ensuring that they too have access to the spaces and lessons historically reserved for men. It demonstrates that the expansion in school-sponsored teams for girls and women brought about by Title IX has correlated with expanded adult leadership roles – an exciting new finding that reinforces the need for continued pressure to fully enforce Title IX.

Ultimately, this research provides a serious assessment of the role of sports in preparing women, as community members and citizens, for engaged leadership. In an era when public and democratic institutions are increasingly in need of fulsome engagement from Americans of diverse and varied backgrounds, and when leadership grounded in neighborhoods, schools, faith communities, workplaces, local governments, and social movements is needed more than ever, the future health of our society rests on how well common people rise to lead in everyday challenges. To this end, understanding the successes from and barriers to youth sports as a developmental context for leadership may suggest ways to seed routine interventions in existing cultural institutions that can render significant impacts.

II. Background: Case Logic, Leadership, and the Stakes for Gender Equality

Anecdotally, sports are frequently posited as a vehicle for women’s leadership development in high-profile contexts (Glass, 2013; Schnell, 2016). Certainly, many women in elected positions have experience in competitive athletics – from members of Congress (e.g., U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, NY, Dartmouth tennis and squash; U.S. Representative Sharice Davids, KS, mixed martial arts) and governors (e.g., Governor Maura Healey, MA, Harvard basketball) to former astronauts (e.g., Sally Ride, Stanford tennis), U.S. Secretaries of State (e.g., Condoleezza Rice, figure skating and tennis), and presidential press secretaries (e.g., Jen Psaki, College of William & Mary swimming). At the highest levels in business, research shows that the women who advance to leadership in male-dominated fields often have a background in athletics. A 2013 study commissioned by Ernst and Young of senior business managers and executives from around the globe famously found that 90% of female respondents had “played sports either at primary

or secondary school, or during university or other tertiary education;” among those with jobs in corporate executive management (often referred to as the “C-suite”), the proportion rose to 96% (Glass, 2013).

Yet sports touch many lives, not only those whose career success reaches great acclaim. Millions of American girls and adolescents participate through community, municipal, school-sponsored, and club teams each year – *how are their adult lives shaped by the skills they learn on the typical teams found in towns, suburbs, and cities across the country?* We know very little about whether or how anecdotes around high-profile leadership outcomes apply to the common experiences of women and gender diverse people. Research on the impacts of girls’ sports participation on leadership outcomes later in life is scant. This report aims to fill this gap.



We approach this report by thinking of leadership emergence through a case study frame. That is, we consider women's leadership emergence as one arena (among many other "cases," see Ragin, 1992; Soss, 2018) where developmental processes and lived experiences of individuals that may otherwise seem indirect or tertiary fundamentally shape adult leadership. Sports, particularly at the youth level, are often thought of as a place for recreation, socialization, physical exercise, and play. We draw on theories of human development that suggest that these seemingly playful spaces engender experiences with serious and consequential effects on adult life.

Many of us know that the experiences we have as children mold who we become as adults. Academic studies from various disciplines document the ways in which formative experiences during youth can shape adult outcomes. For example, social scientists demonstrate how youth socialization and experience can influence civic participation (e.g., Lawless & Fox, 2015; Zukin et al., 2006), how opportunity structures can produce educational access (e.g., Bowen & Bok, 1998), and how educational access can engender workforce participation (Gardner et al., 2008). Scholars also consider how public policies can play a key role in shaping access to resources (e.g., Barnes, 2021; A. Campbell, 2003; Halpern, 1999; Reisner et al., 2007; Soss, 2000), with long-term consequences of lifelong outcomes in civic engagement and public life (Mettler, 2005; Mettler & Welch, 2004). We apply these lessons from outside the sports space to our case study here, particularly with an eye towards understanding stratification among girls and women.

Our approach adopts the youth and young adult sports realm as a venue for what scholars call "the private roots of public action" (Burns et al., 2001). This tack foregrounds the role of social spaces "in which we nurture and are nurtured, learn, toil, play, and pray" as developmental venues where adult outcomes may "have their origins in a long, cumulative pattern...in the principal social institutions of everyday life—the family, school, workplace, voluntary associations, and church" (Burns et al., 2001, p. 3). Specifically, we consider leadership emergence through skills, traits, and experiences in youth and young adult sports as circumstances where such experiences are inculcated and accrued and where such "private" experiences in athletics amass with life-long "public" effects.²

In this sense, we aim to address the bigger questions about women's status in American society *through the lens* of sports

2 *This is not to suggest that women and gender-diverse people don't lead within their families and/or private lives or that such leadership does not have major consequences for the broader society. In fact, familial leadership is recognized as a core component to healthy communities, children, and individuals (Galbraith & Schvaneveldt, 2005). Among participants in our study, 41% indicate having leadership roles within their families, and 67% feel that they have influence within their familial units, though this varies across age cohorts and likely reflects the broader gendered expectations and societal milieu that conditions women to familial labor and caregiving (Goldin, 2021; Ridgeway, 2011). However, women's public sphere leadership roles (and the extent to which socializing institutions in youth and adolescence prepare them for them) are a particularly critical indicator of women's broader social status.*

participation and its effects. The presence or absence of women and gender-diverse people in leadership is both an indicator of their status and empowerment (as it suggests the answer to basic questions in our society about who is "allowed" to lead and steer our collective futures, who is asked to lead, and who is not), and an engine that can drive the future possibilities to reshape our social order. Throughout, we adopt a normative stance that increasing leadership by women and gender-diverse people across sectors of society is a critical channel for addressing gendered bias, pushing for democratic equality, and ensuring full enfranchisement.

What is leadership? Perhaps as a testament to how important leadership is, researchers to casual observers have been preoccupied for centuries with how to think about it, conceptualize it, and define it.

Although leadership from high-profile, highly public women matter in our definition, so too does low-profile, lower-stakes leadership in communities, schools, neighborhoods, and everyday workplaces. Women may lead in their neighborhood association, on the local school board, on the job, in advocacy organizations, in their families, and elsewhere. Paths to leadership can be formal, as in a leader is appointed or elected to a position, or informal, as in when someone in a group emerges because of a need or particular area of expertise; and/or sheer force of personality, thought of most often as charisma (Burton et al., 2020). Our study results concern leadership outcomes in women's lives ranging across these domains, both in terms of formal roles (with and without traditional leadership titles, like "President" or "Manager") and taking charge of groups in informal ways. For this project, we adopted Burton et al.'s (2020) definition of leadership as "...an influence relationship aimed at moving organizations or groups of people toward an imagined future that depends on alignment of values and establishment of mutual purposes" (p. xi) in the ways it shows up across multiple venues in society.

Why study gendered leadership? Across sectors, men are promoted, appointed, elected, and given authority in leadership appointments at higher levels than are women, leaving a pronounced "leadership gap" in multiple arenas of society (Center for American Women in Politics [CAWP], 2024; Goryunova & Madsen, 2017; Lyness & Grotto, 2018; Thomas et al., 2023).

Research shows that this gap emerges early in childhood (Greenlee et al., 2020). Likewise, adults are more apt to assume that "leadership" is a masculine domain (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2008; Schyns et al., 2013). A wealth of research also reveals that these gendered assumptions are also racialized, with both adults and children demonstrating a greater likelihood to identify leaders as not only masculine, but also White (e.g., Lei et al., 2022; Rosette et al., 2008, 2016).³ Still, American public opinion has steadily shown support for women's leadership over past decades, such that for the past quarter century roughly 57% of Americans have expressed the belief that the country

3 *Throughout, we capitalize racial groups including "White" (see Ewing, 2020).*

would be “better governed” with more women in leadership (O’Connell-Domenech, 2024). American culture remains vexed in the struggle for full gender equality.

One of the most pervasive arguments made in support of achieving gender equity in every sector of society is the importance of equal representation in decision making. The disruption of systems that have overlooked, neglected, and/or undervalued the needs, talents, and concerns of diverse women require the voices of the historically marginalized (e.g., Collins, 2000; Goss, 2012; Strolovitch, 2007). But beyond having a mere voice at the table, women leaders are increasingly being recognized for what they bring to leadership, across sectors. Results from the Potential Project (2022), a multi-year study that drew on data from leaders and employees from 5,000 companies in 100 countries, show how leaders are called upon in a post-COVID world to do hard things in a human way, with an emphasis on wisdom combined with compassion. Study participants associated women with the capacity to balance those qualities by a 2:1 margin. Likewise, in a McKinsey study of 65,000 workers, employees scored women higher in providing emotional support (+11 percentage points); checking in on overall well-being (+7 percentage points); navigating work/life challenges (+5 percentage points); workload management in terms of timelines and deadlines (+6 percentage points); and taking action to help with burnout (+5 percentage points) (Thomas et al., 2021).⁴

Furthermore, the extent to which women and gender-diverse people are tasked to lead reveals fundamental truths about our human condition. Measures of gender equality are central indicators of the democratic and social health of societies (e.g., Htun & Weldon, 2018; Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Yet evidence of the many struggles confronting women and gender-diverse individuals in their on-going quest for equal standing abounds (e.g., Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010; Jamieson, 1995; Lyness & Grotto, 2018; Sigel, 1996; Teele et al., 2018). Among the many metrics of equality, women’s leadership attainment in economic, political, workplace, spiritual authority, athletic coaching, and other roles are key indicators of access to shared decision-making, agenda control, resource allocation, individual autonomy, and population health and well-being (Goryunova & Madsen, 2017; Lyness & Grotto, 2018). The preparation, capacity, and authorization of women and gender-diverse people to lead across society bears directly on central dimensions of egalitarianism, fairness, and the ideals of liberal democracy.

Leadership matters because it impacts our collective fate. Notwithstanding the very real challenges of increased visibility as women in historically male-dominated fields, gendered integration of leadership realms are also changing workplace climates and culture. Scholarship across disciplines suggests that both gender discrimination and double standards (e.g., requisite hyper-competence when women lead, compared to men) remain defining features of movements toward leadership equity, particularly for women of color and

⁴ All differences are statistically significant (see Thomas et al., 2021, p. 58).



gender-diverse people.⁵ Healthier and happier employees result in better retention, more stability in the workforce, and greater productivity (Thomas et al., 2023); and women leaders can favorably affect both job engagement and job performance (Hougaard et al., 2022). In political institutions, the increased presence of women as elected representatives has real consequences, with research showing that women’s increased representation in political leadership leads to policy outcomes that are more congruent with gender equality (Weeks, 2022). In social movements, women’s leadership can effectively contest intersectional gender injustice and androcentric norms and can ensure the incorporation of often marginalized voices (e.g., Htun & Weldon, 2018; Perez Brower, 2024).

The preparedness of women and gender-diverse people to claim authority shapes our public and private realms. Outside of the public eye, leadership by and among women also happens during “the second shift” (Hochschild, 1989), after the work hours conclude and domestic labor often intensifies. Women can guide family units, lead in raising children, take the lead on familial emotional labor, and perform other often “invisible” tasks. This domestic leadership provides the backbone of our social order just as much as does leadership in our marketplaces, democratic institutions, and communities, though it is often uncompensated and less highly regarded.

Public opinion towards women’s capacity to lead has shifted dramatically, though Americans also acknowledge the many barriers that prevent women from developing skills and emerging as leaders in many areas of society (Pew Research

⁵ *The challenges of workplace integration are well-studied and, on balance, demonstrate that institutional and cultural leadership transformations are uneven and ongoing, particularly for women of color (e.g., Browne & Misra, 2003; Jamieson, 1995; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; E. Smith & Nkomo, 2001). For gender-diverse people, the challenge of finding affirmation in leadership positions are even more complex (e.g., Fassinger et al., 2010; Muhr & Sullivan, 2013).*



Center, 2015, 2018). Data suggests that gender gaps remain in youth leadership experience, with men (59%) remaining more likely than women (52%) to say they held leadership roles when they were growing up (Goddard & Horowitz, 2013). Scholars find that such factors can play a role in how and when leadership ambitions emerge later in life, as preparation – or self-perceptions of preparation – can be hugely determinative of whether women pursue things like running for political office (Lawless & Fox, 2010, 2015). Among women of color, research shows that leadership emergence can be highly contingent on community encouragement (Ford Dowe, 2022) and the framing of the leadership need (e.g., Brown, 2014; Holman & Schneider, 2016).

In other words, the *conditions* of leadership emergence in the lives of girls, women, and gender-diverse people do not mirror those for boys and men, so studies of their leadership emergence require distinction. In a world where women and gender-diverse people remain under-represented in the highest levels of public political, economic, spiritual, and social authority, understanding some of the dynamic drivers of their leadership development (and how these drivers have changed over time due to shifts in the implementation of equity policy and practice), is therefore critical to understanding the dynamics that sustain or disrupt gendered inequalities more generally.

Thus, we embark on this study with our vision set both within and beyond the sporting landscape. What happens on teams for girls shapes our shared destiny. But this important case logic requires a theoretical approach to understand the dynamic processes through which sports develop leaders. Next, we lay out the key elements of the theory that scaffolds our research design.

III. Literature: Theories of Leadership Development Over the Life Course

In this section, we develop our research approach through the specific perspectives and expectations of “life course theory” (see Mayer, 2009), which suggests that formative experiences, like those experienced by girls in sports, mediate lifelong outcomes (Bruner et al., 2017; Cairney et al., 2018; Coakley, 2016; Gibbons et al., 2018). The theory has its roots in sociology, where it offers insight into how changing environments influence individuals over the life span (Elder & Shanahan, 2006). Typically drawing on narrative interviews and other longitudinal measures, such research explores how large cultural, political, and economic shifts influence societies, communities, and families, and why—amid considerable societal shifts—some cohorts, communities, or individuals thrive and are able to maintain lasting, engaged relationships with institutions while others struggle to do so (Darrah & DeLuca, 2014; DeLuca et al., 2024; Elder, 1994; Perkins & Sampson, 2015; Silva, 2012; Wilensky, 1961). Because we posit that leadership is a developmental outcome that emerges over time and as a consequence of lived experiences, we look to scholars of human development within changing social institutions (e.g., work, schooling, family, community, religion, and politics) to investigate how we think leadership will emerge. This perspective investigates how “biography, history, and the problems of their intersection with social structure” (Mills, 1959, p. 149) relates sports participation to leadership. *Through this lens, sports operate as a “treatment effect,” intervening on the life course of girls in ways that shape who they become as adults.*

Life course literature suggests that the several factors should be critical, for our interests, in propelling outcomes in adulthood: (1) timing of sports participation [including a) age of uptake, b) age of cycling out, and c) defining moments or critical junctures], (2) duration of youth sports participation, (3) historical context (i.e., policy shifts like Title IX) and cohort effects, and finally, (4) family circumstances, insofar as they stratify sports participation (Elder & Shanahan, 2006). Given what we know about the intersectional and interlocking oppression experienced by girls, women, and gender-diverse people who are marginalized on the basis of disability, race, or socioeconomic status, we attune our investigation and analysis to the ways in which these life course dynamics, together, may shape sport’s capacity to either ameliorate or exacerbate existing inequalities particularly as they relate to adult leadership (Elder, 1998; Elder et al., 2003; Elder & Shanahan, 2006).

Sports provide young people with experiences in sociality, teamwork, training, and competition (e.g., Coakley, 2016; Rauscher & Cooky, 2016). They present frequent and varied opportunities for leadership in both informal and formal ways

in settings small and large. The skills developed in sports align with general leadership skills and traits fostered in sports have lifelong impacts (e.g., Callison & Lowen, 2022; Clarke & Ayres, 2014; Kaestner & Xu, 2010; Stevenson, 2010). Thus, we adopt this theoretical approach to how youth developmental experiences in sports provide micro-foundations that “ladder up” to adult outcomes. We draw on scholarship that studies similar processes in other contexts, exploring how developmental experiences shape things like educational attainment (Chan et al., 2014; e.g., Stevenson, 2010; Troutman & Durfur, 2007); civic participation, like voting to volunteerism (e.g., Agans et al., 2014; Chan et al., 2014; Zukin et al., 2006); political participation (McFarland & Thomas, 2006); and psychological well-being and health (Agans et al., 2014; Ahrens et al., 2008).

The life course approach is particularly suitable because it considers both developmental patterns and cohort effects. It dovetails with studies of women’s leadership development, both in general and through athletic participation. Taken together, this scholarly literature forms the basis for the theory behind our research expectations, design, and analyses. We thread the insights from this literature throughout the report and point readers to a few key insights that guided our research design and analyses.

Key Theoretical Insight 1: Developmental Experiences Matter

While the links between management and business have driven considerable economic and intellectual investment in leadership development among adult populations, leadership development actually begins in childhood (Eva et al., 2021). Given culturally entrenched ideas about women and differing socialization processes, girls compared to boys may be “...less likely to view themselves as (potential) leadership material, receive fewer signals that they are expected to become leaders, and are praised and labeled as leaders less frequently” (Eva et al., 2021, p. 1). Consequently, the access girls have to leadership experiences and the exposure they have to being seen as leaders—by themselves and others—is especially critical during the formative years of adolescence, underscoring the trends suggested by life course theory.

Embarking on our study, we understood the many gendered layers within the task of leadership development for children raised as girls. Girls receive cues about who can lead, and what leadership “looks like” from many sources, sometimes inspiring their own deeper interest and engagement (D. Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006), and other times not (Bos et al., 2022; Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2017). Traditional gender socialization

theories suggest that when girls internalize traditional gender stereotypes and learn to conform to limited societal expectations about their roles, it impacts their long-term behavior and development (Letendre, 2007; Liben et al., 2002).

Theoretically, youth sports are a venue where such stereotypes are challenged. Early childhood is when youth begin to accrue skills, attitudes, and experiences that shape their behaviors and a time that is heavily influenced by an individual's environment (Andersen et al., 2021; Cunha & Heckman, 2007; Moore, 2005), health (Braveman & Barclay, 2009; F. Campbell et al., 2014), and relationships toward social institutions (Heckman, 2008). Numerous empirical studies of the life course highlight experiences in youth as critical to long-term outcomes (Bai et al., 2020; Gomby et al., 1995).

In the U.S., this period is also highly associated with the greatest (relative) access and opportunity to experiment with playing sports, often on teams and programs that are fairly low stakes. From early childhood through youth and adolescence, school-sponsored athletics embed teams in educational institutions and community-based and after-school programming. Sports participation, particularly at the youth (under 18 years old) level, is extremely diffused across American society. There are 60 million participants registered annually in American youth sports (National Council of Youth Sports [NCYS], 2024). Whereas 40% of boys participate in sports between the ages of 6–17, only about 34.5% of girls do (Aspen Institute, 2023a). Although gender gaps that favor boys clearly remain in the contemporary status quo, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 has dramatically changed the institutionalization of school-sponsored teams for girls and women over the past 50 years, particularly at the secondary, college, and university levels. Since 1971, women's college sports opportunities have grown roughly twelvefold, and opportunities for girls in high school are now 11 times more numerous, thanks to the federal civil rights law that has (albeit unevenly and incompletely) forced institutions to change their offerings for girls and women (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2023; National Federation of State High School Associations [NFHS], 2023).

Although these trends for girls' opportunities are certainly promising, we don't mean to overstate them. In 2022–23, high school girls still have fewer athletic opportunities in sum than boys had in 1971, before Title IX was passed (NFHS, 2023). A recent report published by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2024) reveals that 93% of colleges and universities have women's athletic participation rates lower than their undergraduate enrollment rates—two statistics that should be the same for an institution to be fully compliant with the first prong of the “three-prong test” of Title IX compliance utilized by the Office for Civil Rights. Further, it found that 40% of these disparate athletic participation rates had not changed since 2009–10.

In an overview of positive youth sports development programs, Rauscher and Cooky (2016) reported that girl-centered sports and physical activity programs had “grown tremendously in the United States since the mid-1990s” and that girls were participating in those programs in record numbers (p. 140).



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Community-based organizations like Girls on the Run and Girls Inc.'s A Sporting Chance — as well as the Women's Sports Foundations programs such as Sports 4 Life, GoGirlGo!, and We Play Interactive® — which have collectively reached millions of girls over the years, have focused on empowering girls with an emphasis on health, physical strength, leadership, and self-confidence. Sports play a critical role in developing a sense of shared identity, a key component of understanding one's place in the world as individuals and as part of a larger group with a larger purpose (Bruner et al., 2017). Youth development programs, like sports, are also shown to reduce risk factors in the lives of adolescents and negative long-term outcomes (e.g., Agans et al., 2014; Ahrens et al., 2008; Chan et al., 2014; Meltzer et al., 2006) and to have many protective qualities in the lives of girls and women (Massey et al., 2024; Zarrett & Veliz, 2023).

Over the course of life, individuals may emerge as leaders not because they have a particular title or are designated as a leader but through the demands of the moment (Cotterill et al., 2022). The building blocks of developing leadership skills as acquired in sports settings (e.g., teamwork, discipline, shared common goals, understanding of self, commitment to others, shared values, conviction, staying calm under pressure, grace under pressure, inner strength) form the transferrable foundation that can be called upon in situations where leadership is required.

Key Theoretical Insight 2: Skill Development Occurs in Sports

One of the ways that scholars and practitioners alike have conceptualized what is learned in sport, across the life course, is through Human Capital Theory. As early as the 1960s, Human Capital Theory was being used to explain how the lessons learned in sports stayed with participants and were carried into their adult lives (Becker, 1962). Lessons learned in sports through



knowledge, skills, attributes, and other characteristics (KSAOs) amount to a cache of human capital. When viewed through that lens, sports participation can be seen as a “resource caravan” that those who have participated in sports can draw upon throughout their lives (Walsh et al., 2022).

Some employers, for example, have identified athletes as a talent-rich group to hire because of a host of attributes and skills athletes typically possess, “including competitiveness, confidence, ability to handle pressure/mental toughness, time management, strong work ethic, self-discipline, team effort/teamwork, learning how to prioritize, overcoming adversity, and goal setting” (Weight et al., 2022, p. 444; see also Gallup, 2016).

In interviews with former athletes ($n=15$), Weight et al. (2022) found that the KSAOs developed through sports participation organize around six themes or categories. Those include: “1) drive (accountability, dedication, competitiveness, and tenacity); 2) resilience (an ability to overcome obstacles, demonstrate perspective in failure and success, and an ability to perform under pressure); 3) teamwork (an ability to unite toward a common goal, collaborate, and depend on others); 4) leadership (a propensity to lead/influence, build credibility with others, and manage time effectively); 5) confidence (having a strong sense of identity/pride, self-efficacy, and physical acumen); and 6) emotional intelligence (demonstrating situational awareness, empathy, and strong social skills)”

(Weight et al., 2022, p. 448). Notably, the themes or categories nest together, overlapping, supporting, and complementing one another. Leadership is not a stand-alone quality that is activated in isolation but is connected to the full menu of KSAOs.

Furthermore, these studies taken as a whole underscore the importance of taking a life course approach to studying and observing leadership emergence. Skill acquisition and development take time and require additional space and experience for individuals to make meaning of them elsewhere in their lives. Whereas other studies have focused on leadership skills evident in current athletes (e.g., Cotterill et al., 2022; Monda et al., 2016), we adopt the longer view, studying across cohorts of adult women and gender-diverse people in order to tell a more complete and emergent story, and to break new ground in research. In other sectors, much evidence suggests that women’s leadership emerges dominantly with time, training, and support (e.g., Bernhard et al., 2021; see also Day et al., 2014).⁶

6 In other contexts, youth programming specifically works to build girls’ leadership skills. Programs like the Center for American Women in Politics “Teach a Girl to Lead” (<https://cawp.rutgers.edu/teach-girl-leadr>) and the NEW Leadership National Network (<https://cawp.rutgers.edu/programs/new-leadership/new-leadership-national-network>) both provide training to teach young girls and college students the skills for civic participation and adult leadership (see also American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2016).



Key Theoretical Insight 3: Timing and Duration of Participation Matters

Life course theory suggests both that early involvement may be most critical and, when true, the impacts of participation will extend and heighten for each subsequent year of schooling and engagement (Stephens & Yang, 2014).⁷ We ground our study in investigating youth’s sports experience, starting at age 5. We follow individuals’ sports participation biographies through adolescence (up to age 26, as explained below) to capture the scope of their experience.

Because we theorize sports participation as a “treatment” that occurs alongside many other critical developmental transitions, and milestones, we attend to questions of timing, particularly the age at which participants initially joined an organized team (i.e., “age of uptake,” See Appendix B). There are many reasons to believe that early engagement – ages 5 through 12 – matters; life course theory also suggests that adolescence and the transition to adulthood are critical periods and the site of important developmental and biographical turning points (Gilligan, 2009; Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996; Shanahan, 2000). Given that the period from adolescence to young adulthood is where many institutional transitions occur (e.g., transitions from school to work or higher education, family to independence, to partnering or marriage, or becoming a parent), it is a unique time of both vulnerability and opportunity. For this reason, sports participation during these later time periods may have increased impact on identity development and the cultivation of critical skills toward how one thinks about the role of sports in building their willingness and capacity to lead. Identity is cultivated, developed, and forged during critical developmental times such as childhood, adolescence (when many youth leadership opportunities are available and valued), and late

adolescence and the transition to adulthood (as individuals become more independent and begin to define and take responsibility for themselves). For these reasons, attention to the duration of participation and its relationship to factors that lead to girls “dropping out” also require close attention in our analyses.

Not only do we theorize that sports will be the mechanism of leadership skill development, but also we argue they are an especially fruitful case to study because the theorized impacts of participation are expected to be seeded relatively randomly across the American population. That is, although youth and young adult sports availability is relatively variable across urban, suburban, and rural environments (see Sabo & Veliz, 2012), there has also been notable growth in teams for girls and women nationwide. These two factors ensure that our research questions can be studied using a nationwide, random sample of American women sampled by age cohorts to capture the impacts of varied and increasing access (because of Title IX’s implementation) over time. As we detail in our research design, variation in duration of sports participation over time among respondents, wherein some participants started in youth and continued through college and early adulthood while others ceased participation after fewer years, provides variation on the “treatment” effect of participation on our theorized leadership outcomes later in life.

For the purposes of our study, we also confront the question of when “youth” concludes, and adulthood begins. We theorize that the impacts of sports participation on leadership development likely last through the early 20s. Large economic and societal shifts since the late 1990s have changed the transition to adulthood for many Americans, delaying typical markers of adult status (e.g., younger generations have been slower to achieve financial independence, and older to marry and/or have children (if at all), albeit in stratified ways (Shanahan, 2000). “Emerging adulthood” is a uniquely in-between phase, between the ages of 18–26, reflected in research on younger cohorts published over the past quarter century (Arnett, 2000, 2016; Arnett & Mitra, 2020).

Many markers of young adulthood now occur on evolving timelines (Stroud et al., 2015). For example, college education (often correlated with sports participation, see Troutman & Durfur, 2007) endures through the early 20s, and drives large variation in lifelong outcomes between those who complete their degrees and those who do not (Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Lawrence, 2017). Young adults may forego starting their college education or remain in college for longer than the traditional four years, delaying the onset of typical adulthood markers in particular ways. Despite a common assumption that the average American college student is just 20 years old, the actual average age of U.S. college students is somewhere between 25 and 26.4 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023). Because we are interested in capturing the role of sports in these developmental periods of life, it’s critical to ensure that we measure the unique timelines experienced by younger people and diverse groups.

⁷ Such programming is often inequitably available on lines of race and class (e.g., Zarrett et al., 2020).

Furthermore, since our sample includes those who may have been enrolled in college during the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, we must be mindful of the pandemic's effects on both education and athletic competition.⁸ The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on sports participation, in particular, predictably extended the timeline of “young adulthood” for those enrolled in school-affiliated teams. Multiple collegiate sports governance organizations (e.g., the NCAA and the NAIA) granted waivers to their traditional four-year eligibility policies during the pandemic, extending the competitive eligibility of hundreds of thousands of college athletes (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics [NAIA], 2020; NCAA, 2022). Any athletes competing during those seasons (who could comprise a potentially large proportion of our 20- to 29-year-old cohort) are at an even higher likelihood of remaining competitively active well into their mid-20s. Particularly among the 20- to 29-year-old cohort, we expect that measurement error would be likely if we did not account for the anticipated impacts of the pandemic on available athletic training and competition, including extended athletic eligibility timelines (e.g., McCann, 2024). We also aimed to guard against potential omitted variable bias resulting from measurement error among younger cohorts where we anticipate that “emerging adulthood” shifted the parameters and timeline of sports participation vis-à-vis college or university-related teams. For these reasons, we measure participation in sports prior to the age of 26 in this study.

Key Theoretical Insight 4: Timing and Historical Context Matter

In developing our approach, we also paid heed to historical context. Youth sports participation among girls has not remained constant over the past 75 years due in large measure to the passage and implementation of Title IX; therefore, it is not only a developmental but also a historically variable “treatment.” Thus, as we detail in our research design (and at length in our results,) we also think carefully about recruiting participants in ways that allow us to examine change over time.

Key Theoretical Insight 5: Intersectionally Gendered Barriers to Access Matter

Finally, we are sensitive and mindful to investigate the experiences and structures that operate to impede the access of some youth to equal opportunity. Life course theory suggests attention to the role that institutions and youth programming (sports included) play in ameliorating or exacerbating

⁸ During the first year of the pandemic in 2020, college enrollments following high school graduation declined by 6 percent for four-year colleges and 16 percent for two-year colleges (Harris et al., 2024). While the four-year college enrollment rates rebounded, the downward trend for two-year colleges worsened in 2021 -- dropping to 21 percent below 2019 enrollment data. Given this reality and our concerns about ensuring we are capturing important subgroups of BIPOC and low-income young people's sports participation, we aimed to ensure that our measurement tactics did not occlude the non-normative or non-dominant groups' experiences.



inequalities, as well as the extent that equal access to them can operate as a compensatory factor in broader inequalities in the general population. For example, research suggests that both quality schooling (Alexander & Entwisle, 2013; Gamoran, 2013b) and out-of-school activities (Halpern, 1999) can ameliorate social and racial inequalities, but the limited allocation of consistent resources also exacerbates existing inequities (Raudenbush & Eschmann, 2015). Similar benefits and access discrepancies along lines of class and race have been found among other extracurricular activities (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Gamoran, 2013a; Lloyd, 2017; Pate et al., 2021; Reyes, 2019).

Despite many perceived improvements, there remain critical differences in both the rates, quality, and type of sports participation experienced by girls of color, immigrant girls, girls with disabilities, LGBTQ+ and gender-nonconforming youth, and girls from families with a lower socioeconomic status (Staurowsky et al., 2020). We know from other contexts that those from marginalized groups can experience compounding inequitable outcomes resulting from both geography and institutionalized disadvantage in ways that emerge and accelerate over time (Alon, 2007; De Angelo et al., 2016; Lyons & Pettit, 2011; Perkins & Sampson, 2015; Probst et al., 2011).

In sum, the sports-specific research reveals the nuanced circumstances defining access to the world of sports. Our team was focused on both the conditions for leadership emergence and its possible barriers as designed the study.

IV. Methods and Data Description

In order to study leadership emergence in the general population and based on the findings from the literature, we designed a study using survey methodology that relied on a nationally representative sample of Americans. Our data collection efforts employed an age-based cohort design, and our survey instrument collected the experiences of respondents in youth and young adult sports between the ages of 5 and 26. We employed the services of the survey vendor, YouGov, to recruit participants.⁹ Our study was fielded online from February 9–19, 2024, and was reviewed in advance by the UMass Amherst Human Subjects Research Protection Office and determined to hold exempt status.

Qualifying respondents were invited “to participate in a research study regarding the impact of organized youth activities on other areas of one’s adult life,” and provided information about the study’s risks under the direction of Professor Elizabeth Sharrow through the University of Massachusetts Amherst. After the survey concluded, respondents were debriefed on the involvement of the Women’s Sports Foundation and informed that it is “an educational non-profit organization that works to advance the lives of women and girls through sports and physical activity.” They were also informed that Sharrow was “employed as a short-term consultant with the Women’s Sports Foundation to assist in the development of this study and the analysis of its results,” and that the results would be publicly available through the Foundation’s website.

Recruitment and identifying gender of respondents: We aimed to recruit a nationally representative sample of adults who participated in youth sports teams designated for girls or women at any time between the ages of 5–26, across six age cohorts (i.e., age 20–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–69, 70–80). See Table 1. YouGov recruited a relatively even distribution of participants across cohorts based on birth year. The preponderance of our respondents identify as women; however, our recruitment strategy enabled the participation of individuals across the gender spectrum based on their past experience participating in sports designated for girls/women.¹⁰ We describe our recruitment strategy in Appendix A. Our total $N=2,886$. Of these, 2,847 (98.6%) identify as women, two (0.07%) identify as transgender men, 34 (1.2%) identify as

⁹ YouGov America hosts an online panel of millions of opt-in survey participants from which it recruits respondents for many long-standing research initiatives in the social sciences. The YouGov panel is demonstrated to produce similar estimates to mail surveys, and telephone surveys with live interviews (Ansolabehere & Schaffner, 2014).

¹⁰ Research from demography and sociology suggests that gender identity shifts across the life course have become more prevalent in younger cohorts, trends we did not want to erase through measurement errors (Lagos, 2022; Meadow, 2018).

Table 1: Age Cohorts

Cohort	N	Weighted Percentage
20–29	531	20.7%
30–39	641	22.2%
40–49	502	17.8%
50–59	414	13.7%
60–69	429	13.5%
70–80	369	12.2%
Total	2,886	

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding.

“genderqueer/gender nonconforming, neither exclusively male or female,” and three (0.1%) identify in another gender category. The language to measure gender identity was determined by YouGov panel data and not by the research team, although the response options enable expansive gender self-definitions that align with academic literature on public opinion research (see Bittner & Goodyear-Grant, 2017; Medeiros et al., 2020; Westbrook & Saperstein, 2015). Nevertheless, the total sum of gender-diverse respondents using this recruitment strategy (1.37%) is strikingly close to recent findings of the percentage of athletes currently identifying as transgender and/or nonbinary on NCAA teams (i.e., 1.596%–1.604% estimated) (Mullin et al., 2023).

Method in survey instrument: As we discuss in the theory section, our research questions are grounded in understanding the details, salience, intensity, and texture of respondents’ youth sports participation backgrounds between the ages of 5 and 26. Thus, we create a series of measures to elicit their youth athletic background. Within each youth age grouping (5–13, 14–17, 18–26) we sought additional information about the types of teams/programs on which they participated (e.g., school-sponsored teams, clubs), the types of sports they played, the ages at which they started (i.e., “uptake”) and stopped (i.e., determining the “duration” of participation), among other specifics. We then asked a series of questions about their experiences in sports during youth, intentionally guiding them chronologically through events in order to aid their reflection and sequencing so that they could reconstruct and share their athletics “life story” (see Cohler & Hostetler, 2003, on this method). Finally, we asked them to focus on their adult experiences with taking

charge in groups and holding informal and formal leadership appointments and titles. Our survey instrument is available in Appendix B, showing all questions discussed in this report presented in the order in which respondents were queried. In the appendix, we note where response options were displayed in randomized order in order to reduce potential bias due to non-response or social desirability (e.g., to avoid the suggestion of hierarchy in team-type status when soliciting sports background information), and when some questions were asked only to a subset of respondents (see Warner, 1965).

Research design and limitations: In adopting a case study logic, this study trades alternative research designs that could be more directly comparative. We select on youth sports participation instead of treating it as a variable, per se, by comparing sports participants to girls who did not play sports (or other possible variation matrices, like comparing outcomes of groups of boys and girls, some of whom did and did not play sports, over the life course, for example). No one research design is inherently superior to another, and any singular study must confront its limitations. We focus on exploring the variable and cross-sectional impacts of youth and young adult sports participation on teams for girls over time. This follows other studies in the social sciences that explore the impacts of public policies on constituency populations (e.g., A. Campbell, 2003; Mettler, 2005; Rose, 2018), some of which explicitly adopt a life course frame (e.g., Mettler & Welch, 2004). What we trade off

in comparative leverage, we gain in content and descriptive specificity. In this study, we aim to theorize the case and open new ground for research, making clear the potential benefits of studying sports as a venue for gendered social change. Throughout, we aim to make clear the limitations of our claims, and the opportunities for future research to expand and apply this case study in other contexts.

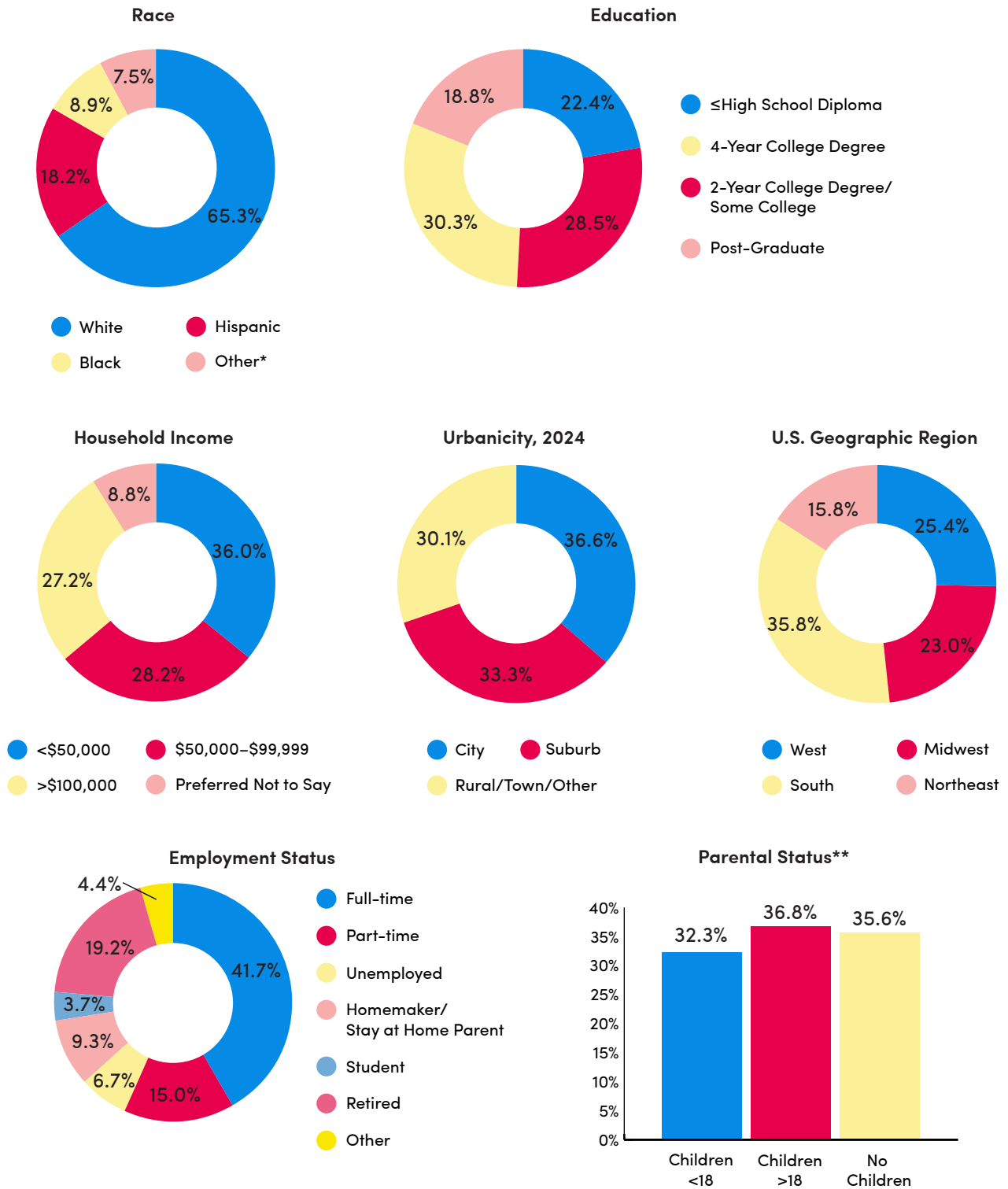
Basic Demographic Statistics

YouGov makes full effort when recruiting participants to build a sample that mirrors the American public on key U.S. Census measures. In order to correct for any small imbalances between the sample and the population, all analyses are conducted with survey weights. See Figure 1 (on following page) for demographics of the study participants.



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Figure 1: Demographics of Study Participants



Note: Percentages are weighted and may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

*Includes Asian, Native American, Middle Eastern, or Other

**Respondents could respond to having children both over and under 18 so percentages do not sum to 100.

V. Findings

Our main findings are in four groups. First, this study presents a groundbreaking opportunity to explore the sports backgrounds of a national sample of American adult women (that also queries and accounts for gender-diverse people), providing insight into the cross-generational impacts of increased opportunities made available under Title IX. Given the intentional sampling strategy by age cohorts, it also provides insight into the shifting barriers to participation across generations, and within subgroups of participants. Second, our research illustrates the types of skills, traits, and experiences that women and gender-diverse adults reflect as meaningfully inherent to their youth sports involvement. It reveals the ways in which they have made meaning of their lived experiences from youth, providing insights into the role of sports in their life course development, including how barriers to participation limited potential avenues for growth. Third, our findings relate these developmental experiences in youth sports to outcomes in adulthood, revealing the impacts of learnings from sports en masse and leadership outcomes. Finally, we also reveal the relationship between past experiences in sport and opinions toward the future support (through increased access to opportunities, funding, etc.) for girls, women, and gender-diverse people in organized athletics.

State of Youth Sports Participation Among Those Who Participated in Girls' and Women's Sports, 2024

There is very limited research that assesses the sports backgrounds of a random sample of American women and gender-diverse adults.¹¹ The change in opportunity structure for American girls and women over the past 75 years is remarkable. Over the course of the 20th century, teams for girls and women were increasingly institutionalized in communities and schools around the country (Cahn, 1995). Yet nothing changed the landscape of sports (and education) more dramatically than the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Boschert, 2022; Suggs, 2005). Passed relatively quietly by the U.S. Congress in June of 1972, Title IX established protections against sex discrimination in educational institutions. Data from the NCAA (2023, p. 131) suggest that in the 1966-67 academic year, only 15,182 women participated in college sports. By contrast in that same year, 151,918 men had access to varsity college athletics — a magnitude of 10 times as many roster spots for men than women (NCAA, 2023). See Figure 2 on

¹¹ The NCAA has co-produced some landmark research on the adult outcomes of former NCAA college athletes (Gallup, 2016, 2020) vis-à-vis like-situated, non-athlete college graduates. Literature on post-college outcomes and transition-from-sports is thriving (e.g., Miller & Buttell, 2018; Weight et al., 2018).

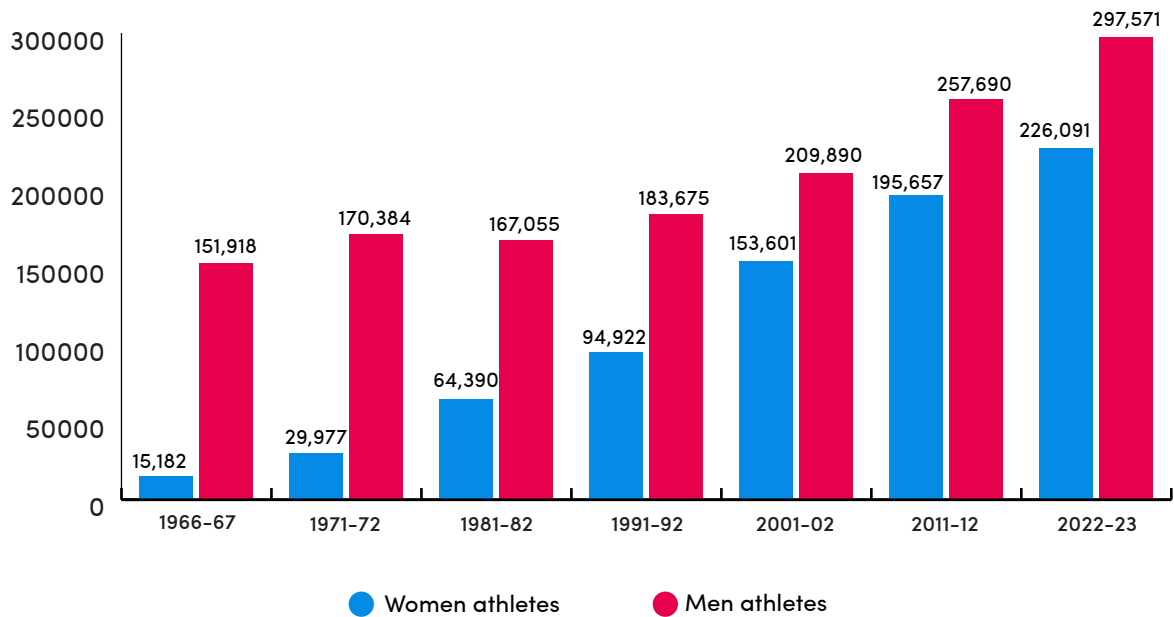


following page. American high schools were equally weighted towards opportunities for boys, who had 3,666,917 participation opportunities in 1971-72 compared to only 294,015 held by girls (NFHS, 2023). See Figure 3 on following page.

Title IX's implementation has dramatically altered access to school-sponsored athletics for girls and women, compared to the 1971 status quo, as a result of substantial advocacy and legal battles on behalf of advocates for its enforcement (see, e.g., Belanger, 2017; Suggs, 2005; Ware, 2011; Wu & Mink, 2022). Growth in youth programs and club teams for all ages has also evolved dramatically (Messner, 2009; Messner & Musto, 2016; Rauscher & Cooky, 2016).

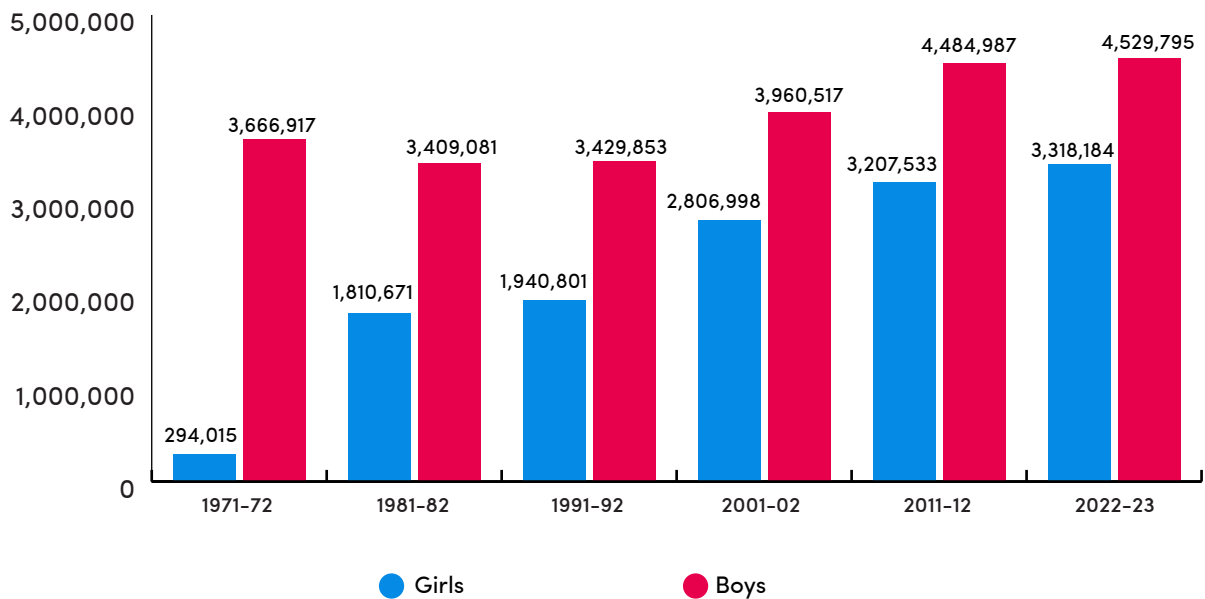
Policy implementation in primary and secondary schools, as well as colleges and universities has been notoriously incomplete and uneven over the past 52 years (Druckman & Sharrow, 2023; GAO 2018, 2024; Staurowsky et al., 2022). At the same time, for the purposes of our study, the implementation timeline and exogenous intervention of a law being passed to force institutional change creates several important structuring conditions. Women in their 70s during 2024 were born between 1944 and 1954 — situating them squarely in the “Baby Boom” generation, when school-sponsored teams for girls were few and far between. Women now in their 60s (born roughly between 1955 and 1964, depending on birth date vis-à-vis the timing of our survey) were just entering adulthood when Title IX was passed, as they were turning 18 between 1973 and 1982. Women in their 50s, born 1965 to 1974, were children when Title IX became law. It is those now 49 and younger, all born

Figure 2. U.S. College Athletic Participation by Gender, 1966-67 through 2022-23



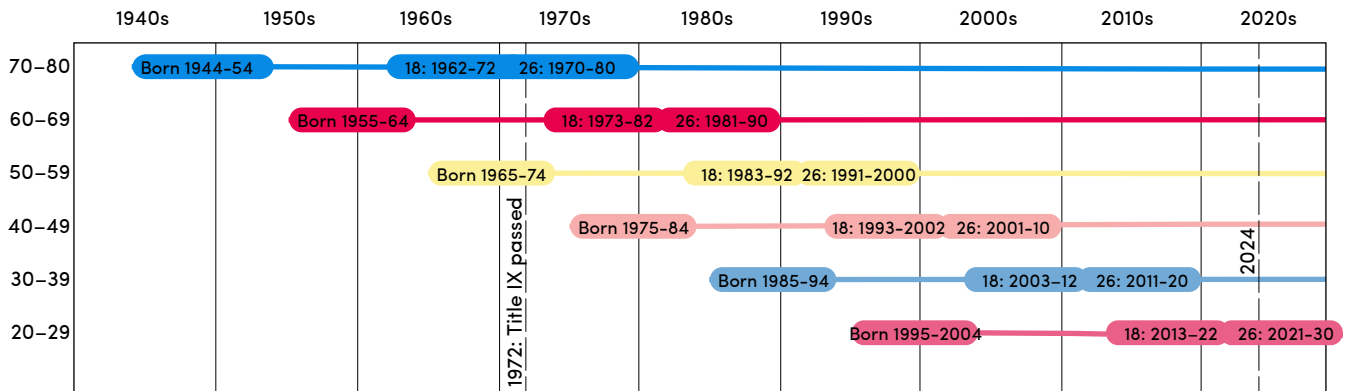
Data Source: NCAA Sports Sponsorship and Participation Rates Report, 2023
 Note: Annual data missing between 1968 and 1981 in NCAA reports.

Figure 3. U.S. High School Athletic Participation Opportunities by Gender, 1971-72 through 2022-23



Data Source: National Federation of State High School Associations Athletics Participation Survey, 2022-23

Figure 4: Cohorts, with Age of Adulthood and Passage of Title IX



after 1974 and in the 40s, 30s, and 20s cohorts, who squarely lived in a post-Title IX world. See Figure 4.

But what Title IX meant, and how aggressively it was enforced by local administrators at any given high school or college meant very different things for the first few decades of its implementation. Federal-level debate over policy guidelines stretched on for years and focused heavily on intercollegiate athletics (Sharrow, 2017). In the end, guidelines were most clearly delineated for college administrators, who were instructed to create new opportunities for women in ways that were equitable to their existing men’s programs (Office for Civil Rights [OCR], 1979). However, many schools were slow to react, and scores of athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators fought institutional and legal battles to force their institutions to fund and support the promised teams (Belanger, 2017; Boschert, 2022; Brake, 2010).

Despite significant evidence that Title IX’s full promise remains unrealized, athletic opportunities on girls’ and women’s teams have undeniably changed (see Cooky & Messner, 2018; Druckman & Sharrow, 2023; Yanus & O’Connor, 2016). Scholarship on public policy and its impacts suggests that policy implementation, even when uneven, can have major impacts beyond the direct or intended effects and particularly on the populations that receive its benefits (see A. Campbell, 2012; Clinton & Sances, 2018; Jacobs & Mettler, 2018; Larsen, 2019; Rose, 2018; Soss & Schram, 2007). Other studies demonstrate that Title IX’s impacts include shifts in attitudes toward equity policy itself among college athletes (Druckman et al., 2018; Druckman & Sharrow, 2020); and, as we explore in the results that follow, its spillover effects in shifting lived experiences of the young athletes whose lives it touches are many.

This sequence of events presents an opportunity to unpack cohort-specific differences, including investigating how the changes in athletic opportunity structures impacted those of different ages over their life courses, and with what outcome. To ensure that we are able to capture and address these dynamics, we scaffold our study by examining different cohorts of women ranging in age from 20 to 80.

Thus, we begin by offering a description of the contours of our sample to provide fresh insights into the status of sports biographies among the mass public.

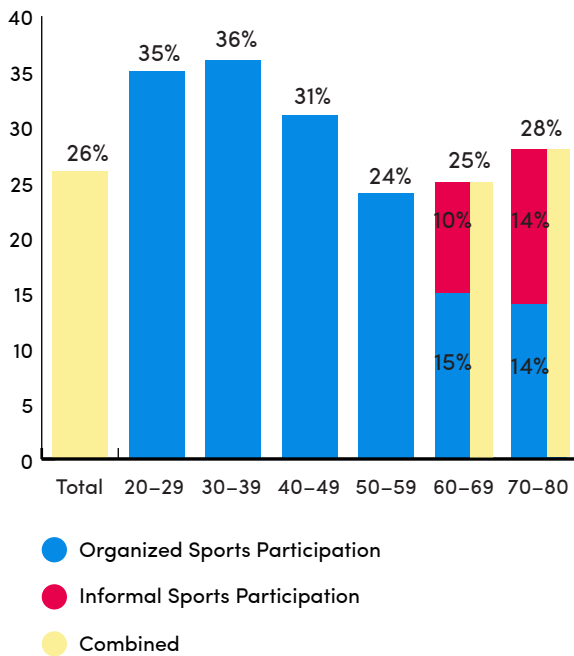
Our recruitment efforts reveal that *one in four adult women, on average, report having participated in organized sports (or pickup games for those 60+) when they were between the ages of 5 and 26.*¹² YouGov calculated these statistics based on the primary recruitment question fielded to their empaneled population (described fully in Appendix A), and recruitment efforts suggest that a larger proportion of the younger cohorts within the empaneled population had sports participation backgrounds (see Figure 5 on following page). This statistic is highly provisional and merely suggestive, as our research design was not crafted to compare participants in sports to non-participants. Nevertheless, it suggests an interesting baseline for future research and reveals that the sample population likely represents a substantial subgroup of American adults.

While Figure 1 on page 25 shows where our participants currently live, they also were asked to report the type of region they lived in while growing up during the majority of their years between ages 5–18 (see Figure 6 on following page).

The impact of birth year on youth sports participation is immediately revealed by these statistics. The three youngest cohorts (20s, 30s, and 40s) were born roughly between 1975 and 2004. The older cohorts (50s, 60s, and 70s) were born roughly between 1945 and 1974. The younger generations were more likely to respond in higher numbers to our recruitment question, underscoring the reality of greater availability of organized teams and programs for girls in the years after Title IX’s initial implementation. The oldest members of those in their 40s entered primary school in or around 1979, the same year that the federal government’s Office for Civil Rights promulgated the final version of intercollegiate policy interpretation guidelines

¹² No research that we know of has taken such a broad and comprehensive definition of “youth and young adult sports participation,” so direct comparison to other research is difficult.

Figure 5: Sports Participation Among All Women Ages 20–80



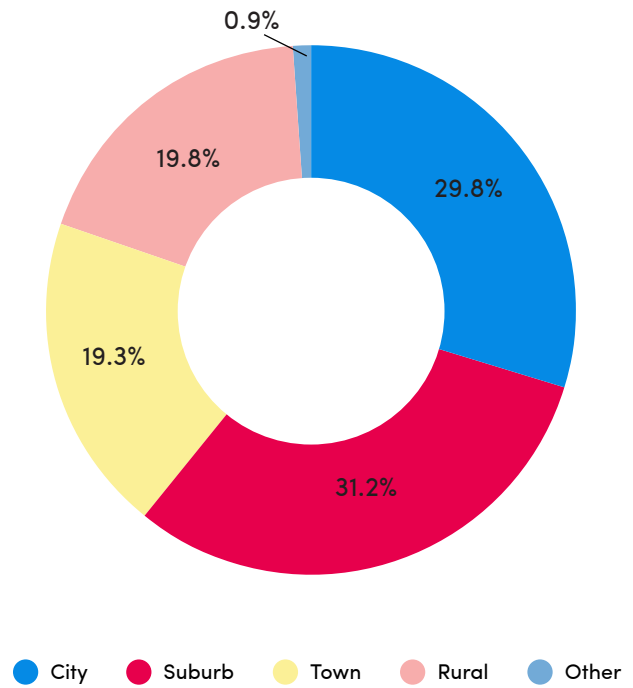
Notes: Results are statistically significantly higher/lower at a 95% confidence interval between all cohorts with the exception of 20–29 and 30–39 and 60–69 and 70–80. These statistics should be read highly provisionally as the research design was not crafted to identify true variation in the population across cohorts. Our recruitment of those aged 60–80 with the additional inquiry about “pickup games” during their youth rendered an additional 10% of those randomly sampled between 60–69 and 14% of those 70–80.

for Title IX (see Suggs, 2005). The youngest members of those in their 40s turned 5 in or around 1988, the year that the U.S. Congress passed the Civil Rights Restoration Act (over a veto by President Reagan) to clarify congressional intent for Title IX to apply to all schools, colleges, and universities in the country.¹³

In short, the participation rates revealed across cohorts by our initial recruitment underscore the lived experiences and impacts of growth in athletic opportunities for those who came of age after the federal government clarified the application and breadth of Title IX. Although the law applies only to educational institutions (e.g., private sports clubs are not required to comply), we deem worth noting the clear distinction in participation rates between these two cohort groups as indicative of a shift in practice, guided by evolving political pressures and policy norms.

¹³ The CRRRA was passed in response to a 1984 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Grove City College v. Bell* that held a more limited interpretation of Title IX and temporarily halted its implementation between 1984–88 at some schools.

Figure 6: Urbanicity During Ages 5–18



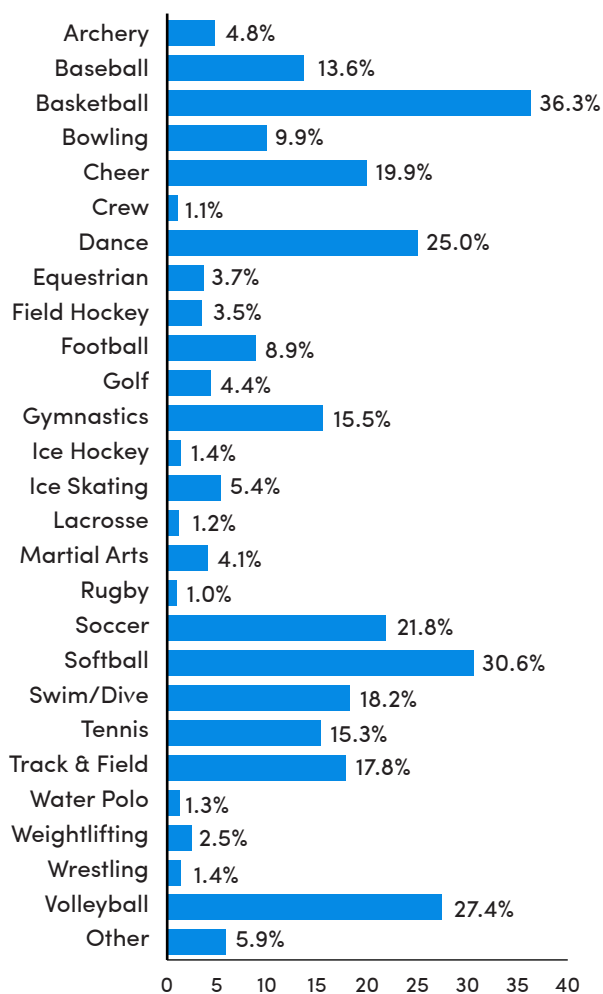
The question of what proportion of the American adult women and gender-diverse population had youth athletic experience is quite understudied, but these data suggest that our “treatment” (that is, those who played youth sports versus those who did not) was indeed experienced by a relatively substantial proportion (roughly 25%) of this group.

As we detail in Appendix C, there is great diversity in the types of sports backgrounds in the sample. The most common sports (participation rates above 20% of the sample) are basketball (36.3%), softball (30.6%), volleyball (27.4%), dance (25%), and soccer (21.8%). Team sports are more common than individual sports, across the sample. See Figure 7 (on following page) and Appendix C for full list and participation rates.

Next, we breakdown the averages of sports participation rates in each youth age grouping (5–13, 14–17, 18–26, and 26+), across cohorts, shifting here to analyses of percentages within our full sample, $N=2,886$. *Sports participation was more common for women and gender-diverse respondents when they were between the ages of 5 and 17, with about seven in 10 participating between 5–13 and 14–17* (see Figure 8 on following page).

Participation is highest, on average, during ages 5–13 in all cohorts except among those in their 20s. Those 30–59 have statistically distinguishably higher rates of participation than both the 20s and 70s cohorts, with 75% of respondents in those cohorts reporting youth team experience. All participants needed to report sports participation in one of the three age ranges (i.e., 5–13, 14–17, 18–26) in order to be recruited to the sample, so these percentages reveal that it was not uncommon (i.e., 29% did not report participation between 5–13) for many

Figure 7: Sports Participation Rates Among Sample

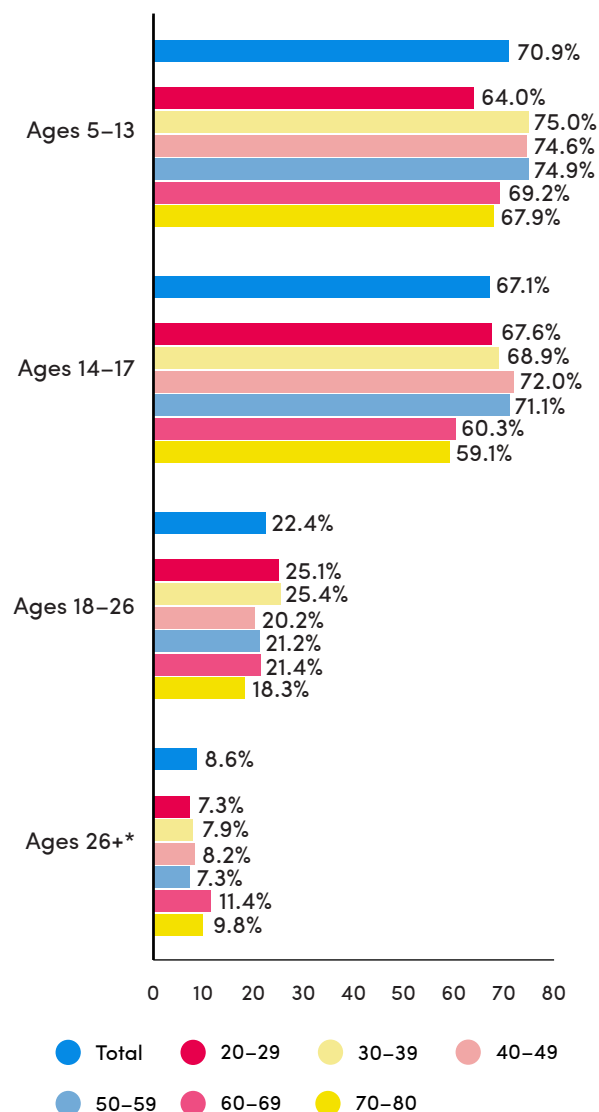


Notes: Cheer includes cheerleading, acrobatics and stunt. Track & field includes cross country. Percentages reflect weighted participation rates, at any age, across full sample. For count breakdown, per age group by sport, see Appendix A.

American girls to delay the start of their sports careers until adolescence or later, even in younger cohorts.

On average, the overall rate of participation during high school age (14–17) sports drops only slightly (approximately 4 percentage points, on average in the full sample) from ages 5–13, though some participants began their sporting careers during high school while others had already exited sports. Among the 20s cohort, overall participation actually increases by 3.6 percentage points, bringing them into alignment with participation rates experienced by those 30–59 (all cohorts with statistically significantly higher participation than those in their 60s and 70s). The relatively depressed high school participation

Figure 8: Sports Participation at Age Levels, by Cohort Group



*Notes: Results are statistically significantly higher/lower at a 95% confidence interval for:
 Ages 5–13: between those 30–59 and those 20–29 and 70–80, as well as between those 30–39 and those 60–69;
 Ages 14–17: between those 20–59 and those 60–80;
 Ages 18–26: between those 20–39 and those 70–80, as well as between those 30–39 and those 40–49; and
 Ages 26+: no significant differences.
 Participation in pickup games is included for those 60+.
 Participation at age 26+ among the 20–29 cohort is based on respondents aged 27–29 only (N=172). Therefore, the N for Age 26+ across the whole sample is 2,527.



©Dancing Grounds

rates of the older cohorts also likely reflect the policy context; those in their 60s turned 18 roughly between 1973 and 1982. Those in their 70s turned 18 roughly between 1963 and 1972. Thus, these two cohorts were either done with high school or in the midst of their education during Title IX's early years. Those now in their early 60s may have seen the very early implementation effects of Title IX at the high school level, but the clear break in participation increase (a 10.8-percentage-point statistically significant jump) occurred for the next cohort, those in the 50s (who turned 18 between 1983 and 1992).

During the ages of 18–26 (years when most Americans attend college), participation rates fall substantially to about 1 in 5 respondents (22.4%). A closer analysis of the type of teams/programs with which respondents report engaging reveals that most of this participation is on non-school-sponsored teams and programs. Only 5.6% (weighted) of the full sample report participating on National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (IAIW), National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), or National Christian College Athletic Association (NCCAA) teams. Across cohorts, there is another clear demarcation in Title IX effects between those 20–49 versus those 50–80. The participation on varsity-level college teams within cohorts are 20–29: 8.2%, 30–39: 7.4%, and 40–49: 7.6% versus 50–59: 2.8%, 60–69: 2.4%, and 70–80: 1.1%. Including those who reported participation in community college sponsored teams, the percentages increase but the trend remains — 7.4% overall,

20–29: 11.0%, 30–39: 10.6%, and 40–49: 9.0% versus 50–59: 3.8%, 60–69: 3.3%, and 70–80: 1.7%. In other words, those 49 years old and younger have a two to five times higher likelihood of matriculating to varsity-level college sports than did older cohorts. The evidence of Title IX's implementation effects at the population level as reported by average women and gender-diverse Americans, across cohorts, is considerable.¹⁴ *These data reveal truth to the anecdote that athletic participation for girls and women has increased over time during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and specifically on the timeline on Title IX's implementation.* Even without full information about the specific implementation context of each school or community experienced by every participant in the study, the overall trend reveals that the post-Title IX environment shifted opportunities and outcomes substantially across cohorts.

That said, the explicit impacts of Title IX on school-sponsored athletics drive only a portion of the change in youth sports participation. Across all cohorts, average participation *durations* on various team types vary widely.

¹⁴ *Arguably, it is easiest to detect and trace the impact back to Title IX at the intercollegiate college level due to a host of factors that are easier to assume/hold constant than at other levels. Namely, the federal policy guidelines for Title IX's implementation are most specific and robust vis-à-vis college sports, and the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act has ensured that colleges and universities (compared to primary and secondary schools) are the most exposed in some of their practices.*

Theory suggests that the extent of sports engagement plays a role in leadership outcomes. Scholars of life course theory find that the duration, intensity, and salience of experiences during youth can condition long-term impacts on adulthood (Bohnert et al., 2010; Busseri & Rose-Krasnor, 2009). For example, a national study of adolescent participation in organized activities found that two years of participation yielded more benefits for educational and civic success than did one year and those benefits could endure for as many as eight years following high school graduation (Gardner et al., 2008). Another study found participation in a more diverse array of organized activities during early adolescence (i.e., 7th grade) and for more hours per week can positively impact educational outcomes, namely by deepening commitment to high school (Denault & Poulin, 2009). Conversely, teenagers who work more hours (in jobs outside of school) perform worse in school, threatening their educational and economic success as adults (Staff et al., 2010). On balance, this literature suggests attention to contours of experience over time.

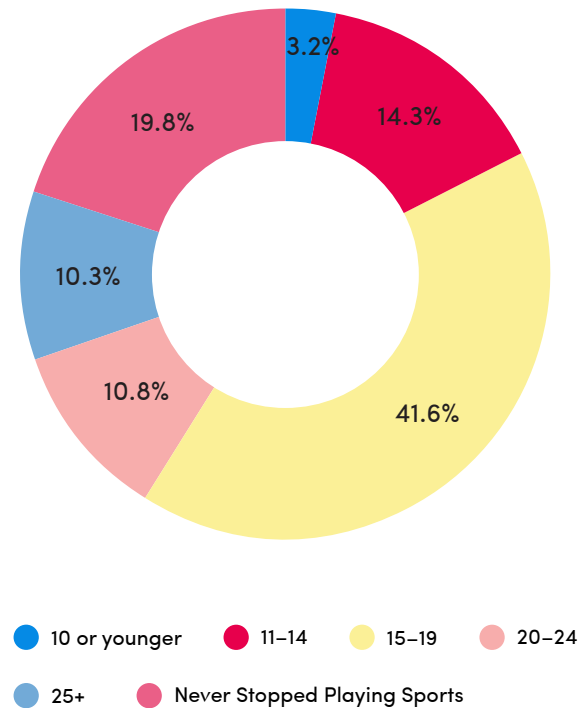
In our sample, participation trails off in young adulthood, with 41.6% of the sample reporting that they stopped participating in organized sports between the ages of 15 and 19 (see Figure 9). Since this shift coincides with the conclusion of American high school education (where school-sponsored teams are comparatively most abundant), the end of participation is likely less “dropping out” and more driven by diminished opportunity. This drop-out “cliff” also underscores the need and opportunity for more forceful implementation of Title IX at the collegiate level – a need recently (and enduringly) identified by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2024). With the vast majority of colleges and universities still out of compliance with full equality in their intercollegiate athletics programs, many female high school athletes continue to be denied athletic roster spots at the college level that are more widely available to their male counterparts (GAO, 2024). These opportunities to remain in sports have impacts on skill, trait, and experience development, as we reveal in subsequent report sections. In short, the participation patterns should be read as indicative of the opportunity structure, among other things.

As women and gender-diverse people age, their participation rates when respondents are over the age of 26 are statistically indistinguishable from each other among those in the 30- to 80-year-old age range, range from an average of 7–11% within cohorts, and are 7% across the sample. Again, it is worth noting that we asked respondents only to reflect on organized sports in this age range as rates of physical activity more generally are likely much higher (e.g., Aranda et al., 2022; Callison & Lowen, 2022).

Duration measures: Our theoretical perspective suggests the need for attention to duration in participation. Turning to the average number of years of youth sports participation, *women and gender-diverse people participated for 7.3 years on average between the ages of 5 and 26, with individuals in older cohorts indicating participation for fewer years.*

Across cohorts, those in their 30s indicated the highest number of years, on average (8.3, statistically distinguishably higher

Figure 9: Age at Which Respondents Dropped Out of Sports

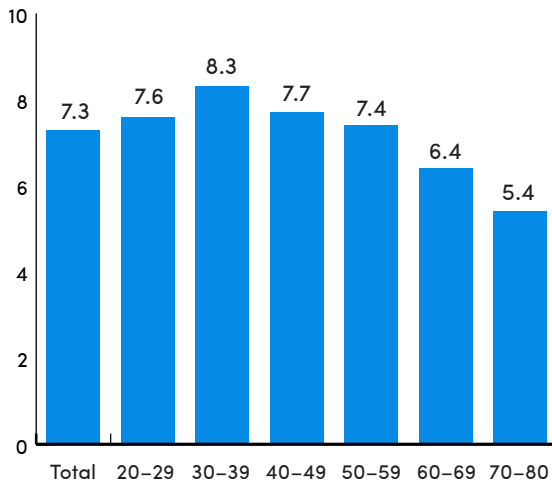


Note: Respondents' individual current ages were listed as the highest possible response option.

than all cohorts except those in their 40s, whose average is 7.7). Average participation diminishes across cohorts, setting aside those in their 20s (who are slightly more difficult to compare due to their younger age) but still average 7.6 years (see Figure 10 on following page). As Figure 11 (on following page) details, the number of years of participation is fairly evenly distributed with 27.1% of the sample participating for 3 years or less, 19.9% participating between 4–5 years, 30.0% between 6–10, and 23.0% between 11 or more. As a trend, the higher duration participation, on average, is among those in their 30s and 40s. Those in their 60s and 70s, however, are significantly more likely than other cohorts to have participated for three years or less. On balance the data show distribution of the duration variable over time and across cohorts.

The slightly lower number of participation years, on average, among those in their 20s should be a point for future research as it could suggest a negative consequence of the pressures that have increased earlier in adolescence to “specialize,” both in sport (Brooks et al., 2018; Buckley et al., 2017; Post et al., 2019) but also in other college- and career-preparatory activities. This specialization has escalated as a strategy to minimize college costs by focusing time and energy on enhancing merit, sport, arts, and talent-based scholarships and/or focusing on working

Figure 10: Mean Number of Years Participated in Sports, by Age

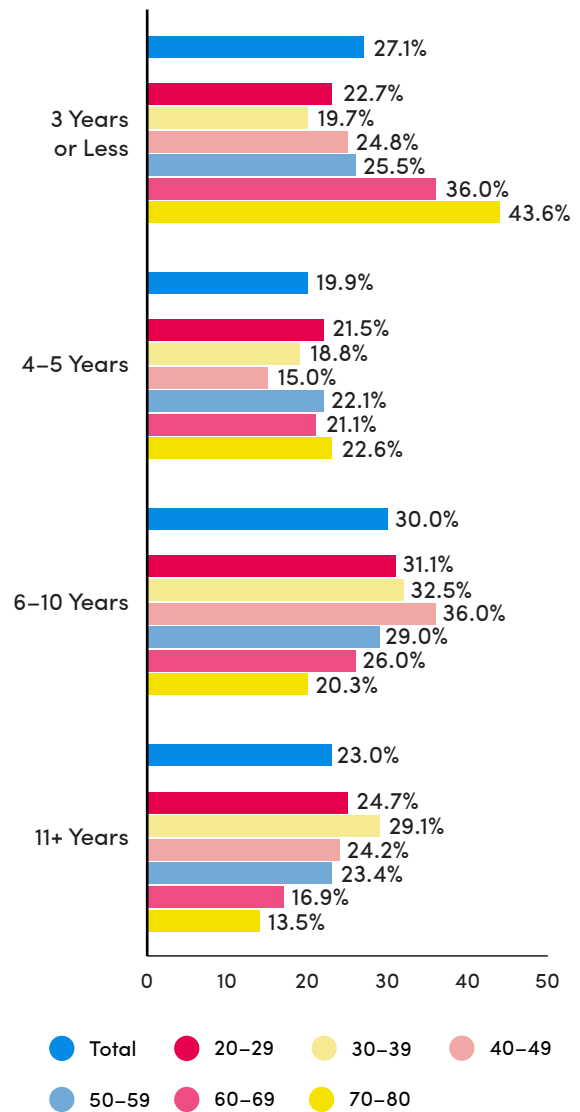


Notes: Results are statistically significantly higher/lower at a 95% confidence interval between those 60-69 and 70-80 and all other cohorts, as well as between those 30-39 and those 20-29 and 50-59.

to earn and save money for college. College costs are a set of future unknown costs, but the intense escalation of these costs since the late 1990s has caused great economic pressures, especially for those young people who are from lower-income households. And this can cause youth to not put effort into sports, school, and/or other activities due to a lack of belief that their educational effort will pay off and/or that college will be feasible (Destin & Oyserman, 2009; Hardy & Marcotte, 2022). Furthermore, this cohort was most directly impacted by pandemic-related interruptions to athletic competition.

These duration statistics also underscore how the post-Title IX environment has correlated with an increased average number of years of sports participation in youth. Opportunities correlate with endurance of participation across cohorts. This, too, impacts outcomes later in life, dynamics that we turn to next.

Figure 11: Years of Sports Participation, by Cohort Group



Notes: Results are statistically significantly higher/lower at a 95% confidence interval for:

Participation of 3 years or less: between those 40-80 and those 30-39, as well as between those 20-29 and those 60-80;

Participation of 4-5 years: between those 40-49 and all other cohorts except those 30-39;

Participation of 6-10 years: between those 70-80 and all other cohorts except those 60-69, as well as between those 60-69 and those 30-49 and between those 40-49 and those 50-59; and

Participation of 11 years or more: between those 60-80 and all other cohorts, as well as between those 30-39 and those 40-49.



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Contours and Texture of Participation: Importance of Sports and Skill Development

Next, we turn to unpacking the impacts of these experiences on long-term outcomes, including skill development with an eye toward leadership. From elite athlete memoirs and testimonials (e.g., Ottaway, 2018; Rapinoe, 2020; Wilson, 2024) to academic research on how sports change lives, multiple streams of evidence suggest that sports teams teach more than just athletic skills.

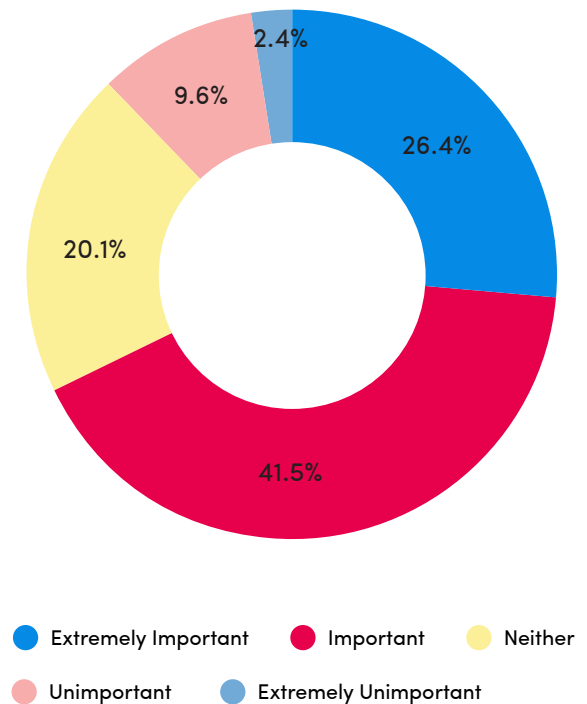
Sports participation can inculcate traits like grit, drive, resilience, teamwork, and confidence, which are key theoretical mechanisms for leadership emergence (Nothnagle & Knoester, 2022; Weight et al., 2022). Multiple studies demonstrate how sports develop skills, provide opportunities to lead, support academic success, promote mental health benefits, and develop healthy habits (Massey et al., 2024; Staurowsky et al., 2020). Girls and women who stay in sports reap greater benefits in academic access, attainment, and achievement (Staurowsky et al., 2020). Additionally, longer participation during youth predicts adult participation in sports and enhanced adult fitness as well (Haynes et al., 2021). In adulthood, the lessons push beyond the fields. In the Ernst & Young study, 55% of women respondents with jobs in the executive “C-suite” had played sports at the university level, compared with 39% of other managers (Glass, 2013). In other words, previous research suggests that longer duration of participation may correlate with long-term impacts and higher leadership attainment. Thus, the length of time spent participating in sports likely relates to the acquisition of skills and how such skills relate to leadership development.

Here, we expect that the content of experiences matter. In order to assess the salience of sports as a function of their developmental journey and the meaning respondents made of the role of sports in their leadership development, we

asked respondents a series of questions regarding the level of importance sports participation had in their youth; the ways in which it was important to them; and the skills, traits, and experiences they believe sports helped them develop. We note several trends related to the role of sports in their lives and the ways in which respondents indeed positively reflect upon their experiences as a place for developing skills and traits.

Salience of sports in life across cohorts: For the preponderance of respondents, sports were a significant part of their life. Approximately 68% of respondents in the full sample indicated that sports were either “important” or “extremely important” in their experiences growing up. See Figure 12. Only 20.1% reported that they were “neither important nor unimportant.” Younger cohorts expressed higher likelihoods of importance, perhaps reflecting the increased time invested in youth sports as a component of childhood in American life over recent decades (Messner & Musto, 2016).

Figure 12: Importance of Sports Participation in Childhood



Note: Respondents were asked: “How important was participating in sports in your childhood? (5-pt response option from Extremely important=1 to Extremely unimportant=5)” (Mean=2.20, S.E. 0.19).

Role of sports in personal/social development: Over half (55.0%) indicated that sports played either a very big (19.5%) or big role (35.5%) in their personal or social development. Twenty-eight percent remained neutral on its perceived role, and only 17.0% indicated it played a small (10.9%) or very small (6.0%) role. See Figure 13. The two measures of salience (above) and size of the role sports played are highly and statistically significantly correlated. ($\alpha = .80$).

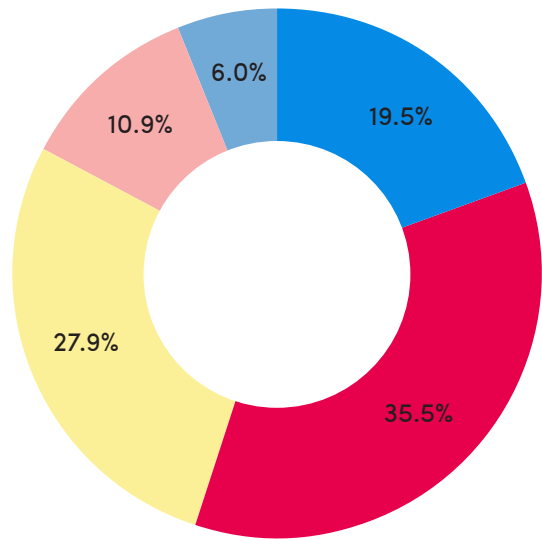
Most important elements of youth sports experience: When asked which elements of sports were the most important to them about playing sports between ages 5–26, respondents valued the social and playful elements (i.e., “playing with friends,” 50.0%), the development of physical capacities (i.e., “being active physically/developing physical strength/stamina,” 44.5%), “being a part of a team” (42.6%), “building confidence” (30.0%), and “learning new skills” (29.4%) most highly (see Figure 14 on following page). Respondents valued social skills, time with teammates, opportunities to build confidence, and learn new skills. Paired with the finding that the majority of respondents – across age cohorts – see their participation in sports as a significant part of their lives, the finding that they reflect on its contributions to their physical health and personal development begins to reveal some of the pathways through which sports helped them mature and develop into adulthood.

Elements with lesser support were “representing my team/neighborhood” (16.7%), “improving my mental health and well-being” (13.2%), “belonging to something bigger than myself” (11.4%), “pleasing my parents” (11.2%), “learning to speak for myself/others” (6.6%), and “spending time with role models/my coach(es)” (4.4%).

Developing skills, capacities, and experiences: When asked to reflect upon the skills, capacities, and experiences that they believe they gained from participating in sports, seven out of 10 indicated that teamwork was their greatest takeaway (73.0%). Over half reported “learning from mistakes” (52.6%)



Figure 13: Role of Sports Participation in Personal/Social Development



● Very Big ● Big ● Neither ● Small ● Very Small

Notes: Percentages are weighted and do not sum to 100 due to rounding.

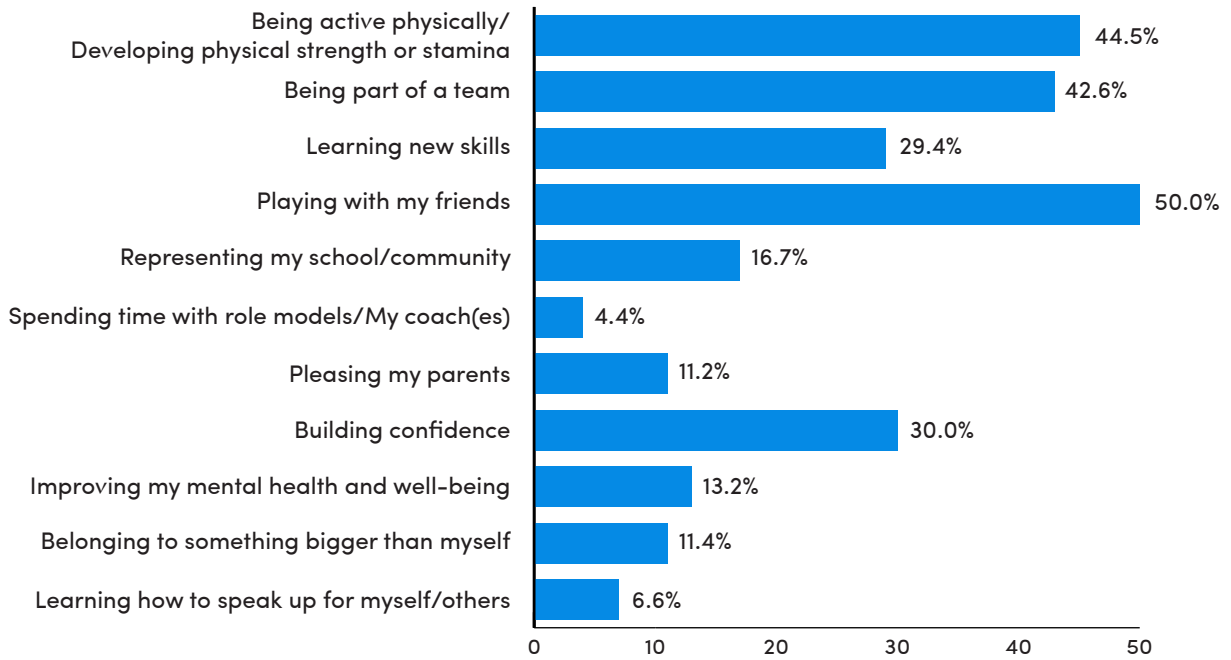
Respondents were asked: “How big of a role did your sports participation play in your personal and/or social development? (5-pt response option from Very big role=1 to Very small role=5)” (Mean=2.49, S.E. 0.21).

and “handling pressure” (50.9%), and 46.2% reported “pushing physical boundaries.” See Figure 15 on following page. Roughly three in 10 reported “decision-making” (36.5%), “goal setting” (36.3%), “responding to criticism” (34.3%), “problem-solving” (32.9%), and “effective communication” (32.3%). Smaller but not unsubstantial proportions reported gaining “comfort with receiving attention” (22.9%), “earning respect from my peers” (28.8%), and “advocacy (speaking up for myself/others)” (17.3%).

Traits developed in sports: When reflecting on the traits they developed in sports, over half reported developing confidence (57.3%), strength (52.1%), and persistence (50.3%). Four in 10 reported dedication (44.9%), patience (40.0%), resilience (39.6%), adaptability (39.1%), and courage (38.9%). Between two and three in 10 reported leadership (31.6%), humility (being humble) (30.8%), critical thinking (26.6%), and selflessness (21.0%). See Figure 16 on page 37.

Descriptively, the preponderance (more than half) of respondents indicated that they learned a bevy of skills through sports participation. We return to discussing the centrality of these traits in development below, in our discussion of leadership emergence.

Figure 14: Most Important Elements of Youth Sports Participation



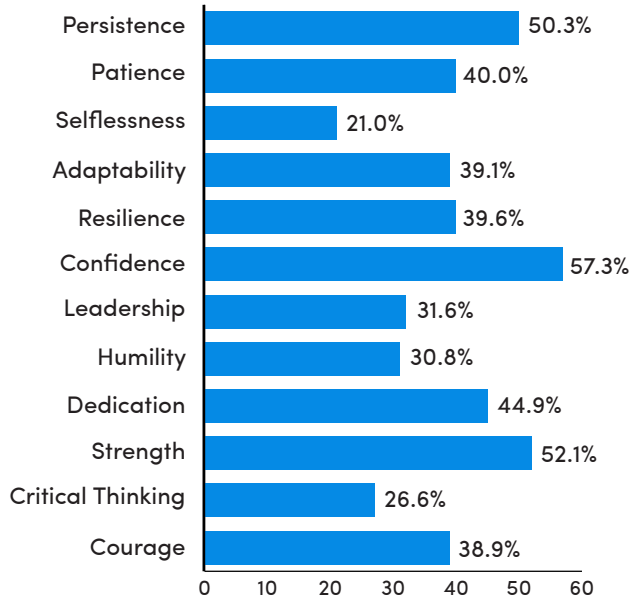
Note: Respondents were allowed to select 3 items from a list of 12; the open-ended “other” choice is not shown above.

Figure 15: Skills Gained from Sports Participation



Note: Respondents were asked to select all that apply and were given an open-ended “other” choice, which is not shown above.

Figure 16: Traits Developed from Sports Participation



Note: Respondents were asked to select all that apply and were given an open-ended “other” choice, which is not shown above.

Throughout the findings section, we include several quotes from respondents. As the survey concluded, we did allow one open-ended response opportunity for participants to reflect on their experiences with leadership development in sports. We did not qualitatively code these for analysis, but a few anecdotal responses add texture to the report. Many respondents commented specifically on the skills they learned from sports participation:

“...my experiences with sports and leadership development have taught me a lot about teamwork, goal-setting, and perseverance. Sports have helped me learn how to work with others toward a common goal, and they’ve also shown me the importance of setting realistic and achievable goals. Leadership development has helped me understand the importance of leading by example, communicating effectively, and managing conflict.”

— Survey respondent, age 39

“It’s more than just playing a sport that teaches you lifelong lessons. It’s ... good coaches and role models, good teammates dedicated to each other and the sport, support system outside of teammates and coaches, sufficient and equal support from city, county, and state officials. With all of these things and people available, there are a multitude of fundamental principles and positive characteristics you can gain from playing team sports.”

— Survey respondent, age 32

In addition to asking respondents to reflect on the skills and traits they attribute to their athletic experiences, we also asked about the nature and contours of their experiences. In particular, we were interested in learning how many of them experienced sports as a venue for leadership roles during their youths, and how many of them experienced unique environments in sports that may have prepared them for leading in the real world.

Team leadership roles, age 14–26: Many of the study participants reported having team leadership roles on their youth teams: 29.0% of participants were captains (or other leaders/managers) of their teams between 14–17, and 10.3% from 18–26. Comparatively, a recent study by Pew Research Center found that 19% of adult women in the general population say they took on leadership roles in their school or community “extremely often or often.” These distinct and slightly higher percentages in our sample raise interesting questions for future research about whether and how sports provide unique opportunities to lead in formal roles more frequently than might occur in an average childhood (Goddard & Horowitz, 2013).

Co-ed team participation: Among the types of experiences within youth sports that we were most interested in investigating was the experience of respondents with coed (also known as mixed-sex or sex-integrated) teams. Literature on contact theory suggests that intergroup contact has significant impacts on attitudes and other lifelong outcomes (e.g., Paolini et al., 2021; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011), including in sporting contexts (Druckman & Sharrow, 2023; Mousa, 2020). Research shows that women’s integration into male-dominated domains can push change to men’s gendered attitudes (see Dahl et al., 2021), but less is known about how women’s participation in coed sports may impact their non-sporting lives in the long term. Although sports are often sex-segregated, it is less frequently the case on youth teams (Messner & Musto, 2016; Musto, 2014). Thus, we wondered how, as access to youth sports for girls expanded, sex integration was a part of their team environments. And, given



the co-evolving patterns in workplace integration that have marked many American employment sectors after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (including Title VII's protections against sex discrimination at work), we wondered how such youth sports experiences on coed teams might correlate to leadership outcomes (see discussion of workplace trends in Schaeffer, 2024).

We found far more variation in mixed-sex training and competition among our respondents' experiences than readers might imagine. We crafted multiple response options to capture the various types of teams that could be coed, from mixed training environments to mixed competition and various amalgams of team compositions. Although it was the most common experience on average (and particularly among the majority of respondents over 50), less than half (45.8%) of respondents participated only on teams that were all-girls (see Figure 17 on following page). Of course, there are almost certainly multiple factors at play here. We cannot know whether selection effects lead certain types of respondents to choose integrated teams, or if they were placed on coed teams against their will. In some contexts, during some eras, girls played on "boys' teams" because no such teams for girls existed. In other contexts, girls seek integrated teams on purpose. Some schools or programs may have had integrated training environments due to a limited coaching staff. It's also possible some respondents were reflecting on recreational teams that were intentionally organized as coed venues.

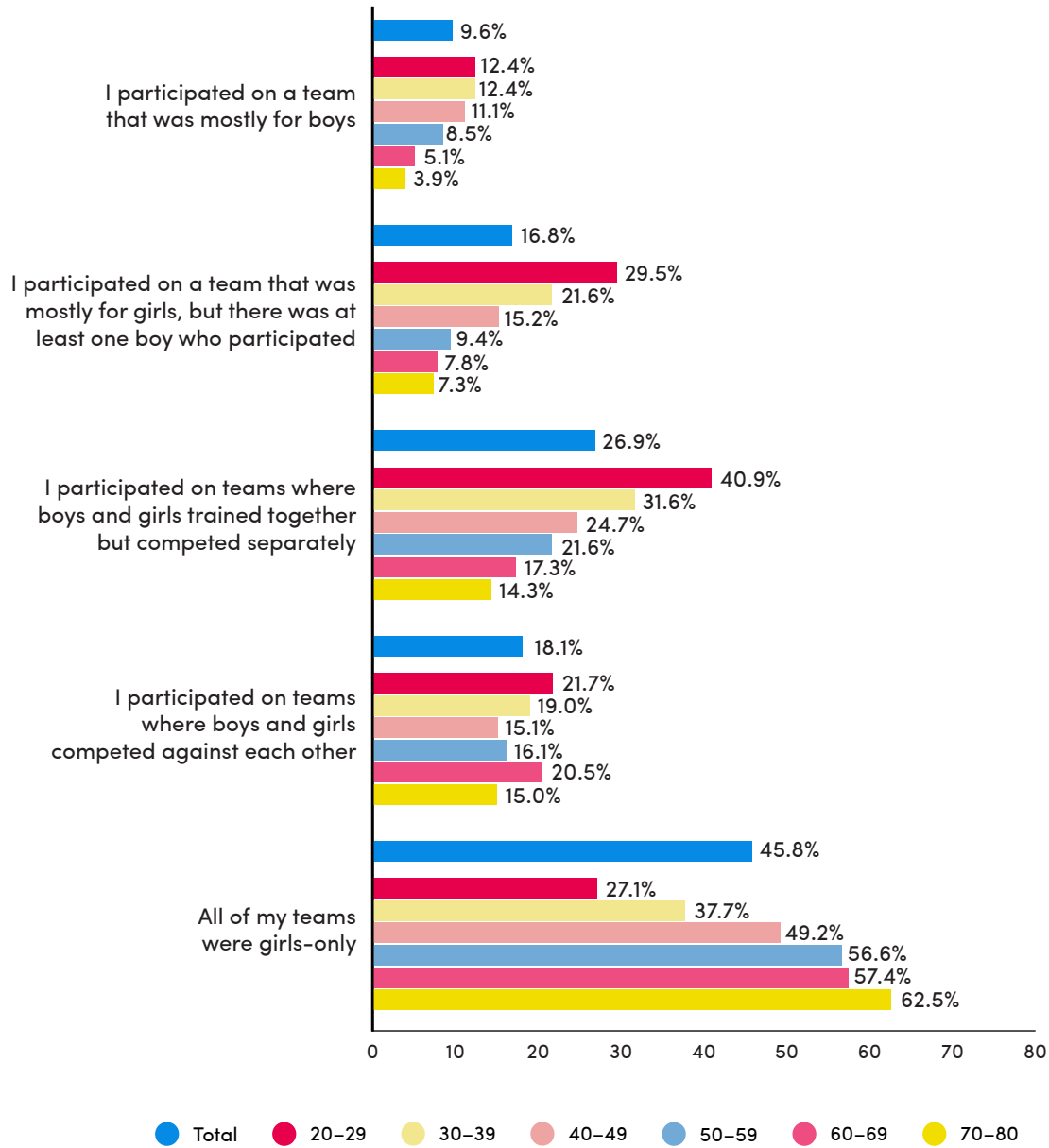
The *younger* age cohorts are more likely to have played with or trained with boys on at least one of their teams, while the *older* age cohorts are more likely to have played on girls-only teams. The most common experience of integration, on average, was on teams that train together but compete separately (27% of the sample), and 41% of those in their 20s indicated having such experience. Integrated training environments are relatively common on swimming teams, running teams, and various youth leagues under the age of 12 (see online appendix Druckman & Sharrow, 2023; Posbergh, 2022).

This finding runs counter to much of the political discourse currently promulgated from actors interested in excluding transgender and gender-diverse athletes from school-sponsored teams. Certainly, our questions were not crafted to elucidate whether respondents participated on teams with out-trans athletes (though, as noted, a portion of respondents in the sample themselves now identify as gender-diverse, underscoring the fundamental nature of gender fluidity for some humans), but we note here how the reality of integrated teams reveals that mixed-sex (and mixed-gender) environments are not as uncommon as recent political discourse may suggest. Many state legislatures have entertained legislation that suggests that teams for girls and women must be restricted to participation for cisgender athletes in order to retain the status quo (see, e.g., Sharrow, 2021). Twenty-five states have passed outright bans on trans girls and women on school-sponsored



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Figure 17: Coed Sports Participation, by Cohort Group



Notes: Results are statistically significantly higher/lower at a 95% confidence interval for:
 Participation on teams mostly for boys: between those 70-80 and all other cohorts except those 60-69, as well as between those 20-49 and those 60-69, and between those 30-39 and those 50-59;
 Participation on teams mostly for girls: between all cohorts except those 50-80;
 Participation where boys and girls trained (but didn't compete) together: between all cohorts except those 60-80, as well as between those 40-49 and those 50-59;
 Participation where boys and girls competed against each other: between those 20-29 and 60-69 and those 40-49 and 70-80, as well as between those 20-29 and those 60-69; and
 Participation on girls-only teams, statistical significance of 95% confidence exists between all cohorts except those 50-80.



teams, though several of these laws have been ruled unlawful by the courts (MAP, 2024). Our findings suggest that such arguments mischaracterize the nature of athletic experience already at play among the American population, where respondents report that their teams have been more commonly integrated without respect to strictly policed sex-segregated lines. This reveals not only that characterizing transgender athletes as a “threat” to teams for girls and women mobilizes bias against vulnerable, minority groups, but also that gender-integrated environments have already defined the experiences of many Americans in their youth and young adulthood. Although many teams are sex-segregated (see McDonagh & Pappano, 2007; Sharrow, 2017), these data remind us that many others are not. Asking this question provided us with the opportunity to explore the correlation of mixed environments with leadership outcomes.

This element of girls’ youth sports experience is under-studied and under-valued as a component of youth experiences, particularly given the proportion of adults who report training, practicing, or competing in these environments. It is a particularly intriguing dimension of our investigation because we also find that those we classify as “public sphere leaders” (i.e., those who have held a formal leadership role outside the family) are less likely to have played only on teams that are only girls than are those who have not had formal leadership in adulthood (43% versus 53%).

In adult life, most leadership opportunities are in sex-integrated settings – whether at work, in faith communities, in community or advocacy groups, or elsewhere – so unpacking the relevance of coed sports backgrounds and experiences is highly relevant to the settings that many women and gender-diverse people must navigate. Literature suggests that women who enter male-dominated fields in the workplace must have skills in resilience (e.g., Bridges et al., 2023), among many others, so the leadership outcomes that may correlate with these sports experiences deserve much greater attention in future research. Other research indicates that experience in integrated environments has a positive impact on women’s leadership development in ways that can spill over to equity initiatives in organizations in positive ways (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014).

The picture that emerges from our data is one where Title IX’s implementation (as well as its broader shift in cultural expectations) led to enhanced access to sport, longer duration of participation (except in the youngest cohort), and higher-impact experiences that enhance learned, lifelong skillsets. Life course studies are often used to study the relative deprivation caused by isolated historical crises (depression, war, decades of disinvestment as in Elder, 1998; Perkins & Sampson, 2015). However, our case reveals the impacts of transitions from scarcity and deprivation towards greater opportunity. Relative deprivation (from sports as a developmental opportunity) was experienced by older cohorts, whose participation biographies were less robust than those born after Title IX.

The impact on the life course, then, becomes clear in hindsight: with additional organized sports participation (in contrast to pickup games, much more common among older participants) and longer duration of play comes increased opportunities to develop skills that matter for public sphere leadership – a point we demonstrate in greater detail, next. Additionally, those athletes who trained or competed in sex-integrated settings experience some of the more pronounced payoffs in adult leadership. These findings, derived from a representative sample of the mass public, should give us deeper clarity about the long-term effects of Title IX and the perils of creating laws that strictly limit team participation on the basis of identity categories (see also Goldberg, 2021, on the critical importance of keeping teams open to transgender youth).

Barriers and Obstacles to Accessing Sports

While there is much to be learned in our data about trends towards increased participation and access to sports, we are also careful to investigate barriers and roadblocks. Despite intentionally sampling among respondents who *did* access youth sports, seven out of 10 respondents reported various barriers to full access. Understanding the contours of these barriers to participation is critical for our purposes because we see sports not as an end in and of themselves, but as a potential training ground for skill development towards adult leadership. We also distinguish barriers to accessing sports from barriers to assuming leadership appointments (a separate report section). While they are interrelated, each deserve independent attention.

Research demonstrates that barriers to sports access for girls and women can take many forms. As mentioned, and despite the decades of efforts to implement Title IX, the opportunity structures for girls' and women's teams continue to lag behind those for boys and men at all levels of sports (Sabo & Veliz, 2011, 2012; GAO, 2024; Veliz et al., 2019; Veliz & Zdroik, 2022). These opportunity differentials impact girls of color especially harshly, suppressing their participation rates compared to their White counterparts (National Women's Law Center [NWLC] & Poverty & Race Research Action Council [PRRAC], 2015; Pickett et al., 2009, 2012; Staurowsky et al., 2020). While these trends are enduring, they were also especially pronounced for those born before the passage of Title IX (Cahn, 1995; Ware, 2011).

Research also shows that a host of factors can prevent girls from accessing sport or enduring when they do. A 2020 Women's Sports Foundation report on "Keeping Girls in the Game" extensively reviews the literature on interpersonal, social, and structural factors that influence sports participation (Zarrett et al., 2020). This report points to the important roles that parents can play (alongside other role models), coaches, body image, and fostering both competition and a love of the game (see also Balish et al., 2014; Cooky, 2009). Other barriers can emerge from safety and injury rates, abusive coaching, or poor leadership.

Since we are studying those who participated in sports for at least part of their youth, we pay particular attention to the barriers that can emerge and cause children to drop out, withdraw, or disengage from their sports experiences. This focus

on barriers underscores the concerns of life course theorists regarding lifelong impacts of access to durable resources and opportunity.

In a review of 43 studies, Crane and Temple (2015) found that the multiple reasons children have for leaving the sports system can be categorized into intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. At the intrapersonal level, the two most common reasons include the fact that children are simply not having fun and that they don't feel competent in their physical abilities. Interpersonally, pressure from coaches, families, and friends, along with competing demands from other things they were interested in, factored into decisions children made to withdraw from sport. At a structural level, youth sports participants mentioned lack of time and time demands as well as injuries as top reasons for dropping out of sports (Eliasson & Johansson, 2021). Much research in sports studies underscores the specific insights from life course theory on tracking and measuring the barriers to duration of participation. All three categories can impact the likelihood of skill, trait, and experience acquisition that may lead to leadership development, so closer scrutiny of each is warranted for our purposes.

Much attention has focused on the "black box" of departure from sports experienced by many youths, including respondents in our study. In recent years, increased attention to long-standing issues have revealed both the danger of naturalizing "dropouts" as simply based in choice and the importance of attending to the nuance of gendered barriers that create attrition. Certainly, in older cohorts, the under-resourced opportunity structure inherently limited teams and roster spots for older adults. As the opportunity structure evolved, so too has a more nuanced analysis structure of the barriers confronting girls, women, and gender-diverse athletes. A national standard for credentialing coaches has been called for in the aftermath of crises around abusive coaches and coaching practices leading to the sexual assaults of girl and women athletes (Gaedicke et al., 2021) and the rise in mental health issues among girl and women participating in the sports system and dropping out from sports (see also Novkov, 2019). As per Lavoie (2018), "controlling coach behaviors are linked with lower perceived autonomy and relatedness and higher extrinsic motivation" (p. 43). Arguing for greater attention to be paid to the development of girls through sports and physical education, Voelker (2016) noted that the coaching profession could respond in novel ways to the leadership and empowerment of girls by embracing leadership diversity and challenging gender stereotypes, fostering in girls a sense of place in relationship to networks and mentoring, and encouraging girls to use their voices and exercise leadership within their sport.

While some barriers confront girls as a group, other barriers to sports access are bluntly classed and racialized. The Aspen Institute (2019) found that between eighth and 12th grade, there was a steady increase in dropout rates for both boys and girls. Girls, however, were two to three times more likely to drop out of sports than boys. As noted by Zarrett et al. (2018) that increased dropout rate is reflected in the gap in sports participation between boys and girls seen in the 12th grade.



Girls of color, girls of lower socioeconomic status, and girls in urban and rural areas often enter sports later, participate in lower numbers, and drop out earlier than White girls, suburban girls, and girls from families of higher socioeconomic status. For example, the attrition rate for girls of color in urban centers is twice that of suburban White girls (Zarrett et al., 2020). These trends have been consistently demonstrated over years of research. One nationwide study showed that by the age of 14, 24% of girls in urban areas dropped out, while 13% of girls from rural areas dropped out by this age, and 6% of girls from suburban areas dropped out by this age (Sabo & Veliz, 2008). Further White girls are found to be more likely to participate through a private organization (21% to 7%) compared to African American girls (Graves et al., 2014). African American girls' sports participation was more likely to come through programs sponsored by schools as compared to White girls (65% to 50%) (Graves et al., 2014).

The endurance of participation in sports is, of course, not random. Literature shows that girls are particularly susceptible to “dropping out” during adolescence due to a range of factors, including body image, gender biases, lack of transportation, location and safety, quality of coaching and coaching style, time demands and competing interests, sport specialization, and social media/technology (Canadian Women & Sport, 2020; Katzmarzyk et al., 2022; Staurowsky et al., 2020). These impacts are disproportionately experienced along lines of race and ethnicity, with research indicating that minoritized racial groups have lower overall participation rates and indicate costs as a prohibitive factor in accessing sports (Zarrett et al., 2020). Furthermore, as youth sports have become progressively professionalized, the financial costs and familial time commitments are increasingly high (Aspen Institute, 2023b; Staurowsky et al., 2020). Thus we also recognize that the duration of sports participation over the life course is as much an indicator of those who are most successful (in sports, and

from families with greater means) and who are able to navigate increasingly competitive opportunities for participation from youth leagues though to high school, and college sports (e.g., Hextrum, 2021; Hextrum et al., 2024; Tompsett & Knoester, 2023).

These barriers impact opportunities to develop skills and traits that empower leadership are anchored in systems of power that impact those from marginalized groups (racial minorities, LGBTQ+ people, individuals with disabilities) most dramatically. Even in this pivotal moment when women's sports entities from basketball to gymnastics to soccer to softball to volleyball have shattered attendance records, drawn record-setting viewership, demanded equal pay, and transcended societal expectations (M. Smith, 2024), the infrastructure supporting girls and women within the sports system remains entangled in androcentric values that influence the allocation of resources and support for girls and women, evidenced in problematic coaching practices, decisions made by administrators regarding funding programs, and a set of social factors that present obstacles to participation (Staurowsky et al., 2020, 2022). In a study conducted by WSF including children ($n=3,041$) between 7 and 17 years of age and parents ($n=30,041$), “Girls...were more likely to have never played (43.1% girls vs. 34.5% boys) and less likely to be currently playing sports (36.4% girls vs. 45.6% boys)” with more than a third of parents believing that boys are better at sports than girls (Zarrett et al., 2020, p. 5).

According to the Aspen Institute Sport and Society Program, families are getting priced out of sports as sports opportunities for children become more privatized. Although youth sports participation has grown for children aged 6 to 12 years, there remains a striking gap in participation based on level of income, with 25% of children from low-income homes (those earning less than \$25,000) participating compared to 39% of children from households reporting \$100,000 or more in income (Aspen Institute, 2023a). Previous research from WSF found that cost is a prohibitive barrier to girls' participation in sport, noting: “African American youth and youth from low-income households (\$0-\$49,999) were least likely to be current players (34.9% and 27.7%, respectively) and most likely to have never played sports (49.1% and 53.9%, respectively) compared to others in the study. These disparities were especially prominent for girls within low-income homes (24.6% current players, 57.5% never played) and/or African American families (28.3% current players, 54.5% never played). Likewise, sports drop-out rates were higher among youth from low-income households (39.9%) compared to families of higher income (\$100,000 or higher; 29%)” (Zarrett et al., 2020).

In a 2020 survey of LGBTQ+ youth between the ages of 18 and 24 years ($n=34,7591$) conducted by The Trevor Project, 32% participated in sports at the school or community club level. Of those reporting that they had participated in sport, 18% indicated hearing coaches or other sports leaders express negative things about LGBTQ+ people. Among the reasons given for why those surveyed would not participate in sport, fear of discrimination and, specifically, the stress associated with mistreatment in locker rooms were identified (Trevor Project, 2021). The climate within athletic spaces is more discouraging



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and exclusionary for transgender and nonbinary students than cisgender male or female students at the high school level as documented by GLSEN (2021). Ten percent of LGBTQ+ students reported being discouraged or prevented from participating in high school sports by school staff and coaches (GLSEN, 2021). The anti-trans climate explicitly promoted by state laws that ban trans girls and women from participating now codifies discrimination against transgender youth in sports teams, laws that the Movement Advancement Project and the Williams Institute estimate explicitly ban 37% of trans youth from participating on sports consistent with their gender identity (MAP, 2024). Such discriminatory bans exclude and artificially suppress the participation (or full lived expression) of gender-diverse athletes in many contexts and/or drive them out of organized sports entirely.¹⁵

Women with disabilities face a complex set of barriers that discourage sports participation and engagement in physical activity. Personal barriers include age, fatigue, loneliness, lifestyle, and gender. Psychological barriers include fear, a perception that women with disabilities are not able to participate, and/or negative self-perception. At a structural level, there is a raft of obstacles that prevent women with disabilities from benefiting from sports participation,

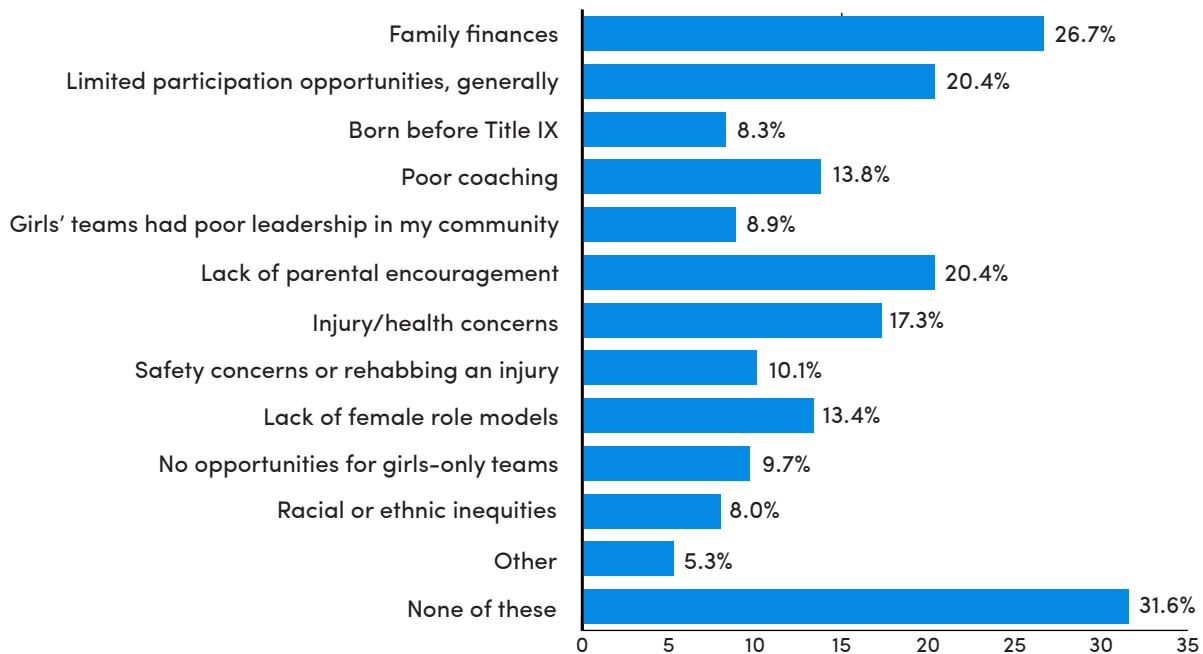
¹⁵ *Animus against transgender athletes is significant, as measured by public opinion data as well (Cunningham & Pickett, 2018; Flores et al., 2020; Knoester et al., 2023).*

including facility, equipment, and management issues (Olasagasti-Ibargoien et al., 2023).

Although we do not probe all elements of personal identity and its relationship to barriers in the life course of our respondents, our data provide much insight into the widespread impacts of barriers. We framed the survey question around barriers as one related to skills and traits development, asking which of our list of barriers (derived from the aforementioned literature) prevented them from developing the skills and traits we asked about.

Only three in 10 reported experiencing no barriers to accessing opportunity for skill and trait development. The most reported barrier, across our sample, was family finances (26.7%), a barrier that is more pronounced among younger cohorts (20s–40s). See Figure 18 on following page and Figure 19 on page 45. Lack of parental engagement was the second-highest barrier, and it was reported at a static rate across cohorts. Other research from WSF has found the importance of parental involvement in sustaining their children’s sports participation (Zarrett et al., 2020), underscoring the potential positive impacts of cross-generational investment. Parental engagement is also positively linked to shifting the attitudes of fathers of daughters in favor of gender equality policies, including Title IX (Sharro et al., 2018); in short, the stakes of parental disinvestment are potentially negative in both directions.

Figure 18: Barriers to Developing Traits/Skills Through Sports Participation



Note: Respondents were asked to select all that apply.

The third-highest barrier was opportunities to participate, and this concern is distinctly generational. More than one-quarter (27.6%) of those in their 70s reported this concern, revealing an awareness of their plight compared to younger generations. Those in their 60s and 70s similarly expressed a lack of availability of teams for girls during their youth and being born before the passage of Title IX (18.8% of 70- to 80-year-olds, and 11.0% of 60- to 69-year-olds).

In younger cohorts, there is a clear concern about lack of accurate Title IX knowledge (as those objectively born after it was passed still reported being born before passage as a barrier), but this phenomenon is widely reported in both mass opinion polls and academic research, even amongst those who benefit most from the law (Druckman et al., 2014; Igielnik, 2022; Staurowsky et al., 2017; Staurowsky & Weight, 2011). In other words, our data underscore the need for education on legal rights, especially among younger generations.

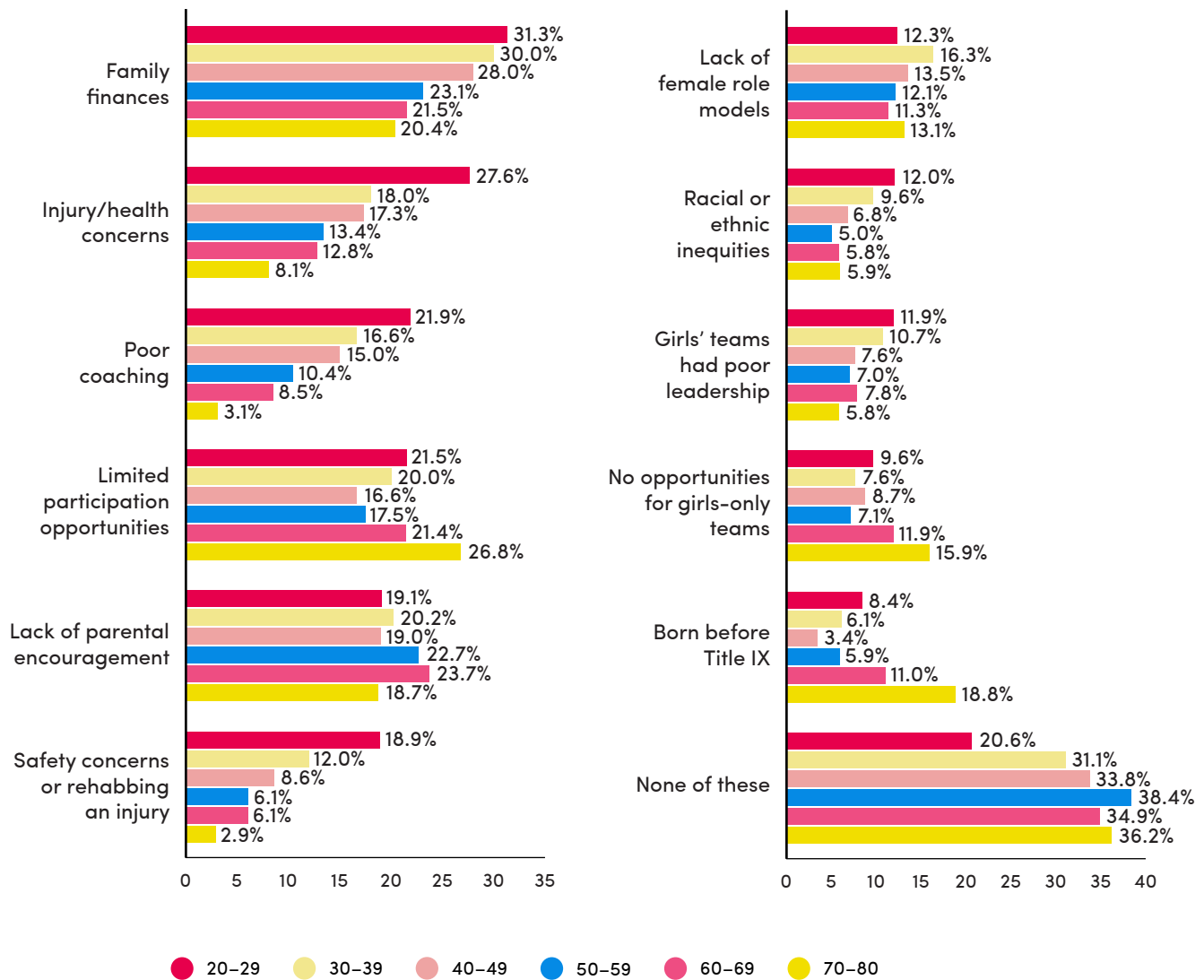
Those in their 20s were actually statistically *more* likely to report barriers (eight in 10 did) than any other cohort. Their barriers were more apt to include concerns about injury (27.6%), safety (18.9%), and poor coaching (21.9%). Three in 10 women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s reported financial barriers (a statistically significant difference from the older cohorts), underscoring the increasing costs and class disparities that define access to youth/adolescent sports (e.g., Hextrum, 2021; Sabo & Veliz, 2008). With concerns about injury, safety, and health clearly evidenced in our data as barriers to skill development, these

findings join the chorus of voices drawing attention to the increased vulnerability of girls and women in sports just as opportunity structures have increased access (Eckstein, 2017; Gluckman, 2022; Kliegman, 2024). Respondents in their 20s are twice as likely to report safety concerns as those in their 40s, and three to six times as likely as elder cohorts. Every cohort is statistically distinct from those in their 70s, but women in their 20s and 30s are also statistically significantly different from all cohorts except those in their 40s.

Racial and ethnic inequalities were also indicated as a barrier among 5–12% of each cohort, with concerns growing in younger cohorts (and perhaps as we would expect, these barriers are predominately experienced by the athletes of color). Concerns about poor coaching and poor leadership also increase across cohorts, underscoring that the transition to male-dominated coaching of teams for girls and women at all levels of sports may not have been beneficial for many athletes.

In order to assess perceptions of the roles of race, gender, and their family's socioeconomic status, we also asked respondents to reflect on the specific roles of each in their lives as it pertained to barriers to sports. We sought respondent assessments of the roles of gender, race, and socioeconomic status as a barrier to sports participation in their personal lives, growing up, each with a 5-point response option ranging from 1) strongly agree to 5) strongly disagree. A) "My gender was a barrier to participating in sport while I was growing up;" B) "My race or ethnicity was a barrier to participating in sport while I was growing up;" C) "My

Figure 19: Barriers to Developing Traits/Skills Through Sports Participation, by Cohort Group



Notes: Results are statistically significantly higher/lower at a 95% confidence interval for:

- Family finances: between those 20–49 and those 60–80, and between those 20–39 and those 50–59;*
- Injury/health concerns: between those 70–80 and all other cohorts, between those 20–39 and those 50–59, and between those 20–29 and those 30–49;*
- Poor coaching: between those 70–80 and all other cohorts, between those 20–49 and those 50–59, and between those 20–29 and those 30–49;*
- Limited opportunities: between those 20–29 and 40–49, and between those 70–80 and those 30–59;*
- Lack of parental encouragement: no significant differences;*
- Safety concerns: between those 70–80 and all other cohorts, between those 20–39 and those 50–59, and between those 20–29 and those 30–49;*
- Lack of female role models: between those 30–39 and those 60–69;*
- Racial/ethnic inequities: between those 50–80 and those 20–39, and between those 20–29 and those 30–39;*
- Girls' team had poor leadership: between those 20–29 and those 40–80, and between those 30–39 and those 50–59 and 70–80;*
- No girls-only teams: between those 70–80 and those 20–59 and between those 60–69 and those 30–39 and 50–59;*
- Born before Title IX: between those 70–80 and all other cohorts, between those 60–69 and those 30–59, and between those 20–39 and those 40–49; and*
- None: between those 20–29 and all other cohorts, and between those 30–39 and those 50–59.*

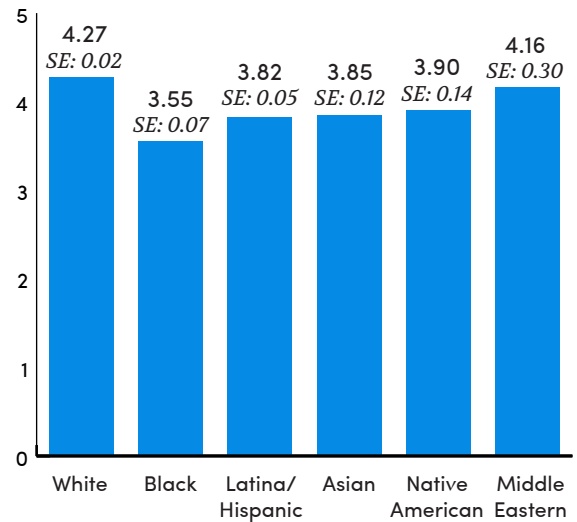
family's socio-economic status was a barrier to participating in sport while I was growing up" (see Figures 20 and 21).

We also evaluated for trends among those who report multiple barriers and found apparent patterns around cohorts (see Figure 22 and Figure 23 on following page). Younger respondents were more likely to report greater numbers of barriers. White women were less likely to report as many numbers of barriers as women of color (statistically significant among both Latinx and Black women). See Figure 24 on following page.

In sum, a few troubling ironies emerge as we investigate the story of barriers. Among the cohorts who have experienced the greatest access to participation opportunities in the aftermath of Title IX, there are now escalating concerns around barriers to full and safe participation. The impacts of high costs and poor leadership of the increased teams available to American girls made younger cohorts more vulnerable to potential harm and hampered skill development during an era when they should have seen the greatest gains. Additionally, girls of color confront greater challenges to achieve similar outcomes.

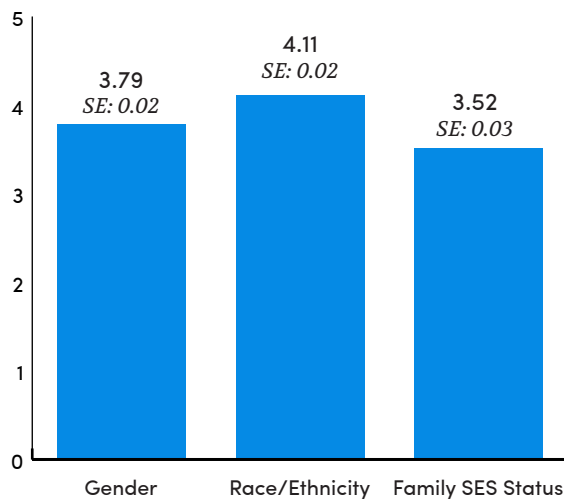
In this sense, the future of sports for girls and women is poised to face new forms of precarity despite the gains of Title IX, and that precarity – insofar as it leads fewer young athletes to stay in sports – could impede the positive possibilities otherwise rendered from skill development. Thus, the evidence suggests that researchers and public observers must be cautious and vigilant in narrating the impacts of Title IX. Although public policy has shifted many elements of the athletic opportunity

Figure 21: Role of Race as a Barrier to Sports Participation, by Race/Ethnicity



Notes: Means on 5-point response option ranging from 1) strongly agree to 5) strongly disagree

Figure 20: Role of Gender, Race, and Socioeconomic Status as a Barrier to Sports Participation



Notes: Means on 5-point response option ranging from 1) strongly agree to 5) strongly disagree (α = 0.77)

Figure 22: Number of Reported Barriers to Sports Participation

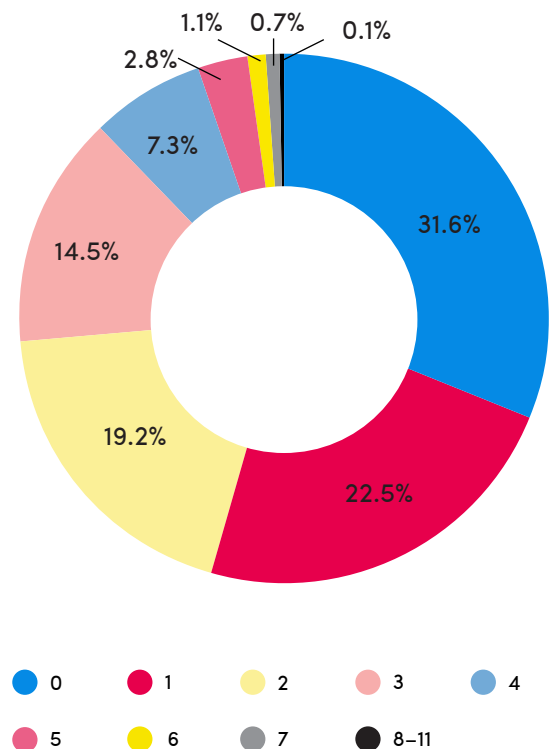
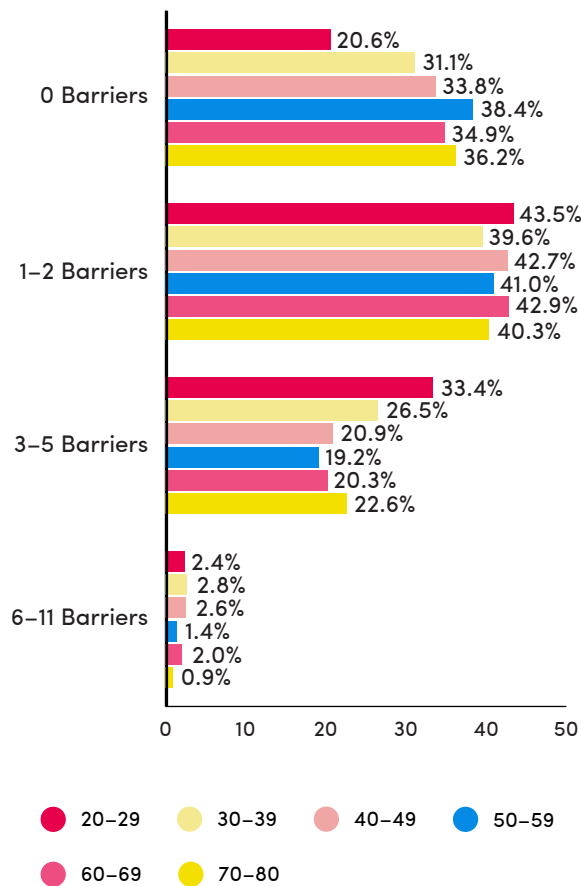


Figure 23: Number of Reported Barriers to Sports Participation, by Cohort Group



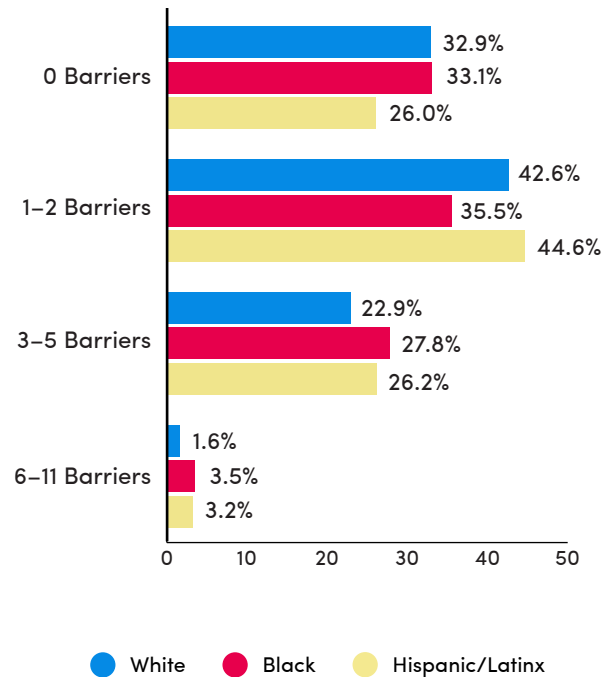
Note: Percentages are weighted and may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

structures for many girls and women, vulnerabilities and barriers remain. We return to respondents' opinions toward the future of sports at the conclusion of our findings section.

Positive Impacts of Sports for Women: Leadership Outcomes and Skills, Traits, and Experiences

Still, even with evidence of barriers and limitations front of mind, an important and clear main story about leadership among former sports participants emerges. Our data indicate that the pipeline for youth sports participation made available to women and gender-diverse Americans over the past 75 years has rendered a nuanced and patterned leadership tapestry across the public sector among many youth sports participants in their adulthood. *There is a clear and positive relationship between years spent in youth sports and holding formal leadership titles in adulthood, with greater years of involvement rendering*

Figure 24: Number of Reported Barriers to Sports Participation, by Race/Ethnicity



Note: Percentages are weighted and may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

greater likelihood of leadership. Short of formal leadership, respondents overwhelmingly credit the skills and lessons learned in sports for having a positive impact on their adult life, and many directly trace their leadership emergence to the lessons learned in sports. The relationship between skills and leadership emergence largely holds constant across racial and ethnic groups.

In this section, we draw out the findings of our assessment of skills, traits, and experiences of respondents in youth sports, and its relationship (both according to their self-reflection and as a function of statistical analysis) to their leadership patterns in the public sphere.

Positive Impacts in Quality of Life

We begin by discussing the findings on how respondents reflected on the impacts of their youth sports experiences. Reflecting on the impact of skill development and lessons learned in sport, the preponderance of respondents across cohorts expressed many constructive and enduring impacts in their adult lives. Sixty-seven percent believe they have carried the skills and lessons from sports into adulthood, with clear, tiered cohort impacts indicating that younger age cohorts are more likely to attribute these positive outcomes to sports than

older cohorts (see Figure 25). This interestingly suggests that many respondents see the value of the skills they learned as immediately and directly applicable, and not only after the benefit of years of hindsight.

Several of them explicitly reflected on the journey of self-reflection we hoped the survey might engender (see Appendix B for question wording and order):

“...Taking this survey has opened my mind to realization, that by participating in sports it helped me to develop special skills. I became the first female volunteer firefighter in my community, opening the door of opportunity for other women to follow. I also became a volunteer EMT I, which involves quick, critical decision making and teamwork. As I gained more skills and experience, I was hired on as full time after being passed 2x (they hired males). Once again earning the title of first full time female FF/EMT-I in my community, during my full-time position, I earned the rank of Lt. and eventually Assistant Chief of Rescue.”

– Study respondent, age 62

We measured opinion toward whether respondents believed they have carried the skills and lessons of sports into their adult life, whether such skills were critical to their leadership development, whether their perceived success in life is connected to the skills they learned in sport, and whether their satisfaction in life is connected to their skills participation (see Figure 25 and Figure 26 on following page). Several important cohort trends emerge. Younger cohorts have stronger belief in the developmental capacity of sports compared to older cohorts.

Those in their 20s and 30s also are more likely to see sports as critical to leadership development (significantly more so than compared to other cohorts, although those in their 40s and 50s are also more apt to indicate as much than are those in their 60s and 70s), and to attach their satisfaction and success in life to the skills gained.

Additionally, half of women and gender-diverse people credit the skills acquired through sports for their leadership abilities. Seven in 10 believe the skills/lessons learned in sports had a positive impact on their adult life. This highlights the significant role that sports can play in personal development.

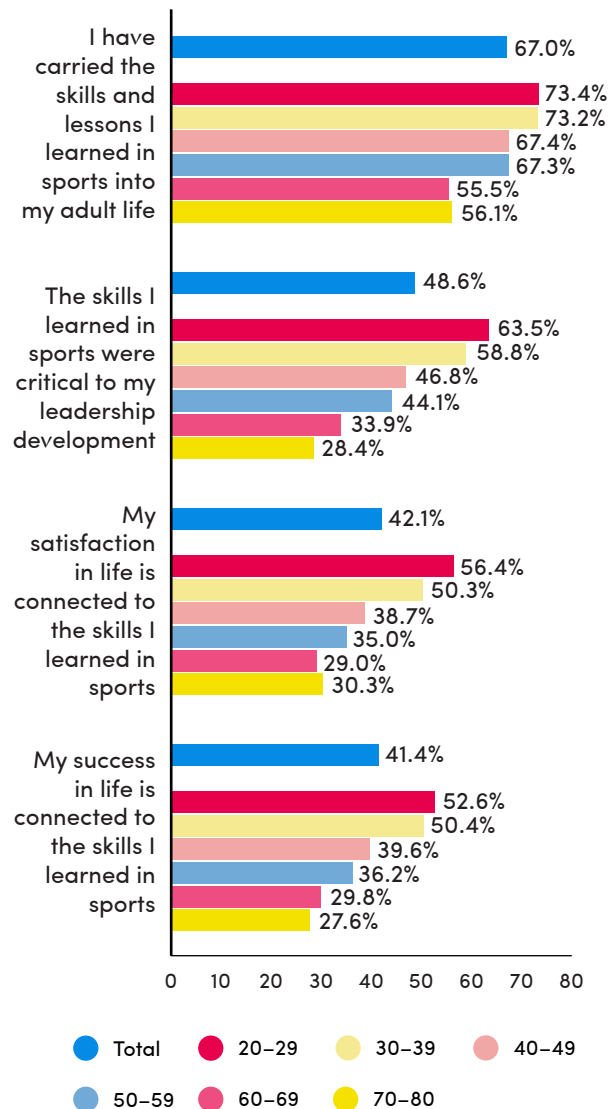
It also highlights the generational shifts that have come on the back of Title IX’s implementation. The skills learned on the teams built under gender equity initiatives have changed the quality of the lives of those who learned to play within them. Across all four of our satisfaction and success measures, the 20s, 30s, and 40s cohorts were statistically more likely to have higher levels on each than are those in their 60s and 70s.

Or as one respondent noted:

“I’m grateful for the ways sports pushed me to grow.”

– Survey respondent, age 29

Figure 25: Skills Learned Through Sports Participation (Strongly Agree/Agree), by Cohort Group



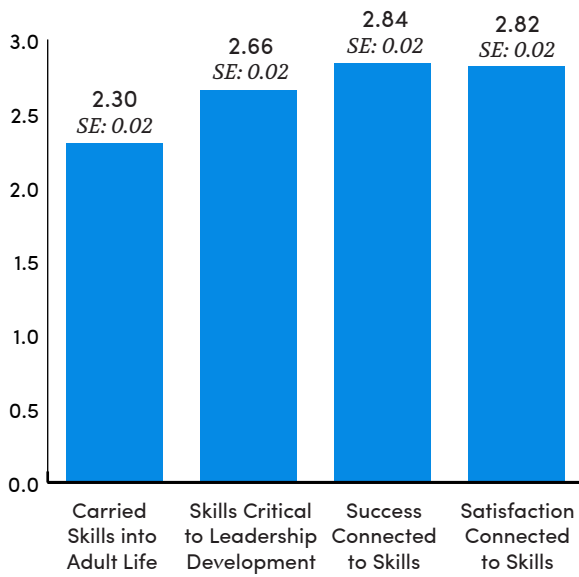
Notes: Results are statistically significantly higher/lower at a 95% confidence interval for:

Carrying skills into adult life: between those 20–59 and those 60–80, as well as between those 20–39 and those 40–59;

Skills being critical to leadership development: between those 20–59 and those 60–80, as well as between those 20–39 and those 40–59;

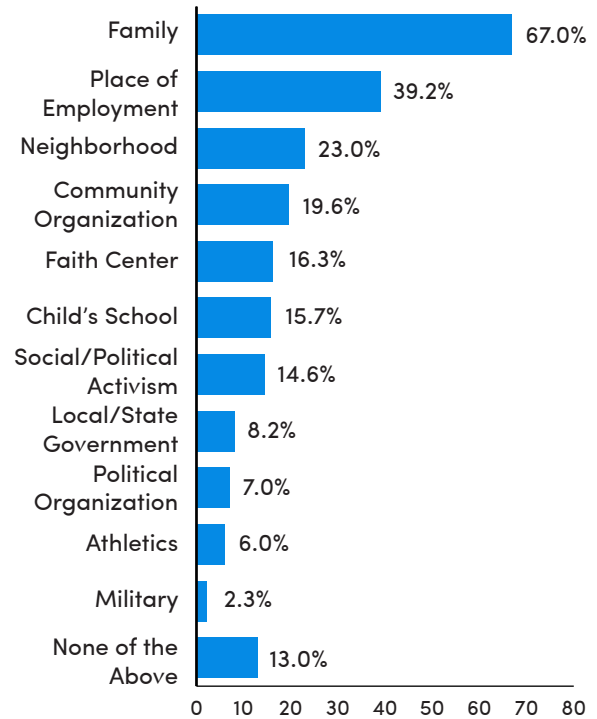
Satisfaction being connected to skills learned: between those 20–49 and those 60–80, between those 20–39 and those 40–59, as well as between those 20–29 and those 30–39; and Success being connected to skills learned: between those 20–59 and those 70–80, between those 20–49 and those 60–69, as well as between those 20–39 and those 40–59.

Figure 26: Role of Skills Learned Through Sports Participation on Adult Life



Notes: Means on 5-point response option ranging from 1) strongly agree to 5) strongly disagree ($\alpha = 0.90$)

Figure 27: Areas of Influence



Note: Respondents were asked to select all that apply.

Spaces for Influence and Perceptions of Impact on Others

When constructing our survey instrument to measure leadership outcomes, we sequenced our report by asking respondents indirectly about their influence over others, rather than directly about “leadership” as a first query (See Appendix B for question wording). Our instinct was that gendered notions of the term “leadership” could suppress responses, so asking about “influence” instead would invite respondents to productively consider their relationships as the survey developed. This follows from research that suggests women’s leadership journeys are often less direct than are men’s, and often require larger and more consistent social networks behind them in order for formal leadership to emerge (e.g., Badura et al., 2018; Ford Dowe, 2022; Jakimow et al., 2023; Lawless & Fox, 2005). The area where respondents reported feeling the greatest influence over others is in their family, where 67.0% indicated holding influence (see Figure 27). Particularly among older cohorts, this result likely reveals other domestic labor patterns well established by scholars of the family wherein women perform most of the care work, from emotional labor to domestic tasks, that keep families afloat. In the public spheres (i.e., outside the home), influence at work is the highest area where 39.2% of respondents said they felt influential. Other areas such as neighborhoods, community organizations, faith centers, schools, and in social/political activist areas also scored between 14–23% of respondents.

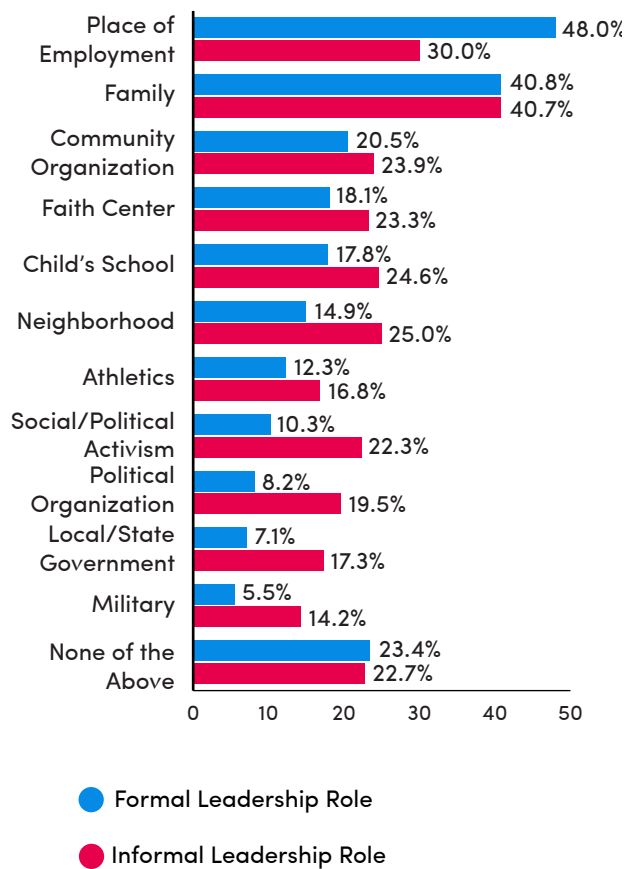


Measuring leadership in adulthood: As we discuss in our literature review, we distinguish this study from others in the field by its conceptualization of leadership more broadly than mere C-suite level, executive leadership (see Ernst & Young, 2013). In developing our survey instrument, our team brought our array of expertise and backgrounds to bear on developing measures of both informal and formal leadership across all sectors of society. Ultimately, we define and identify “public sphere leaders” as those who have held a formal leadership position, not including leadership in the family. Respondents were asked to separately designate having held “formal” versus “informal” leadership roles; response categories (listed in Figure 28) were randomized in the order displayed. We define “public sphere leaders” as those who held at least one formal leadership role; “non-public sphere leaders” were all others. By this definition, we have 1,994 (69.1%) “public sphere leaders” and 892 (30.9%) “non-public sphere leaders” across the sample.

We asked, “In which of these settings have you ever been in charge of a group of people, either formally or informally, in your adult life? Select all that apply. 1) At my place of



Figure 28: Formal and Informal Leadership Roles



Note: Respondents were asked to select all that apply.

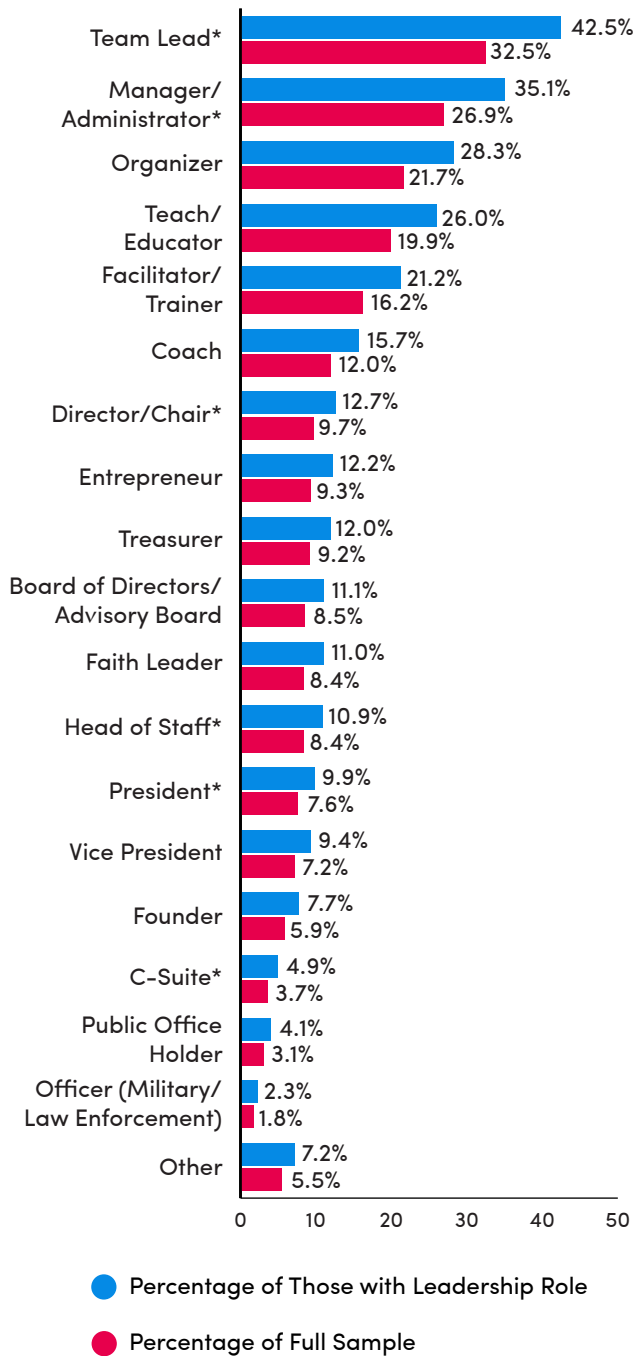
employment, 2) At my faith center or place of worship, 3) In my neighborhood, 4) As an athletics coach or manager, 5) In a community organization, 6) In a political organization or campaign, 7) In social or political activism (e.g., protests, advocacy groups), 8) In my family, 9) In the military, 10) In my local or state government, 11) At my child’s school, 12) None of the above.” See Figure 28. Respondents who only indicated that their leadership had been “in the family” were defined as “non-public sphere leaders” for our purposes.

In short, we find substantial evidence of public sphere leadership experiences in adulthood among our respondents, with seven in 10 having held formal leadership roles.

We then turn to investigating more formal leadership roles, asking respondents when they had “been in charge of a group of people.” As a reminder, we asked respondents to indicate both their informal and formal leadership roles across multiple sectors. Here, respondents indicate the highest levels of formal leadership at work, where nearly half of respondents has a formal leadership role. In all other public realms, informal leadership is reported at higher levels than formal leadership is, across neighborhoods, schools, community organizations and faith centers.

Because the contours and qualities of leadership often vary in different hierarchies, we also aimed to probe for additional information about the extent to which respondents held formal leadership titles. Finally, we asked respondents to report whether they had held a host of common leadership titles (see Figure 29 on following page for full list, N=2,215). The most common leadership titles are Team Lead (42.5%), Manager/Administrator (35.1%), Organizer (28.3%) and Teacher/Educator (26.0%). However, across the full sample, 71.1% of respondents (N=1,573, or 54.2% of the full sample, weighted) had held at least one of the following “executive-focused” titles, Team Lead (42.5%), Manager/Administrator (35.1%), Director/Chair (12.7%),

Figure 29: Leadership Titles



*Executive-Focused group

Notes: Respondents were asked to select all that apply. N=2,215; This N is larger than those defined “leaders” because this question was also asked of those who indicated formal leadership “in the family.”

Head of Staff (10.9%), President (9.9%), or C-Suite title (Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operating Officer, Chief Financial Officer, etc.)(4.9%).

The relationship between holding these leadership titles and participating in sports is clear and positive: the longer respondents stayed in sports the more likely they are to hold almost all titles compared to those who spent less time in sports, often with statistically significant differences compared to fewer years of participation. This trend is particularly pronounced for those holding titles Team Lead, Organizer, Facilitator/Trainer, Coach, Director/Chair, Entrepreneur, Board/Director, President or VP, and/or Founder (see Figure 30 on following page). In short, the *duration* of participation seems to be a key indicator of holding a leadership title in adulthood.

Relationship Between Title and Skill/Trait Development in Sports: When investigating the relationship between titles and skills/traits developed in sport, there are no significant differences between those with a title of C-suite, President, Head of Staff, Team lead, or Manager/Administrator vs. all others. However, if titles are grouped into a more-executive focused group — including all those who held one or more of the titles C-Suite, Founder, President, Vice President, Director or Chair, Board or Directors/Advisory Board, Head of Staff — this group is significantly more likely than those with other titles to mention several skills and traits. This group also is more likely to have spent higher numbers of years playing sports and to have held sports leadership positions on youth teams.

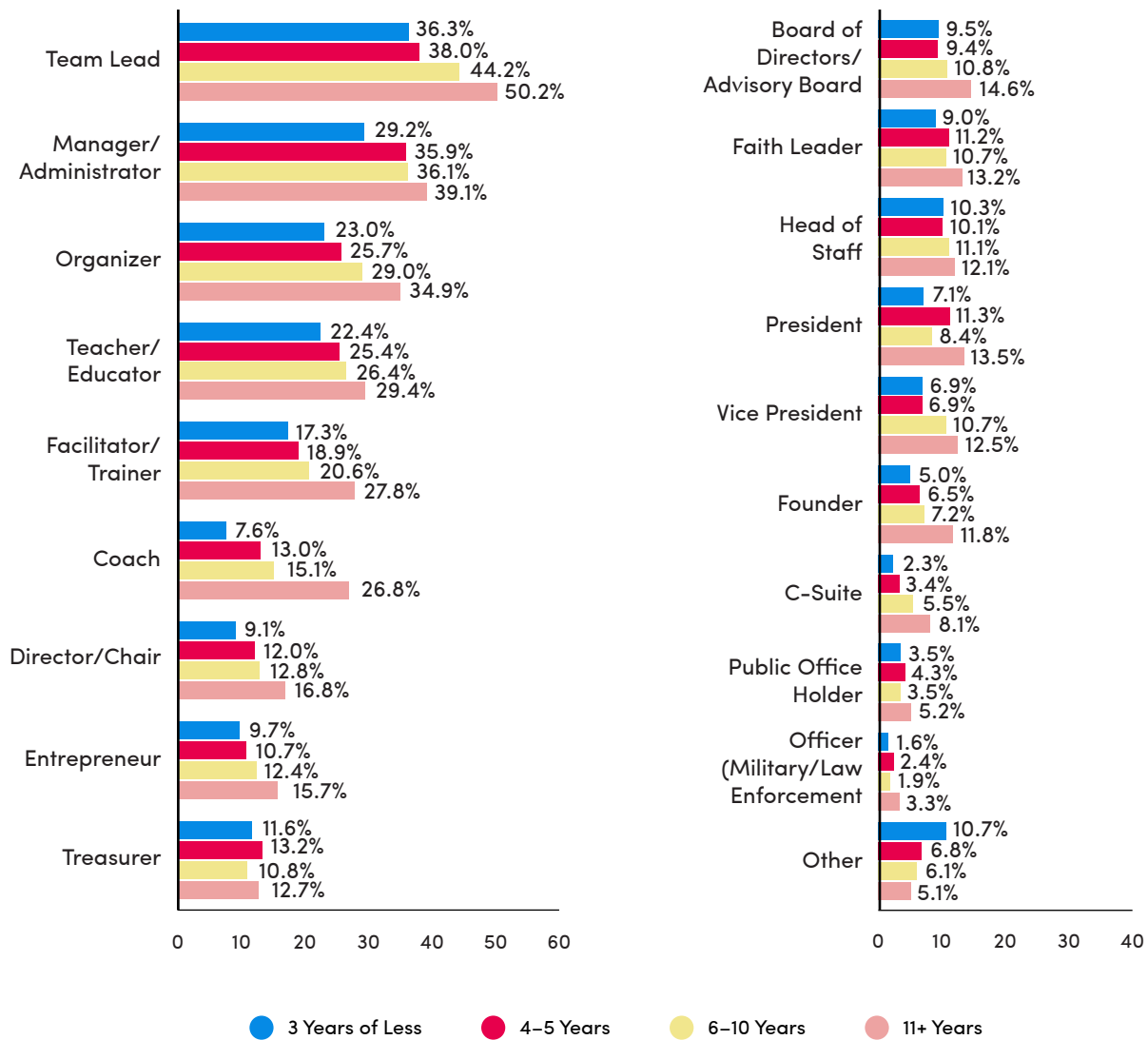
In other words, evidence emerges in support of the impact of knowledge, skills, attributes, and other characteristics on high-level leadership emergence, alongside increased duration of sports participation and former sports leadership. Those who held higher levels of leadership attributed more skills and traits to their sports leadership development. They also stayed on sports for longer and were more likely to have practiced their leadership skills on sports teams.

Qualitatively, respondents spoke to the connections between their experiences in sports and their ability to lead as adults.

“Playing sports have translated into the development of my professional leadership in other ways such as being able to work with a diverse group, easily build a rapport with my new hires, and ability to work independently or in a group.”

— Survey respondent, age 40

Figure 30: Leadership Titles, by Years of Sports Participation



Notes: Results are statistically significantly higher/lower at a 95% confidence interval for:

Team Lead: between 5 years or less and 6+ years, and between 6–10 years and 11+ years;

Manager/Administrator: between 3 years or less and all other categories;

Organizer: between 3 years or less and 6+ years, and between 11+ years and all other categories;

Teacher/Educator: between 3 years or less and 11+ years;

Facilitator/Trainer: between 11+ years and all other categories;

Coach: between 3 years or less and all other categories, and between 4–10 years and 11+ years;

Director/Chair: between 3 years or less and 6+ years, and between 4–5 years and 11+ years;

Entrepreneur: between 5 years or less and 11+ years;

Board of Directors/Advisory Board: between 5 years or less and 11+ years;

Faith Leader: between 3 years or less and 11+ years;

President: between 3 years or less and 4–5 years and 11+ years, and between 6–10 years and 11+ years;

Vice President: between 5 years or less and 6+ years;

Founder: between 11+ years and all other categories;

C-Suite: between 3 years or less and 6+ years, and between 4–5 years and 11+ years; and

Other: between 3 years or less and all other categories.

Treasurer, Head of Staff, Public Office Holder, and Officer: no significant differences.

Sports and Developing Leadership Skills

We then sought to unpack the differences between and among those who held public sphere leadership roles and those who did not. As demonstrated in Figure 31 (on following page), there are no differences between the two groups related to geographic region or race – a significant finding for our implications and recommendations. We find that public sphere leaders are statistically more likely to live in cities, and non-public sphere leaders are more likely to live in rural areas. Public sphere leaders are more likely to have 4-year or post-grad degrees and are more likely to now have income levels over \$100,000. This finding underscores the feedback between Title IX's impacts on educational access, sports access, and women's long-term economic security and independence (Clarke & Ayres, 2014; Rose, 2018; Stevenson, 2010). They are not statistically more likely to emerge from any particular cohort more than another, but those in their 70s are statistically less likely to be leaders than those from other cohorts. When sports availability was the most scarce during youth (i.e., those now between 70–80 years old), leadership development later in life is the least pronounced.

The data on Figure 32 (on page 55) illustrate the nuance in the story of leadership emergence. Sports involvement appears to play a role in leadership development, with those who are involved in sports at higher levels and for longer periods of time

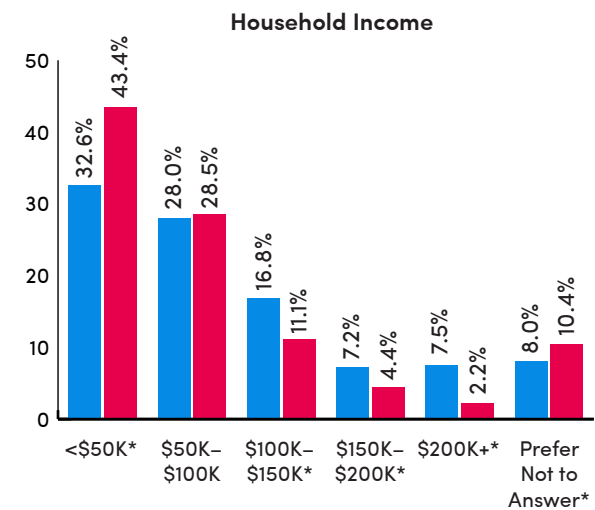
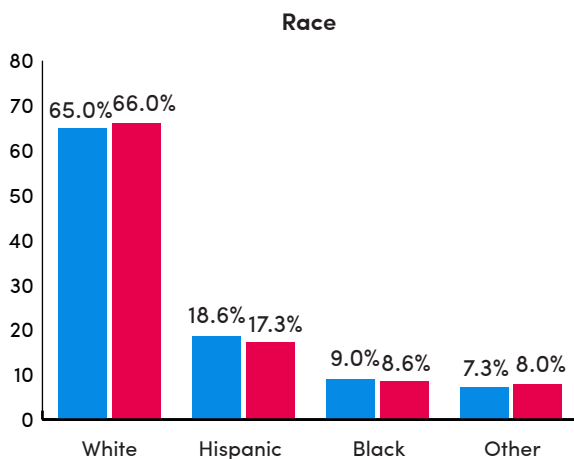
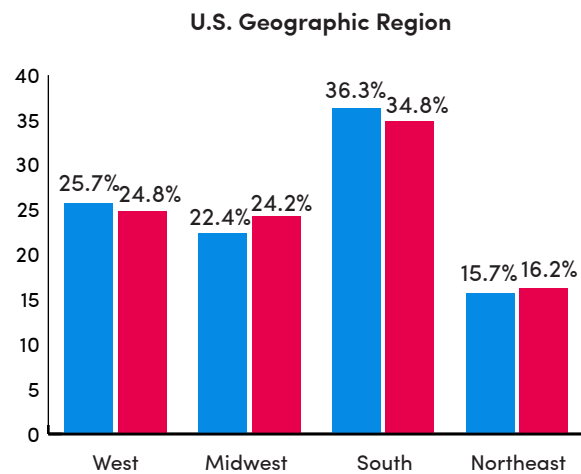
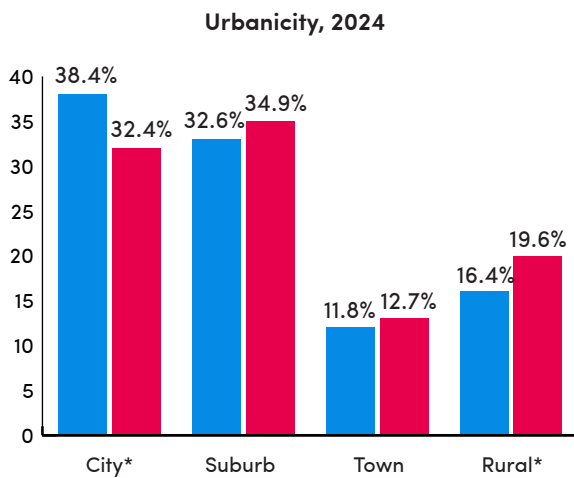
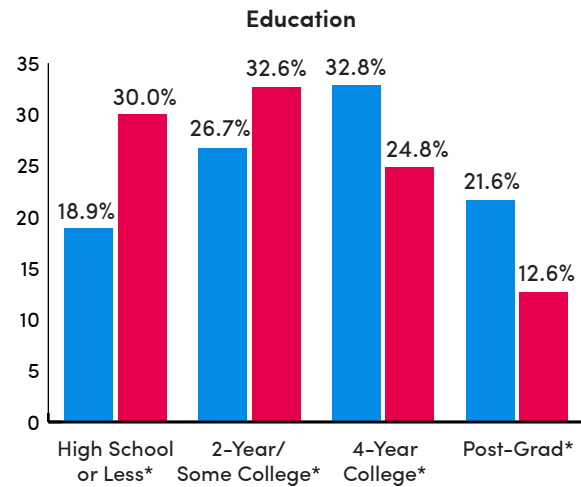
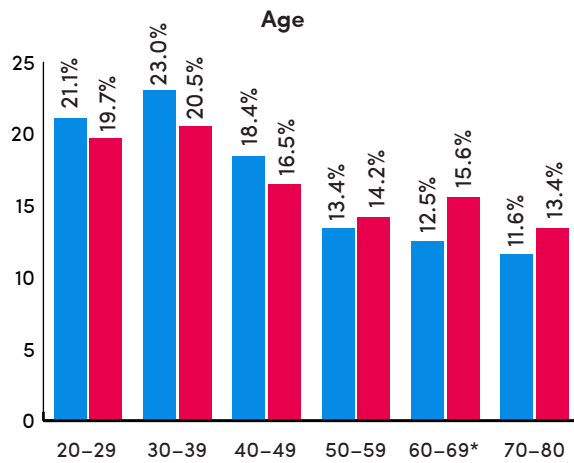
being more likely to hold public sphere leadership roles. We investigate this both in terms of levels of participation, finding that leaders are more likely to be sports participants between ages 14–17, 18–26, and 26+ (all with statistical significance compared to non-leaders), and in terms of duration of participation. There, we find that those who have participated for 11+ years are statistically significantly more likely to be leaders in adulthood, and that public sphere leaders have longer (and statistically significantly different) records of sports participation than do non-public sphere leaders (i.e., 8 vs. 6 years). Leadership in high school or college sports also impacts public sphere leadership later in life, rendering higher levels of leadership than non-leadership later in adulthood. Public sphere leaders also tend to attribute more weight to the role sports played in their development than do non-public sphere leaders as a measure of their self-reflection of the role sports played in their life.

Evaluating the relationship between each of the skills and traits we asked about and leadership indicates that those who have formal public sphere leadership roles are statistically more likely to indicate having learned each trait or skill than are those without formal leadership outcomes in adulthood (see Figure 33 on page 56). In general, women in current leadership positions report that their participation in sports provided them with the skills, capacities, and experiences necessary for their roles more so than those who are not in leadership positions.



Meghan Duggan and Ed Snider Youth Hockey

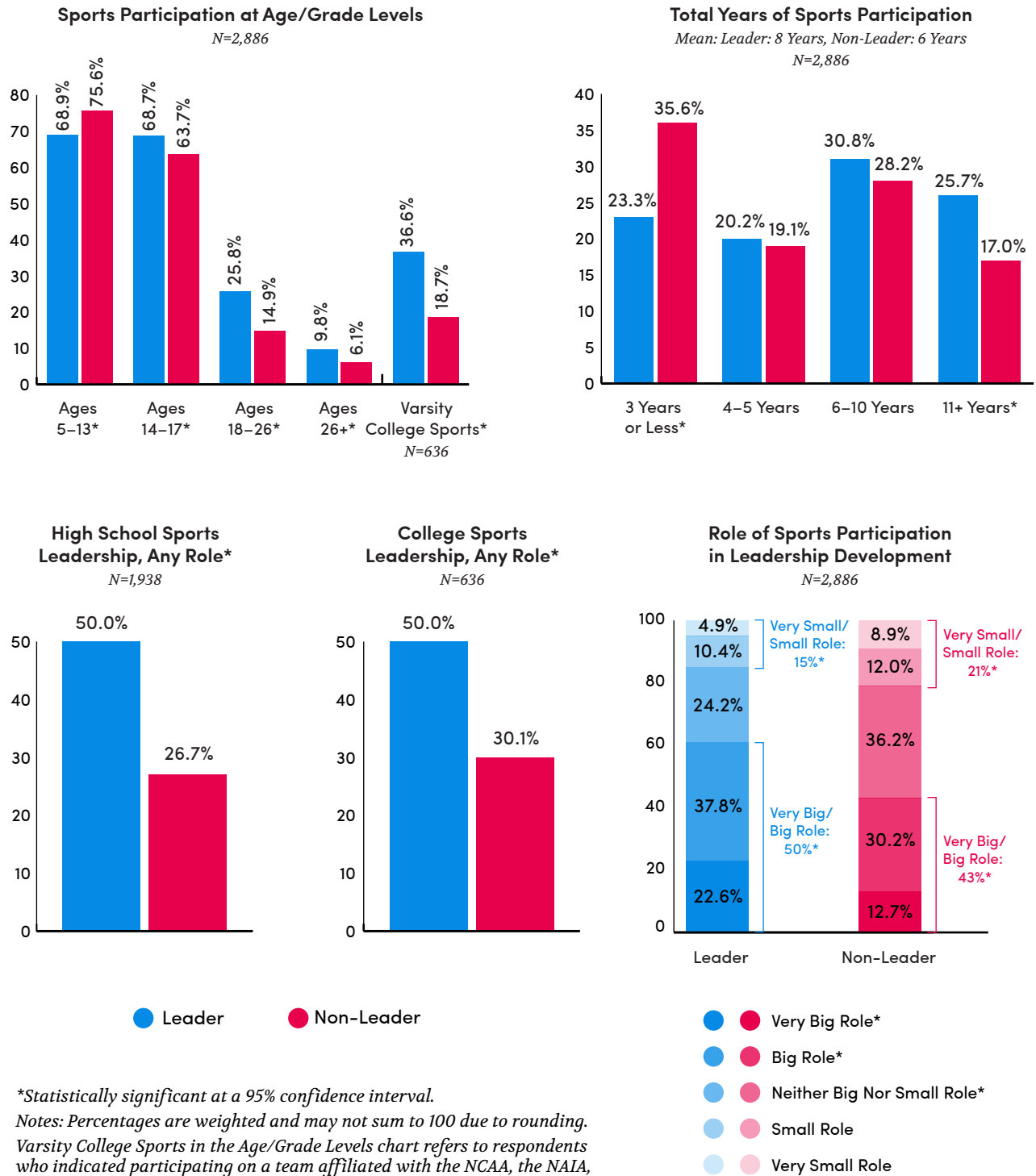
Figure 31: Demographics of Study Participants, by Public Sphere Leadership Roles



*Statistically significant at a 95% confidence interval.
 Note: Percentages are weighted and may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

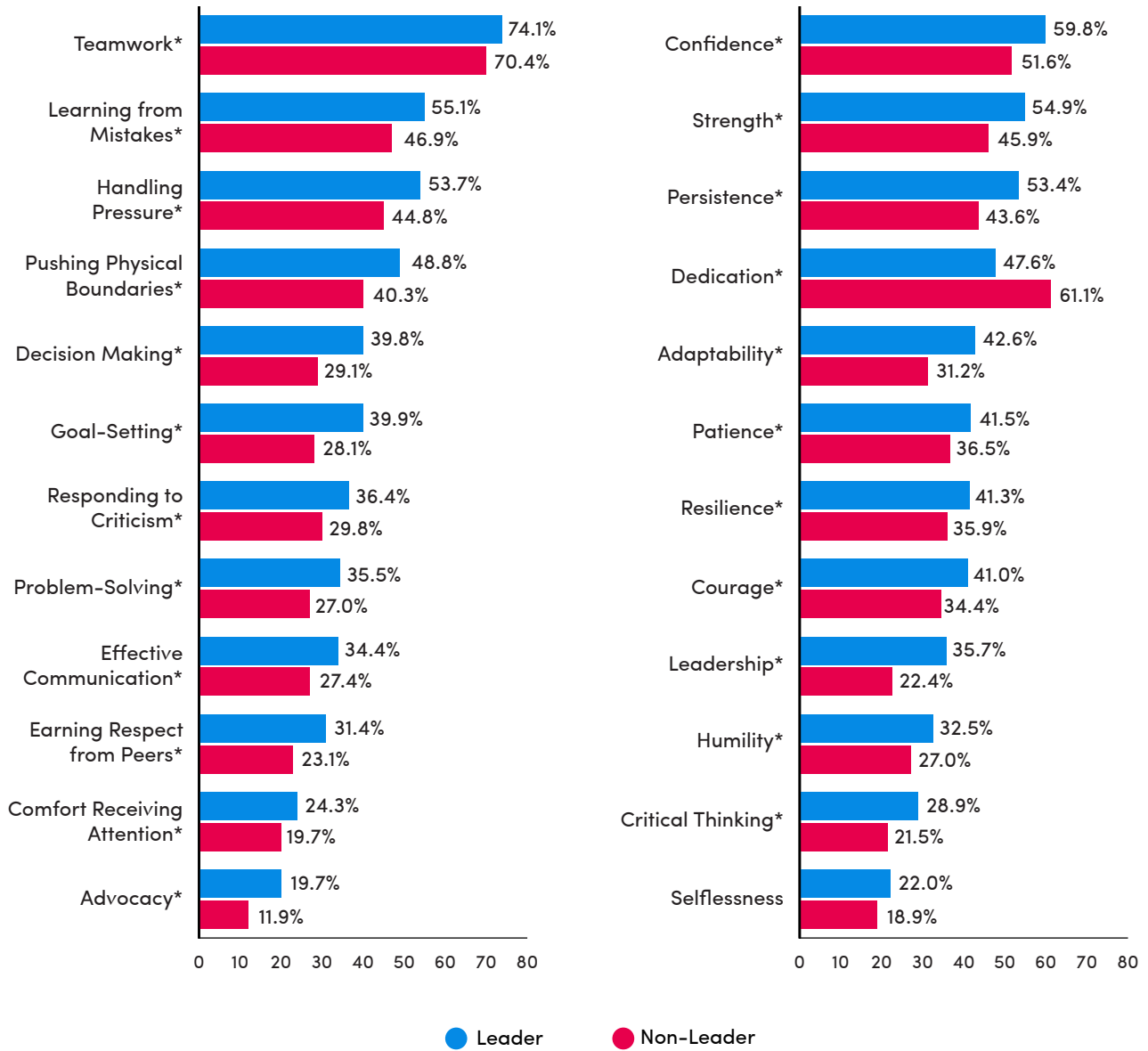
● Leader ● Non-Leader

Figure 32: Key Leadership Indicators



*Statistically significant at a 95% confidence interval.
Notes: Percentages are weighted and may not sum to 100 due to rounding.
Varsity College Sports in the Age/Grade Levels chart refers to respondents who indicated participating on a team affiliated with the NCAA, the NAIA, the AIAW, the NCCAA, or a community college between the ages of 18-26.

Figure 33: Skills, Capacities, and Experiences Gained from Sports Participation



**Statistically significant at a 95% confidence interval.
 Note: Respondents were asked to select all that apply.*



Perhaps most notably, the emergence of leadership and its relationship to skills and traits is consistent *across racial groups*. That is, access to sport, duration of participation, and a high-quality experience within it are critical factors in ensuring equitable outcomes, a powerful point we return to in our discussion and recommendations. This also echoes new research, which finds that when women of color are given access to sports, their long-term outcomes in terms of health can actually exceed those of White women, particularly among those in their 40s (Beck et al., 2024).

Taken a whole, the evidence of public sphere leadership among former youth sports participants with access to girls' teams is remarkable. Our analyses suggest evidence, across generations, of the lifelong impacts of sports on the lives of women and gender-diverse people that both shift their skills and attributes, as well as their ability and desires to assume public roles. To our knowledge, this study is among the first of its kind to begin seriously unpacking the dynamic and multi-generational impacts of the cultural and policy-driven changes to sports teams in American life over the past 75 years on the public sphere leadership of American women and gender-diverse people. The results breathe life and data into anecdote and suggest the need for serious attention both from scholars and from policymakers on the roles of youth sports and the implementation of civil rights policy to its full effect.

Barriers to Accessing Leadership

At the same time, and despite the clear evidence of trends toward leadership emergence within our sample, subcurrents and trends around barriers to leadership emergence are also key findings. Given the overwhelming and aforementioned amount of research that suggests that numerous barriers to sports accessibility, affordability, safety, belonging, etc., exist in ways that challenge the ability of youth to stay in sports even

after they start, we also developed a series of measures to identify the circumstances that may have prevented individuals from developing skills and traits that could specifically prepare them for leadership. Likewise, the significant corpus of research regarding the challenges women and gender-diverse people face in being seen as leaders, seeing themselves as leaders, being asked to lead, and choosing to accept leadership roles, we also sought to tap into experiences that prevented leadership emergence.

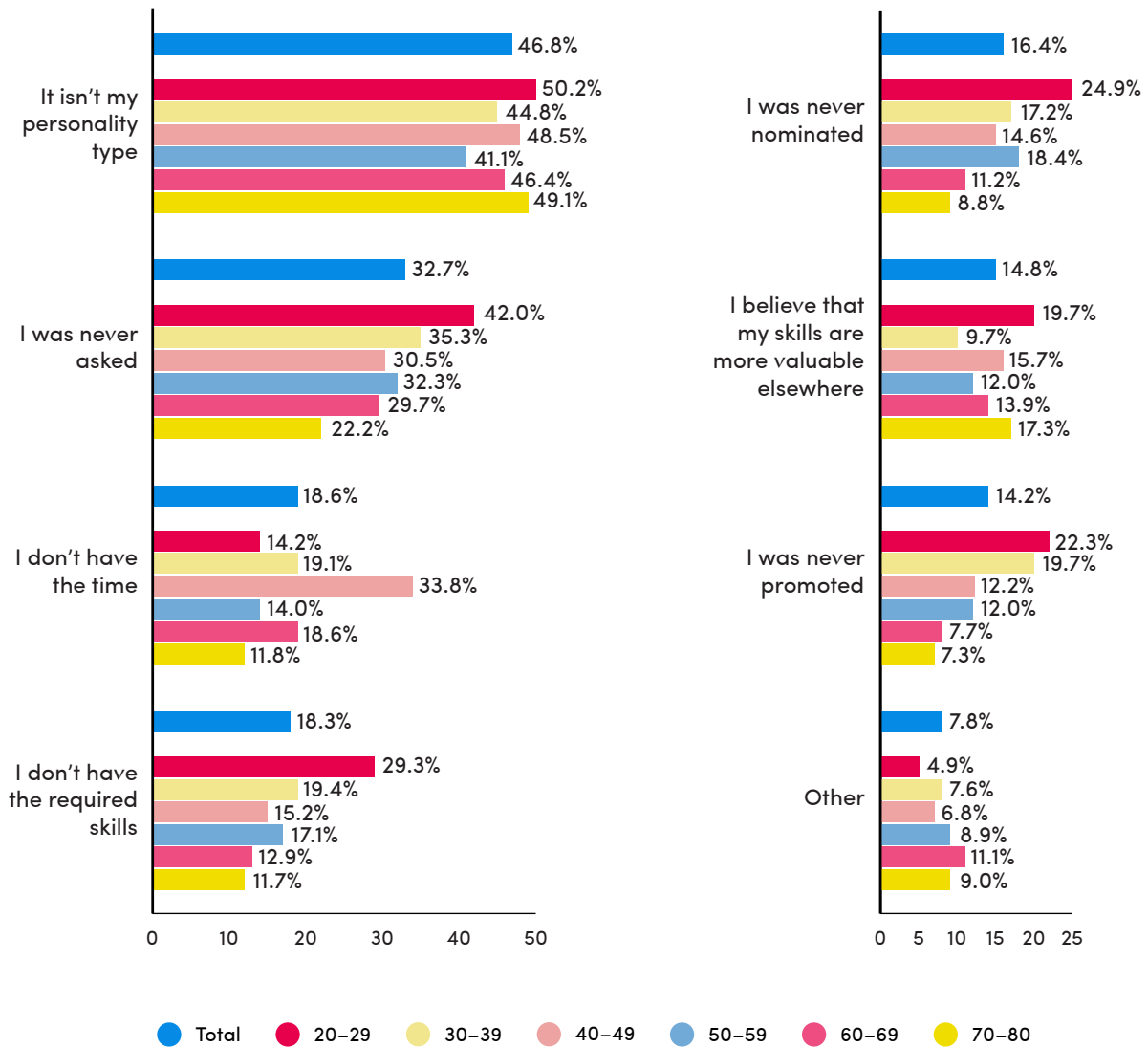
Research shows that girls are socialized into a society with gendered leadership expectations that they must either challenge or accept, and gender codes can “unmake” leaders too. As Dixon et al. (2023) in their scoping study of girls and leader identity development point out, “Leadership is co-created through communication as a process of social influence” (p. 4). They go on to explain that “socialization around gender roles impacts girls’ ideas about who can be a leader and how leaders should act” (Dixon et al., 2023, p. 4). They conclude by identifying four themes that affect girls’ development as a self-identified leader: relationships with mentors and peers, personal characteristics (including resilience and confidence), meaningful engagement in activities that helped them build leadership skills, and social identities.

Among those who did not have formal or informal leadership roles in adulthood ($N=671$), we investigated the reasons why. We developed two sets of questions to measure respondents’ sense of what prevented their leadership development and any reasons that they did not assume leadership roles. See Figure 18 on page 44 for barriers to developing leadership skills through sports participation and Figure 34 on following page for reasons for not assuming leadership roles.

Regardless of age, half of women indicated that they avoid leadership roles due to their “personality.” This response was indicated by just under half of those without any adult leadership roles and was consistent across cohorts. Younger women cited reasons like not being asked, lacking required skills, or not being put forward for promotions/nominations, echoing findings for lack of leadership emergence in other fields (e.g., Lawless & Fox, 2005). Leaders need sponsors, advocates, mentors, and promoters; these findings underscore that in circumstances where those networks are lacking, barriers emerge. Gender stereotypes about what leadership “should” look like also clearly persist, leading some respondents to believe themselves unsuited to the task (see also Badura et al., 2018).¹⁶ In contrast to other ages, women ages 40–49 are more likely to say they don’t have time to take on leadership responsibilities, perhaps reflecting the increased responsibilities for family care that many adults uniquely take on for both children and parents at mid-life.

¹⁶ *The space of sports for girls and women, of course, always contends with stereotype threats in a world where masculinity and sports remain so closely affiliated (Boiché et al., 2014; Festle, 1996; Hively & El-Alayli, 2014). It is worth recalling that one of the original reasons for the creation of sex non-discrimination legislation in education (what would become Title IX) was, in fact, to end the use of sex-stereotyped educational materials that posited men and boys as “natural” leaders (Rose, 2018; Wu & Mink, 2022).*

Figure 34: Reasons for Not Leading, by Cohort Group



Notes: Results are statistically significantly higher/lower at a 95% confidence interval for:

Never asked: between those 20-39 and those 70-80;

Don't have the time: between those 40-49 and all other cohorts;

Don't have the skills: between those 20-29 and all other cohorts except those 30-39;

Never nominated: between those 20-29 and those 60-80;

Skills more valuable elsewhere: between those 20-29 and those 30-39; and

Never promoted: between those 20-39 and those 60-80, and between those 20-29 and those 40-59.

Personality type and Other: no significant differences.



“I grew up before Title IX, therefore there was very little female participation in sports. Girls were still thought to have no physical abilities for sports during my school years. We were relegated to cheering for the boys.”

— Survey respondent, age 70

“I didn’t participate in formal organized sports because I don’t enjoy the competitive aspect of team sports. Many other aspects I would enjoy, but the high/strong competitive aspect of sports tends to turn me off. I think leadership skills or a leader mentality also involve a degree of competitiveness. That drive to beat or compete with others in order to attain that goal or reach a certain level, is something that’s just not in me. I don’t strive to reach my goals by competing with others, except myself. I hope that makes sense.”

— Survey respondent, age 60

Qualitatively, respondents expounded on the dynamics that likely precede these barriers:

“My mostly non-participation in organized sports was due to un-availability of opportunity; I graduated from high school in 1971. And I was the brainy type; organized “sports” for me were chess club and speech club. For recreation I rode my bicycle, aside from that couple of years of fencing.”

— Survey respondent, age 70

“Equal access and funding is so important. I came up before Title IX and was not allowed to try out for little league or punt pass & kick for example. My parents hid me from the newspaper so I could get a paper route (that’s a lot of biking or walking!) because girls couldn’t be paper boys. Being on a team was great because losing gracefully is an important skill — as is winning gracefully. Working as a team, learning to focus, all things that I continue to use at work.”

— Survey respondent, age 57

“When I was growing up there were few opportunities for girls to participate in sports at all, and almost no importance placed on girls participating in sports. Most coaches were men. At the same time boys participating in sports were held up as heroes and encouraged to play and lead.”

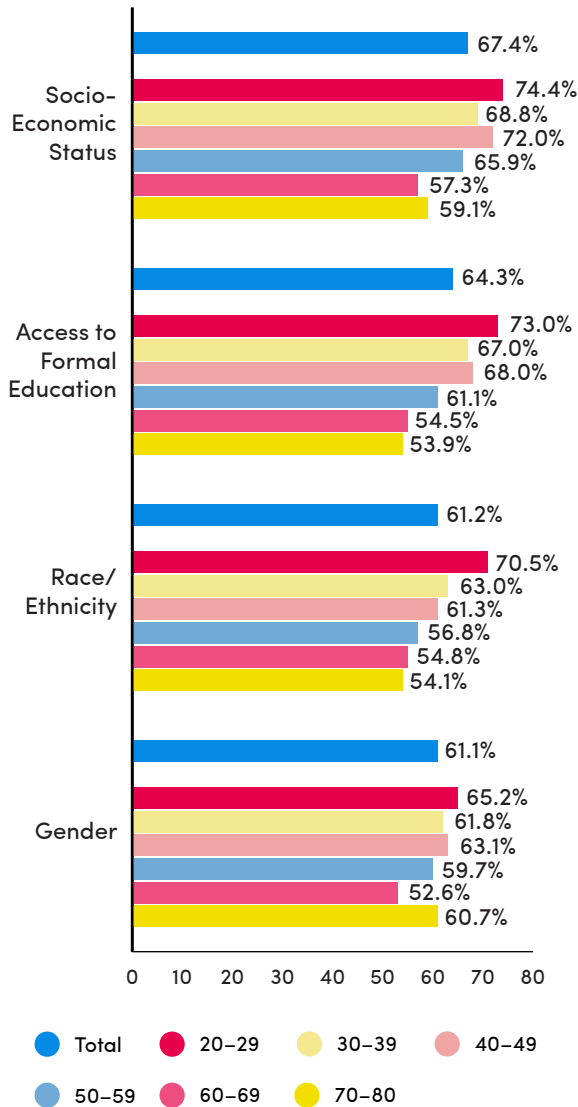
— Survey respondent, age 69

On balance, these results remind us that studying the impacts of the past provides insights for the future. They indicate that young women and gender-diverse people need continued support to nurture the seeds planted toward leadership earlier in life to see them bloom later in adulthood, both before, during, and after sports participation. Sports are embedded in the broader gendered society, where access and encouragement to leadership remains unequal. Attention to barriers, along dimensions of gender and within subgroup dynamics, remains critical for future generations.

Finally, we asked respondents to reflect upon their assessment of general barriers to leadership, whether they had experienced them personally or not. The results reveal that, despite the prevalence of leadership roles many women and



Figure 35: Barriers to Leadership Opportunities (Strongly Agree/Agree), by Cohort Group



Notes: Results are statistically significantly higher/lower at a 95% confidence interval for:

Socio-Economic Status: between those 20-59 and those 60-69, between those 20-49 and those 70-80, between those 20-29 and 40-49 and those 50-59, and between those 20-29 and those 30-39;

Access to Formal Education: between those 20-59 and those 70-80, between those 20-49 and those 60-69, between those 20-29 and 40-49 and those 50-59, and between those 20-29 and those 30-39;

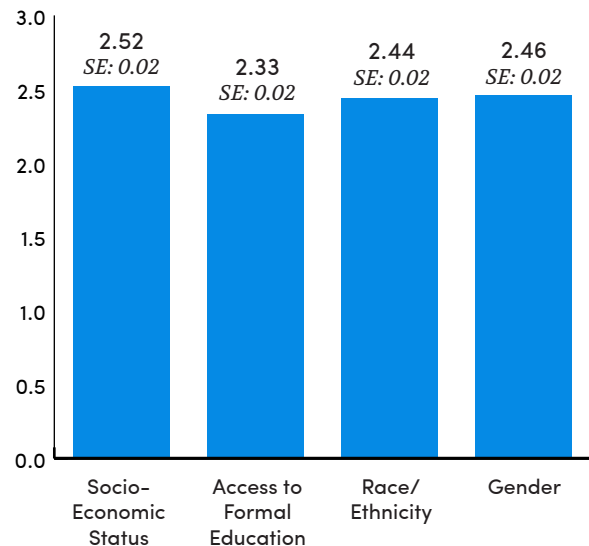
Race/Ethnicity: between those 20-29 and all other cohorts, between those 30-49 and those 60-80, and between those 30-39 and those 50-59; and

Gender: between those 60-69 and all other cohorts.

gender-diverse people assume within our sample, they still see a world around them that is poised to enact barriers to leadership along lines of gender, race, class, and educational attainment (see Figures 35 and 36).

Overall, respondents see socio-economic status as the largest barrier to leadership, closely followed by access to formal education. However, women of all ages are fairly equally inclined to say that gender is a barrier to leadership, while younger age cohorts (particularly those in their 20s) are more likely than others to identify that socio-economic status, access to formal education, and race/ethnicity are barriers to leadership – posing the question of whether gender has become less of a barrier comparatively. These results also suggest fertile ground for future investigations of how these populations experience discrimination at work and in their communities, either personally or through the lens of the experiences of their friends and family. As expectations of equal treatment have become more naturalized with the implementation of Title IX and other civil rights laws, younger cohorts have perhaps become more sensitive to the impacts of unjust practices and unequal systems of advancement. Future studies should interrogate how sports participation may condition former athletes to expect equitable treatment from their colleagues, neighbors, and community members; if or when those expectations are violated, former athletes may be more apt to recognize it.

Figure 36: Barriers to Leadership Opportunities



Notes: Means on 5-point response option ranging from 1) strongly agree to 5) strongly disagree ($\alpha = 0.87$)

The alpha on gender, race/ethnicity and SES, which are arguably more conceptually coherent, is 0.86.

Policy Futures

“...having respect and influence on teams when I was a kid made me feel like I had rights and was listened to. I feel like society tends to see children as not really having rights and opinions worth hearing, through sports one can discover they have more power than they think...”

– Study participant, age 27

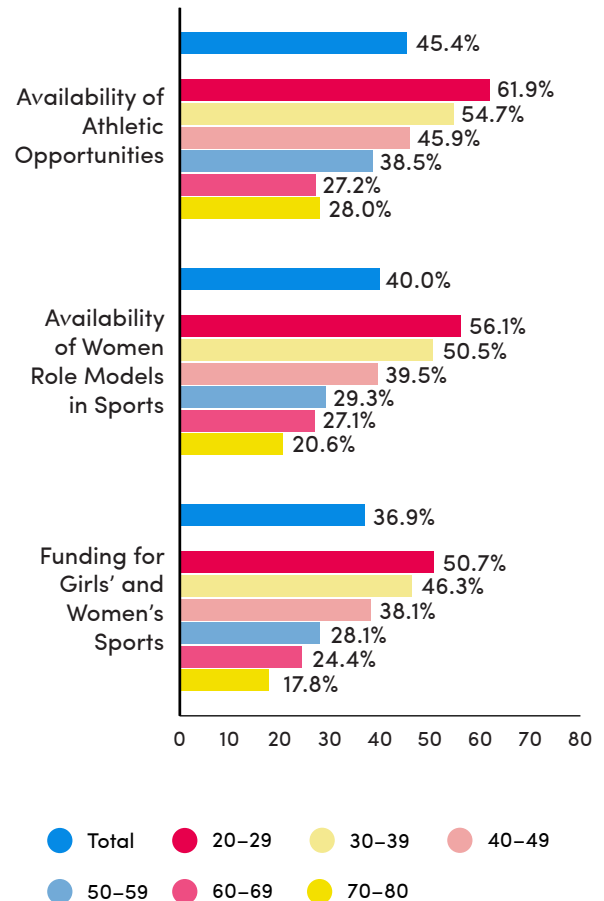
With an eye toward the future, we concluded the study with a series of questions about how respondents reflected on the conditions of equality as foundational to their leadership development, as well as how they envision an agenda for the future of women’s sports. This is a unique stakeholder population of recipients of sports opportunities, making their evaluation of both past and future practices around gender equality particularly important for policymakers. We focused on opinion towards the importance of equal participation opportunities and funding, hiring women coaches, equal media coverage for girls and women in sports, and the governmental enforcement of laws to end discrimination against girls and women in sports (specifically Title IX). Public opinion questions such as these have been asked by scholars in other contexts to identify how both the general public and the athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators in college sports think about the policy future for girls and women in sports (Druckman et al., 2018; Druckman & Sharrow, 2020, 2023).

When asked to reflect upon the impacts of athletic opportunities, female roles models, and funding for girls’ and women’s sports on their own leadership development, younger cohorts (especially those 20–49 years old) are more likely to indicate that such factors impacted their development (see Figure 37). Again, a clear demarcation emerges between those who



Representative Lori Trahan, photo ©Adam Peist

Figure 37: Impact on Leadership Development in Sports (Strongly Agree/Agree), by Cohort Group



Notes: Results are statistically significantly higher/lower at a 95% confidence interval for:

Availability of Athletic Opportunities: between those 60–80 and all other cohorts; and

Availability of Women Role Models in Sports and for Funding for Girls' and Women's Sports: between all cohorts except between those 20–29 and those 30–39 and between those 50–59 and those 60–69.

came of age after Title IX and those who came of age before. Of course, we cannot disentangle the causal chain or know whether some of this attribution is due to the fact that youth sports experiences are more recent and close to mind in the memories of younger cohorts. It could be that younger cohorts are more in touch with their youth sports experiences and, therefore, can more easily reflect on the relationships between structural supports and positive outcomes. However, we also know that the funding and opportunity structures themselves have changed substantially over the past half-century and were notably suppressed (compared to now) for those in their 60s and 70s particularly. In this sense, it is also just as likely

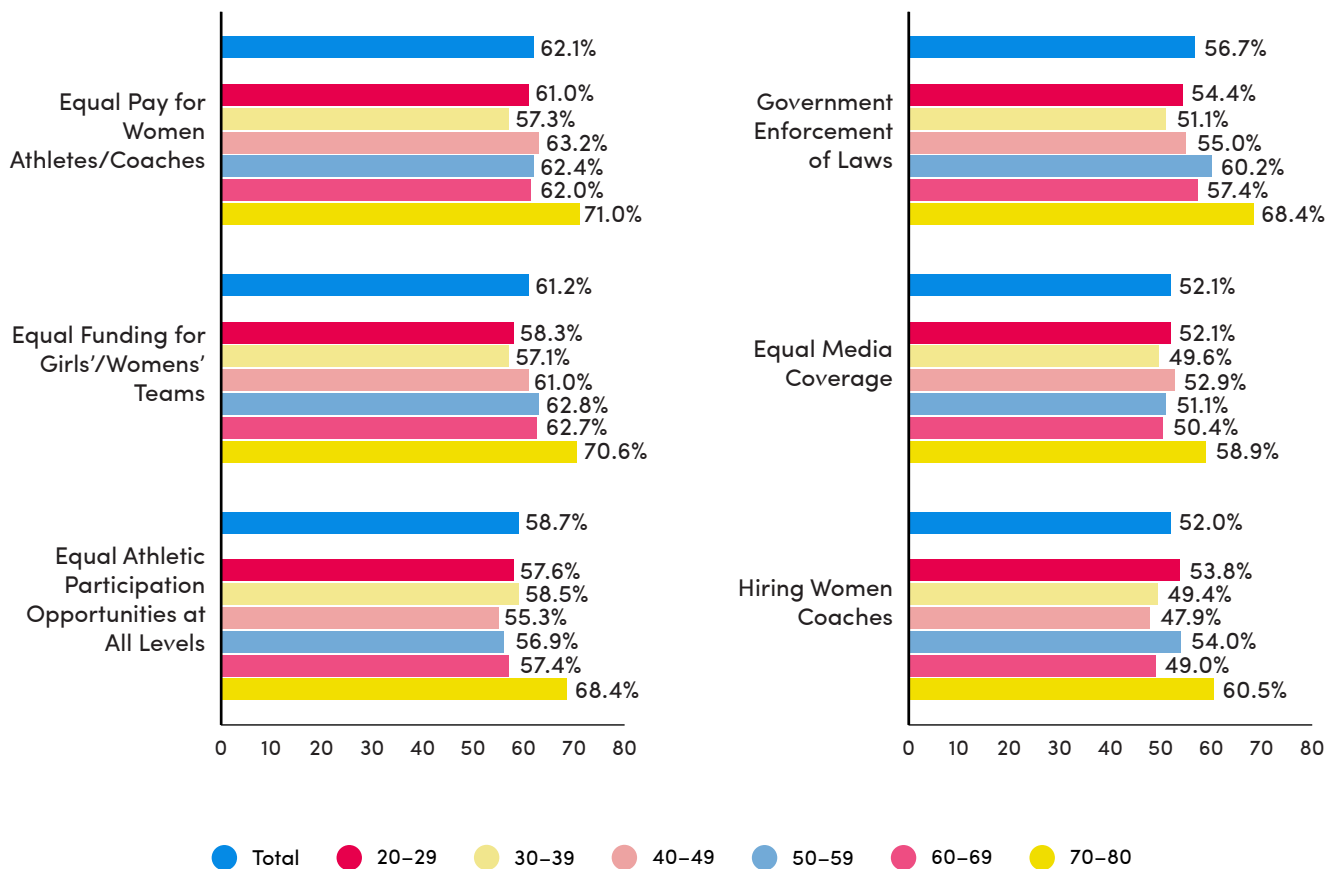
that these results reflect a staid awareness of the impacts of a lack of support for girls' and women's sports experienced by the older cohorts. Individuals in those cohorts were less likely to emerge as formal leaders; perhaps these results indicate their awareness of some other, unmeasured set of factors that inhibited their life choices.

The oldest cohort is remarkably distinct in their assessment of the future (see Figure 38). All cohorts indicated the importance of all factors (opportunity, funding, pay, enforcement of Title IX, media coverage, hiring women coaches) at above 50%. But older cohorts, particularly those in the 70–80 age group, are more inclined to see the importance of all factors when compared to younger generations, across all measures. They

are particularly distinct on opinion toward financial investment questions (equal pay and equal funding) and on the key measures of Title IX (equal participation opportunities and full enforcement of the law). On all four measures, those in their 70s are statistically significantly more likely to express that these factors are “very important,” even among widespread and high support (above 50% on all measures) in nearly all cohorts and all measures. See also Figure 39 (on following page) for means across all cohorts.

Across cohorts, the extent of support for investment of all kinds in the future of women's sports is clear. Recipients of the benefits of sports see high importance for the necessity of future investment. These results underscore findings of other large-N

Figure 38: Importance of Factors for the Future of Women's Sports (Very Important), by Cohort Group



Notes: Results are statistically significantly higher/lower at a 95% confidence interval for:

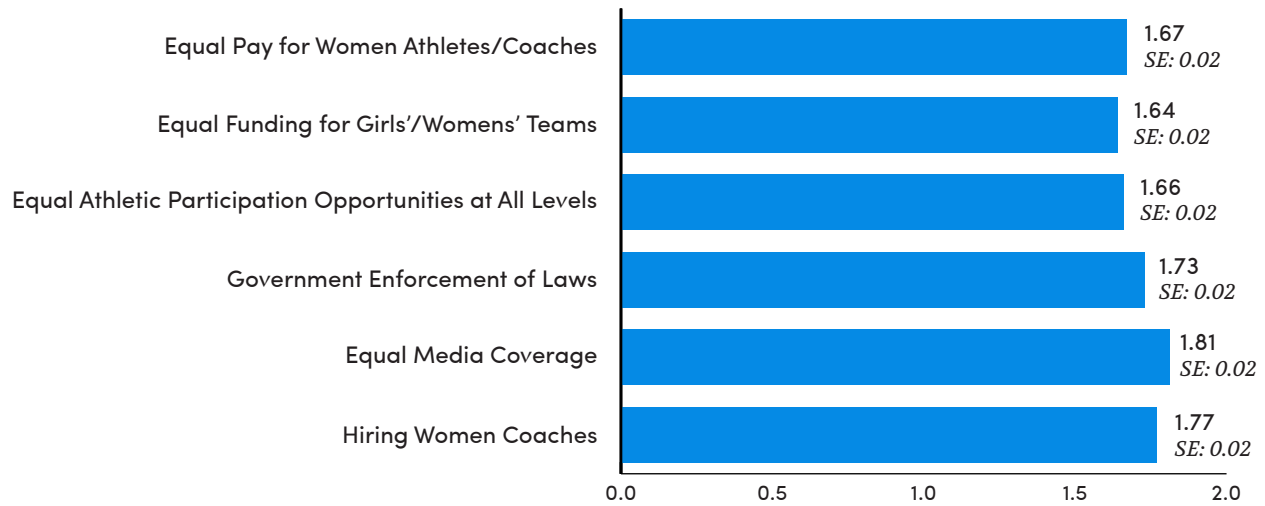
Equal Pay for Women Athletes/Coaches, Equal Funding for Girls'/Women's Teams, and Equal Participation Opportunities at All Levels: between those 70–80 and all other cohorts;

Government Enforcement of Laws: between those 70–80 and all other cohorts, and between those 50–69 and those 30–39;

Equal Media Coverage: between those 70–80 and those 30–49 and 60–69; and

Hiring Women Coaches: between those 70–80 and all other cohorts except those 40–49.

Figure 39: Importance of Factors for the Future of Women’s Sports



Notes: Means on 5-point response option ranging from 1) very important to 5) very unimportant (α = 0.84)

public opinion samples of female college athletes — researchers find widespread support not just for the tenets of equity, but for the future investments needed to secure them (see also Druckman et al., 2018; Druckman & Sharrow, 2023). In the same vein of that research, these data suggest an under-studied but powerful policy constituency of Title IX still poised to push for the full enforcement of policy and likely with the awareness of the power of sports in their individual lives that could be “tapped” for organizing and change. Multiple studies of constituencies

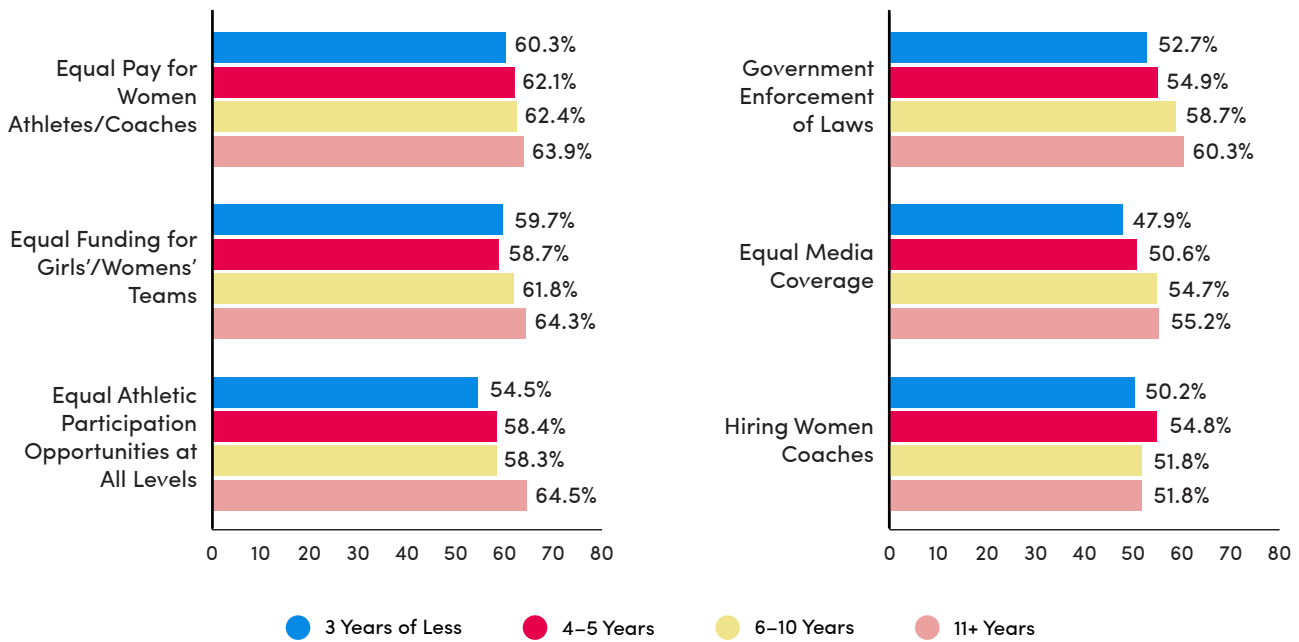
of college athletes have supported this idea of the past decade (Druckman et al., 2018; Druckman & Sharrow, 2020, 2023), but no other studies to date have considered the cross-age-cohort possibilities of constituency emergence, to our knowledge.

Finally, when we analyze opinions about the future as a function of the duration of sports participation, it is clear that those who have participated for longer time periods tend to place greater importance on each factor than those who played for shorter time periods (see Figure 40 on following page). More than half of women and gender-diverse respondents indicated all factors are very important to the future of sports for girls and women, but those who have spent more time within the sporting institutions have statistically higher levels of support for future investments. Staying in sports ensures not only greater access to health, well-being, and leadership development, but also inculcates “constituents” of sports who may be more likely to push for the means necessary to ensure better access for future generations. These findings amplify the importance of the “duration” findings on leadership outcomes; public sphere leadership may not be an end in and of itself, but perhaps the pathway to feedback mechanisms to sustain or reform the system of sports that helped individuals develop it.

While this is the case, there is reason to be concerned about sustaining the gains experienced in the immediate aftermath of Title IX. It appears some of the dynamics that are driving specialization in sports for personal gain (i.e., scholarships, upward mobility), stratification in sports (i.e., divergent pay-to-play pathways), and discrimination (i.e., mistreatment of transgender, gender-diverse, other LGBTQ+, and/or athletes of color) may be having increasingly deleterious impacts on



Figure 40: Importance of Factors for the Future of Women’s Sports (Very Important), by Years of Sports Participation



Notes: Results are statistically significantly higher/lower at a 95% confidence interval for: Equal Pay for Women Athletes/Coaches and Hiring Women Coaches: no significant differences; Equal Funding for Girls'/Women's Teams: between 11+ years and 6-10 years; Equal Participation Opportunities at All Levels: between 11+ years and all other categories; Government Enforcement of Laws: between 3 years or less and 6+ years; Equal Media Coverage: no significant differences; and Hiring Women Coaches: between 3 years or less and 6+ years.

the participation, quality of experience, and related mental health consequences among girls in more recent years. It's also possible that in cohorts with highest youth participation rates (30s, 40s, and 50s) the relative benefits of sports were viewed as outweighing some of the costs.

However, the findings from this representative sample (that mirror other recent WSF targeted reports on barriers) suggest greater scrutiny on the impacts and consequence of sports for those now in their 30s-50s. On balance, our findings suggest the possibility of a relatively brief window or a "golden age" of sports participation that rendered its benefits for women and girls in the U.S. Since then, those in their 20s indicate greater concern about barriers and potentially negative impacts that come part and parcel with participation. To this end, the impacts of Title IX, positive and uneven though they may be, could be poised to mirror other policies that expanded civil rights to prioritize access to education (*Brown v. Board of Education*, etc.) where progress initially produces important outcomes that then wane over time, given the unsustained attention to enforcement of equal conditions or investments. Policy scholars warn of the impacts of "policy drift" – a circumstance where lack of

sustained attention to assessment or enforcement can render aging policy structures outmoded or outdated (Druckman & Sharrow, 2023; Mettler, 2016). Sustained attention to both policy and practice will be required for the future of Title IX's durability and for new solutions at the local, state, or federal level to expand the access needed to ensure more widespread impacts.

Women and gender-diverse people who have experienced the benefits of sports participation draw sharper connections between their experience, the knowledge, skills, traits, and experiences accrued in sports, and their adult leadership, and they see the need for additional work to make Title IX's aspirations a reality for all. Scholars have long hypothesized that Title IX may have educated recipients not only on how to play sports, but also on "their expanding set of political rights" (Sharrow, 2017, p. 5; see as theorized in Mettler & Soss, 2004). These analyses suggest, above all, the public possibilities – in public sphere leadership, and perhaps for public policy – that youth sports have engendered. They also suggest the possibilities for change in policy and practice, to which we turn next, could have a willing constituency of advocates in the coming years.

VI. Policy and Practice Recommendations and Future Directions

Lean into Title IX

It has been more than 50 years since the passage of Title IX, and the significant and positive impacts Title IX's implementation has had on girls' and women's access to and participation in sport cannot be understated. We note the profound impact that equitable and accessible opportunities to participate in sports have on the lives of girls and women.

Recommendations:

1. Advocate for Title IX to be enforced at all levels of education (elementary through college) so that society benefits from leadership development afforded to girls and women through sports.
2. Expand the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (1994) to include second education programs (grades 6–12) and share those data on a publicly accessible and searchable database like <http://ope.ed.gov/athletics>.
3. Advocate for the U.S. Congress to pass the Fair Play for Women Act, to promote fairness and equity in participation opportunities and institutional support for girls' and women's sports programs; ensure transparency and public reporting of data by college and K–12 athletic programs; and improve education and awareness of Title IX rights among K–12 and college athletes as well as athletics staff.
4. Advocate for the U.S. Congress to pass the Patsy T. Mink and Louise M. Slaughter Gender Equity in Education Act, to create a new Office for Gender Equity within the Department of Education (ED) to coordinate Title IX activities in ED and throughout other federal agencies; fund competitive grants for K–12 schools, colleges and universities, states, school districts, and other educational organizations to boost Title IX compliance programs; and provide Title IX coordinators with annual trainings, information, and best practices about Title IX compliance.
5. Educate the public on the updated guidance on Title IX shared by the Biden administration and the Department of Education in 2024, which includes affirming support for transgender youth participating in sports. Advocate for support for enforcement of the protections offered to transgender youth participating in sports consistent with their gender identity.
6. Identify the benefits of Title IX to American society through continue and expanded research and education. As policy and financial restrictions influence the successful implementation and compliance to Title IX, leadership must always support equity practices across the life course, *including* sports participation. Organizations must identify and have immediate consequences to noncompliance to Title IX standards and regulations.



Elevate Youth Sport Coach Training

Youth sports coaches have a profound impact on the sports experiences of girls. Training that prioritizes personal development and teamwork can go a long way toward supporting girls holistically and simultaneously uplifting skills and experiences that prepare girls for leadership.

Recommendations:

7. Advocate for mandatory youth sports coach training based on the most up-to-date best practices for recreational, community based, private leagues, school-based opportunities.
8. Develop accessible and freely available youth sports coach training at the community and school-based levels. Include training that specifically focuses on practices that reinforce girls' holistic development and calls out leadership skills that both organically and intentionally can be integrated in and amplified through practice. Include trainings on cultural proficiency and sensitivity to create a welcoming and supportive environment for athletes from diverse backgrounds.



9. Increase program evaluation of youth sports programs, including coach training and development, to ensure sports environments are safe, welcoming, and a positive space for girls to grow and thrive.

Expand the Number of Women Coaches Through Active Recruitment and Training

It is critical to increase the number of coaches who are women to serve as role models for girls who play sports. Too many girls drop out of sports during early adolescence. Having access to more women coaches can enhance girls' athlete identity and reinforce the passion, drive, and joy they derive from sports. In doing so, girls are more likely to remain in sports and capture the full leadership benefits that comes from greater years of play.

Recommendations:

10. Support training for leaders of youth, interscholastic, and intercollegiate sports regarding the organizational barriers that exist for women pursuing coaching positions and how to reduce those barriers so that more women can pursue coaching opportunities.

11. Support the development of more women as sports coaches, especially at the youth and secondary school level. Coaching training and development programs catering specifically to women can help expand opportunities for women to join the coaching community.
12. Work with communities and schools to create resources for greater access to coach training programs and ways to compensate coaches for any mandatory or voluntary training. Financial barriers can be a factor as to why women do not pursue coaching, therefore it's essential to break down that barrier so that women have the opportunity to gain additional certifications and training.

Increase Government, Nonprofit, and Corporate/Private Sector Support for Youth Sports

Participation in sports affords girls the opportunity to develop and hone their skills and serves as a conduit for leadership development. Girls from marginalized communities continue to face obstacles to participation, and youth sports en masse have become increasingly more expensive. Moreover, privatization within the youth sports industry has left many girls behind. Greater investment is needed to expand access, support infrastructure and address the financial, transportation and other logistical changes that preclude girls' full participation.

Recommendations:

13. Create collaborative programs among private, public, and nonprofit sectors that can sustain sports programming models to ensure sports participation opportunities for girls in rural, suburban, and urban communities.
14. Advocate for greater support from the federal government (and state and local municipalities) and the corporate/private sector to provide equitable access to sports outside of school-based opportunities. Girls in under-resourced and/or underserved communities, including historically marginalized and minoritized communities, do not have similar access to youth sports participation compared with girls in better resourced communities. Youth sports participation outside of a school-based environment disproportionately benefits girls from upper-income families.
15. Prioritize historically marginalized and minoritized communities that continue to face disinvestment practices in all systems including sports participation. Additional research and resources are necessary to level the playing field such that access to leadership development opportunities are equitable for all.

Prioritize Mental Health and Wellness Support

Commercialization, discrimination, and stratification of sports negatively affects the mental health and wellness of girls, women, and gender-diverse adult participants. This phenomenon in sports participation can result in negative experiences or dropping out of sports. The consistent evaluation of sporting experiences and the presence of support services are critical to identify and address potential pitfalls and poor outcomes for girls and women and to boost the positive impacts that accrue when sports are done well.

Recommendation:

16. Develop and implement strategies that couple mental health support strategies with sports programs to enhance positive outcomes and address stigma, bias, and other negative experiences that often dissuade girls from playing. Ensure that all coaches and athletic administrators have adequate and annual mental health training to allow them to help facilitate and maintain a safe environment for all athletes.

Increase Sports Opportunities in K–12 and Higher Education Systems

Playing sports during and throughout childhood and adolescence provides the opportunity to cultivate skills, traits, and experiences that align with leadership emergence. Sports offer a unique setting in which these attributes can be learned, nurtured, and reinforced — shaping an identity that includes leadership-like qualities.



Recommendation:

17. Advocate for support from the federal government (and state and local municipalities) that all public education systems provide support for gender-equitable school-based sports resources as there are significant inequities in opportunities in urban and rural regions of the U.S. Advocate for additional support for middle school sports opportunities for girls, given the disproportionate rate of girls dropping out of sports during this critical period of development. Prioritize advocacy for girls in under-resourced and/or underserved communities who do not have similar access to youth sports participation compared with girls in better resourced communities.
18. Educate parents, family members, and caregivers about the value of participation in sports for girls and the importance of girls participating in sports over many years (beyond the age of 12) so they can engage in local advocacy. Educational programs should be offered in ways that are culturally relevant and accessible to parents, family members, and caregivers and that emphasize the benefits to sports participation, including the benefits of leadership development well into adulthood.

Provide More Sex-Integrated Sports Offerings

As adults are most often working and living in environments that are sex-integrated, it is important to better understand girls' and women's experiences in sex-integrated sports. This area of coed sports experience as a component of girls' youth sports participation is under-studied and under-valued as a component of youth experiences, particularly given the proportion of adults who report training, practicing, or competing in sex-integrated (coed) environments.



Recommendations:

19. Support sex-integrated opportunities in sports from introductory level through early adolescent level. These opportunities should be expanded in community recreation leagues, private sports offerings, and in elementary and middle schools.
20. Encourage, sport organizations from youth through adult recreational opportunities to provide more sex-integrated offerings to support diverse skill sets and interests.

Increase Opportunities for Sports Participation Past K-12 Education

Young adulthood continues to be a time for significant leadership emergence, and yet sports offerings during this time are greatly diminished. Expanding sports opportunities both inside and outside of collegiate settings, including less competitive and recreational play, will maximize the exposure young women have to the benefits that accrue from playing.

Recommendations:

21. Increase the number of and opportunities for competitive sports participation, including through club-based offerings in college/university settings, while also increasing access to less competitive opportunities for intramural sports participation to support young women who do not have opportunities to participate in intercollegiate athletics.

22. Increase the number of opportunities for competitive sports participation outside of college settings. This can include providing more adult-focused recreational sports opportunities for women within local communities (consider need for childcare support). Increase opportunities for women's sports leagues within work / corporate settings and consider opportunities for leagues to form among companies in close geographic proximity.
23. Advocate for adult sports offerings that consider support for childcare, integrating children into opportunities, and other novel approaches to sports offerings that differ from traditional adult recreation models of sports that focus on men's sports participation.

Increase Opportunities for Leadership Development and Additional Research

Data from this report make clear that there are untapped opportunities to elevate the critical role that sports play in leadership development. Creating more intentional leadership development and training efforts within sport organizations can ensure these benefits are fully recognized. New research can further support this effort.

Recommendations:

24. Encourage sports organizations from youth through college (intercollegiate, club, intramural) to provide more opportunities for leadership training and development for participants. Promote collaboration between sports organizations and other youth-serving organizations (e.g., Girls Inc., Girl Scouts of America) to provide leadership skill building that connects sports participation more formally to other opportunities for leadership development.
25. Support funding additional research necessary to better understand how leadership skill development is created and nurtured in a wide range of sports involvement by girls at all ages, race/ethnicity, geographic location, and levels of competition.
26. Provide research grant opportunities to support scholars exploring some of the questions that have emerged from this research. Continue to fund research that examines some of the barriers and negative impacts that were identified by women in the younger cohort groups in this project.

Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Strategy Via YouGov

Participants were first asked to identify themselves as 1) male, 2) female, 3) Transgender man/trans man/female-to-male (FTM), 4) Transgender woman/trans woman/male-to-female (MTF), 5) Genderqueer/gender nonconforming/neither exclusively male nor female, 6) Additional gender category (or other), or 7) Decline to answer. Those who responded “male” were terminated from the study; those who responded “female” or any of response categories 3–7 were asked further questions to identify youth and/or young adult participation on sports teams for girls and women. After we identified those with a youth sports background, we returned to those respondents who did not answer either “male” or “female” to the gender question, and asked: “Between the ages of 5 and 26 [or if under the age of 26, respondents were shown their age here] and in the context of sports teams on which you participated, did you identify as, or did the others identify you as...? Please select one. 1) Female/a girl, 2) Male/a boy, 3) Both, 4) Prefer not to say.” Only those who answered choices 1 or 3 were recruited for participation.

Identifying youth sports participants across age cohorts: To identify youth sports participants, respondents were then asked: “Which of the following activities did you participate in between the ages of 5 and 26 [participants under the age of 26 were shown their age here]? Please select all that apply. 1) Sports teams or programs in your community or school (that met at a regular time and/or had a coach or instructor, and/or were designed to develop and improve sports skills or performance, and competition), 2) Community volunteer activities (includes any volunteering for local charities, as well as any volunteering in your local community), 3) Acting, singing, or performing arts (this could include lessons and/or performances), 4) Non-sports clubs (these may be formal or informal clubs; through a school, religious community, or neighborhood), or 5) None of these.”¹⁷

Among respondents aged 20–59, only those who answered 1 were recruited to the sample. Those over the age of 60 were asked one additional recruitment question designed to capture sports participants who may not have had access to formal teams. “Which of these best describe you between the ages of 5 and 26? Please select one. 1) I was not interested in sport/

¹⁷ This recruitment question rendered other intriguing contextual data about the lived experiences of respondents ($N=2,886$). More than half (52.7%) of respondents participated in community volunteer activities between 5–26; 49.1% were in acting, singing, or performing arts; 53.3% were in non-sports clubs; only 3.8% indicated they participated in none of these youth activities (these were respondents recruited from older cohorts who participated in pickup games). These high levels of participation in non-sports activities underscores findings in the recent WSF report on mental health which found that girls who participate in sports are more apt to be highly engaged in other activities as well (Massey et al., 2024; see also Whitley et al., 2019).



athletic activities, 2) I was interested but there were not any opportunities to play sports, 3) I played pickup/informal games with other children/teens in my community.” Only those who answered choice 3 were recruited.

Among these respondents, we then confirmed their sports participation during the period of interest, ages 5–26. In line with other research that considers the distinctions between youth (age 5–13), high school (age 14–17), and college-age (age 18–26) sporting contexts, we asked respondents questions about their sports background in each of these age ranges (see Messner, 2009; Messner & Musto, 2016; Sabo & Veliz, 2008, 2012; Veliz et al., 2019). For those over 60 who were recruited because of participation in pickup games ($N=332$), we asked their age during those activities. Any respondents who indicated they had no participation between 5–26 were dropped from the sample.

Final sample size and cohort distribution: Thus, our final sample includes women (and those who were identified, in the context of the sports teams on which they played, as a “girl” or “both a boy and a girl” during their youth), ages 20–80, who participated in organized sports between the ages of 5 and 26, or who (if over the age of 60) played pickup sports.¹⁸

¹⁸ In our discussion of results, we refer to respondents as such, and as “former participants on teams for girls and women” whenever possible in order to preserve accuracy and avoid erasing the 39 (1.4%) respondents who do not identify as women in adulthood. As noted, this percentage is only slightly lower than recent estimates of the current proportion of transgender and non-binary athletes competing in NCAA sports (Mullin et al., 2023).

Appendix B: Survey Instrument

Recruitment/Participant Screener Questions

[Further information on how questions used indicated in brackets, throughout.]

Age screener: Dropdown option, 20-80 [terminate if out of range]

Gender screener: Do you think of yourself as...? Please select one. 1) Male, 2) Female, 3) Transgender man/trans man/female-to-male (FTM), 4) Transgender woman/trans woman/male-to-female (MTF), 5) Genderqueer/gender nonconforming neither exclusively male nor female, 6) Additional gender category (or other), or 7) Decline to answer. [Those who responded "male" were terminated from the study; those who responded "female" or any of response categories 3-7 were asked further questions.]

Zip code of current residence [open prompt]

Urbanicity: How would you describe the place where you live?
1) City, 2) Suburb, 3) Town, 4) Rural area, 5) Other [open prompt]

Race: Please indicate the racial or ethnic groups that best describe you. Please select all that apply. 1) White, 2) Black or African American, 3) Hispanic or Latino, 4) Asian or Asian American, 5) Native American, 6) Middle Eastern, 7) Other, 8) Don't know, 9) None of these

Education: What is the highest level of education you have completed? 1) Did not graduate from high school, 2) High school graduate, 3) Some college, but no degree (yet), 4) 2-year college degree, 5) 4-year college degree, 6) Postgraduate degree (MA, MBA, MD, JD, PhD, etc.)

Income: Which of the following income categories best describes your total annual household income before taxes? Please include income from all sources, such as salary, bonuses, profits, capital gains, stock or investment dividends, rentals, interest, social security, pensions, etc. Please select one. 1) Under \$25,000, 2) \$25,000-\$49,999, 3) \$50,000-\$74,999, 4) \$75,000-\$99,999, 5) \$100,000-\$124,999, 6) \$125,000-\$149,999, 7) \$150,000-\$174,999, 8) \$175,000-\$199,999, 9) \$200,000-\$249,999, 10) \$250,000 or more, 11) Prefer not to answer

Youth Sports Participation screener: Which of the following activities did you participate in between the ages of 5 and 26 [participants under the age of 26 were shown their age here]? Please select all that apply. 1) Sports teams or programs in your community or school (that met at a regular time and/or had a coach or instructor, and/or were designed to develop and improve sports skills or performance, and competition), 2) Community volunteer activities (includes any volunteering for local charities, as well as any volunteering in your local community), 3) Acting, singing or performing arts (this could include lessons and/or performances), 4) Non-sports clubs



(these may be formal or informal clubs; through a school, religious community, or neighborhood), or 5) None of these

Follow up for those 60+: Which of these best describe you between the ages of 5 and 26? Please select one. 1) I was not interested in sport/athletic activities, 2) I was interested but there were not any opportunities to play sports, 3) I played pickup/informal games with other children/teens in my community. [Only those who answered choice 3 were recruited for participation.]

Follow up for those who did not identify as male/female (if gender screener = 3-7): Between the ages of 5 and 26 [or if under the age of 26, respondents were shown their age here] and in the context of sports teams on which you participated, did you identify as, or did the others identify you as...? Please select one. 1) Female/a girl, 2) Male/a boy, 3) Both, 4) Prefer not to say. [Only those who answered choices 1 or 3 were recruited for participation.]

Sports Background Questions

Question 1: You noted that you participated in organized sports. Thinking about teams or programs that met at a regular time, had a coach or instructor, and were designed to develop and improve sports skills or performance, and competition, at which age(s)/grade level(s) did you participate on these teams? [If participant noted they played pick up sports in recruitment question for those 60+, asked: You noted that you participated in

pickup/informal sports. At which at which age(s)/grade level(s) did you participate in these?]. Select all that apply. 1) Ages 5–13 (grades K–8), 2) Ages 14–17 (grades 9–12), 3) Ages 18–26, 4) Ages 26+ [only shown if 26+], 5) None of these [if answered, respondent terminated from survey]

<IRB Consent shown here>

Question 2 (asked if Question 1=1): Question wording for team/program type, age 5–13: What kind of youth (age 5–13, grades K–8) sports teams or programs did you participate in? Select all that apply. 1) Teams/programs organized by my town, city, or county, 2) School-sponsored teams/programs, 3) Teams/programs organized by a church, youth organization (e.g., YMCA, etc.), 4) Competitive club teams or programs, 5) Pickup games in my neighborhood/community, 6) Other, 7) Do not recall *[shown only if 40+, exclusive answer; response 1-5 shown in randomized order]*

Question 3 (asked if Question 1=2): Question wording for team/program type, age 14–17: In which types of athletic programs or teams did you participate during your high school years (ages 14–17, grades 9–12)? Please select all that apply. 1) Teams/programs organized by my town, city, or county, 2) School-sponsored teams/programs (i.e., high school team), 3) Teams/programs organized by a church, youth organization (e.g., YMCA, etc.), 4) Club teams or programs, 5) Pickup games in my neighborhood/community, 6) Other, 7) Do not recall *[shown only if 40+, exclusive answer]*

Question 4 (asked if Question 1=2): Team leadership roles high school teams, ages 14–17: Did you consider yourself a leader on your high school teams? Please select all that apply. 1) Yes, I was formally a team captain or other leader, 2) Yes, I was a team manager, 3) Yes, I was informally a leader, though there were no titles, 4) No, I didn't consider myself a leader. *[If respondents chose 4, they could not also choose 1–3.]*

Question 5 (asked if Question 1=3): Question wording for team/program type, age 18–26: Between the ages of 18–26, at which level(s) did you compete in sport? Please select all that apply. 1) Recreational/Intermural team, 2) Club-level team, affiliated with my college or university, 3) Club team or program, not affiliated with college or university, 4) Community College team (sometimes called National Junior College Athletic Association), 5) AIAW (Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women) team, 6) NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics) team, 7) NCCAA (National Christian College Athletic Association) team, 8) National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I team, 9) National Collegiate Athletic Association Division II team, 10) National Collegiate Athletic Association Division III team, 11) Other (please specify). *[Responses 1–5 were displayed in randomized order.]*

Question 6 (asked if Question 1=3): Team leadership roles ages 18–26: Did you consider yourself a leader on the team(s) you participated on between age 18–26? Please select all that apply. 1) Yes, I was formally a team captain or other leader, 2) Yes, I was a team manager, 3) Yes, I was informally a leader, though there were no titles, 4) No, I didn't consider myself a leader. *[If respondents chose 4, they could not also choose 1–3.]*

Question 7: Types of sports: Which organized sports did you participate in between the ages of 5 and 26? Select all that apply. 1) Archery, 2) Baseball, 3) Basketball, 4) Bowling, 5) Cheerleading/Acrobatics/Stunt, 6) Crew/Rowing, 7) Dance, 8) Equestrian, 9) Field Hockey, 10) Football, 11) Golf, 12) Gymnastics, 13) Ice Hockey, 14) Ice Skating, 15) Lacrosse, 16) Martial Arts (Karate, Taekwondo, Etc.), 17) Rugby, 18) Soccer, 19) Softball, 20) Swimming/Diving, 21) Tennis, 22) Track and field/Cross Country, 23) Water Polo, 24) Weightlifting, 25) Wrestling, 26) Volleyball, 99) Other (please specify)

Question 8: Duration measure: Between the ages of 5 and 26 <or 5 and respondent's age>, for how many total years did you participate in organized sports? *[Numeric text box 1–21, unless respondent under 26, then text box showed the upper total as concordant to their possible range; e.g., if a respondent was 25, they were show a range from 1–20.]*

Question 9: Age of stopping participation measure: At what age, if ever, did you stop participating in sports? 1) *[Drop down options 5–80, conditional based on age]* 2) I never stopped participating in sports

Question 10: Participation in coed teams: Sometimes sports teams are co-ed, with boys and girls playing on the same team. Did you have any of the following experiences between the ages of 5–26? Please select all that apply. 1) I participated on a team that was mostly for boys, 2) I participated on a team that was mostly for girls, but there was at least one boy who participated, 3) I participated on teams where boys and girls trained together (but competed separately), 4) I participated on teams where boys and girls competed against each other, 5) All of my teams were girls-only *[If respondents chose 5, they were not also allowed to choose 1–4.]*

Question 11: Youth community type: Generally speaking, how would you describe the region where you lived for most of your years between the ages of 5–18? Please select one. 1) Rural area, 2) Town, 3) Suburb, 4) City



Questions 12a-c: Barriers: To what extent do you believe with each of these statements...Please select one for each statement.

A) My gender was a barrier to participating in sport while I was growing up; B) My race or ethnicity was a barrier to participating in sport while I was growing up; C): My family's socio-economic status was a barrier to participating in sport while I was growing up. *[A-C Displayed in random order]*
1) Strongly agree, 2) Agree, 3) Neither agree nor disagree, 4) Disagree, 5) Strongly disagree

Question 13: Sports importance: Now we want to learn more about your experiences when you were growing up. How important was participating in sports in your childhood? Please select one. 1) Extremely important, 2) Important, 3) Neither, 4) Unimportant, 5) Extremely unimportant.

Question 14: Ways sports were important measures: Thinking back, what was most important to you about playing sports between the ages of 5-26? Please select up to 3. *[responses displayed in randomized order]* 1) Being active physically/ Developing physical strength or stamina, 2) Being part of a team, 3) Learning new skills, 4) Playing with my friends, 5) Representing my team/neighborhood, 6) Spending time with role models/my coach(es), 7) Pleasing my parents, 8) Building confidence, 9) Improving my mental health and wellbeing, 10) Belonging to something bigger than myself, 11) Learning to speak for myself/others, 12) Other (please specify)

Question 15: Size of role of sports in development: How big of a role did your sports participation play in your personal and/ or social development? Please select one. 1) Very big role, 2) Big role, 3) Neither big nor small role, 4) Small role, 5) Very small role

Question 16: Skills/experiences gained from sports measures: Next, we'd like to ask you to reflect on the skills, capacities, and experiences you gained from participating in sports. Which of the following skills do you think sports helped you develop? Select all that apply. 1) Teamwork, 2) Problem-solving, 3) Comfort with receiving attention, 4) Earning respect from my peers, 5) Effective communication, 6) Handling pressure, 7) Learning from mistakes, 8) Decision-making, 9) Pushing physical boundaries, 10) Responding to criticism, 11) Goal setting, 12) Advocacy (speaking up for myself/others), 13) Other *[response options displayed in a randomized order]*

Question 17: Traits gained from sports measures: Which, if any, of the following traits do you think you developed from participating in sports? Select all that apply. 1) Persistence, 2) Patience, 3) Selflessness, 4) Adaptability, 5) Resilience, 6) Confidence, 7) Leadership, 8) Humility (being humble), 9) Dedication, 10) Strength, 11) Critical Thinking, 12) Courage, 13) Other (please specify) *[response options displayed in a randomized order]*

Question 18: Trait barriers: Which, if any, of the following do you feel may have prevented you from developing the kinds of traits and skills through sports that we have been discussing? Select all that apply. 1) Family finances, 2) Limited participation opportunities, generally, 3) Born before Title IX (Law to address sex discrimination in sports), 4) Poor coaching, 5) Girls' team had poor leadership in my community, 6) lack of parental

encouragement, 7) Injury/health concerns, 8) Safety concerns while training, competing, rehabbing an injury, 9) Lack of female role models, 10) No opportunities for girls-only teams, 11) Racial or ethnic inequities, 12) Other (please specify) *[response options displayed in a randomized order]*

Leadership Questions

Question 19: Areas of influence: Now we'd like to switch from talking about your youth to talking about your adult life. In which of the following areas do you feel like you have influence over others? Select all that apply. 1) At my place of employment, 2) At my faith center or place of worship, 3) In my neighborhood, 4) As an athletics coach or manager, 5) In a community organization, 6) In a political organization or campaign, 7) In social or political activism (e.g., protests, advocacy groups), 8) In my family, 9) In the military, 10) In my local or state government, 11) At my child's school, 12) None of the above *[response options displayed in a randomized order; respondents who chose 12 were not able to choose any of the others]*

Questions 20a-b: Leadership roles: In which of these settings have you ever been in charge of a group of people, either formally or informally in your adult life? Please select all that apply for each column. Column A: Formally, Column B: Informally. Response rows: 1) At my place of employment, 2) At my faith center or place of worship, 3) In my neighborhood, 4) As an athletics coach or manager, 5) In a community organization, 6) In a political organization or campaign, 7) In social or political activism (e.g., protests, advocacy groups), 8) In my family, 9) In the military, 10) In my local or state government, 11) At my child's school, 12) None of the above *[response options displayed in a randomized order; forced choice response; respondents who chose 12 were not able to choose any of the others]*

Question 21 (asked if Question 20a =12; N=671): Reasons for not leading: There can be many different reasons that people don't take on leadership roles or appointments. Which of the following describes why you have never taken on a formal leadership role? Select all that apply. 1) I was never asked, 2) I was never promoted, 3) I was never nominated, 4) I don't have the required skills, 5) I don't have the time, 6) I believe that my skills are more valuable elsewhere, 7) It isn't my personality type, 8) Other (please specify) *[response options displayed in a randomized order]*

Question 22 (asked if Question 20a=1-11; N=2,215): Leadership titles: Which, if any, of the following leadership titles have you ever held, either in the workplace or in your community? Select all that apply. 1) C-Suite (CEO, COO, CFO, etc.), 2) Founder, 3) President, 4) Vice President, 5) Treasurer, 6) Team Lead, 7) Director or Chair, 8) Board of Directors/ Advisory Board, 9) Manager/Administrator, 10) Coach, 11) Head of Staff, 12) Public Office Holder (e.g., Schoolboard, Town Council, Commissioner), 13) Entrepreneur, 14) Facilitator/Trainer, 15) Teacher/Educator, 16) Faith Leader, 17) Organizer, 18) Officer (Military or Law Enforcement), 19) Other (please specify) *[response options displayed in a randomized order]*



Questions 23a–d: Reasons for leadership barriers: We are going to show you several screens with a different statement on each. Once you select a response, the survey will move to the next question. Please indicate to what extent you agree with these statements... Columns: 1) Strongly Agree, 2) Agree, 3) Neither agree nor disagree, 4) Disagree, 5) Strongly disagree. Rows [randomized display order]: A) Gender can be a barrier for opportunities to lead teams or groups of other people, B) Race or ethnicity can be a barrier for opportunities to lead teams or groups of other people, C) Socio-economic status can be a barrier for opportunities to lead teams or groups of other people, D) Access to formal education can be a barrier for opportunities to lead teams or groups of other people.

Sports Impact Section

Questions 24a–d: Sports impacts: Now, we have a few more questions about your participation in sports. Again, we are going to show you several screens with a different statement on each. Once you select a response, the survey will move to the next question. Please indicate to what extent you agree with these statements... Columns: 1) Strongly Agree, 2) Agree, 3) Neither agree nor disagree, 4) Disagree, 5) Strongly disagree. Rows [randomized display order]: A) I have carried the skills and lessons I learned in sport into my adult life, B) The skills I learned in sports were critical to my leadership development, C) My

success in life is connected to the skills I learned through sports participation, D) My satisfaction in life is connected to the skills I learned through sports participation.

Questions 25a–e: Future of Sports: For one of our last questions, we are going to show you several screens asking how important you think the following factors are for the future of sports for girls and women in the United States. Once you select a response, the survey will move to the next question. Columns [randomized display order 1–5 or 5–1]: 1) Very important, 2) Somewhat important, 3) Neither important nor unimportant, 4) Somewhat unimportant, 5) Very unimportant. Rows [randomized display order]: A) Equal athletic participation opportunities at all levels, B) Equal funding for girls’/women’s teams at all levels, 3) Hiring women coaches for girls’/women’s teams, D) Government enforcement of laws to end discrimination against girls and women in sports (e.g., Title IX), E) Equal pay for women athletes and coaches.

Question 26: Open ended: Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experiences with sports and leadership development?

Appendix C: Sports Participation Counts by Youth Age Groups

	Weighted %	count, any age	Age 5-13	Age 14-17	Age 18-26	Age 26+
1. Archery	4.8%	135	72	75	16	4
2. Baseball	13.6%	399	292	138	44	16
3. Basketball	36.3%	1,045	675	569	145	46
4. Bowling	9.9%	295	155	144	65	34
5. Cheerleading/Acrobatics/Stunt	19.7%	578	352	326	51	16
6. Crew / Rowing	1.1%	29	9	20	12	3
7. Dance	25.0%	705	472	366	122	38
8. Equestrian	3.7%	101	67	66	34	14
9. Field Hockey	3.5%	100	45	62	19	4
10. Football	8.9%	249	118	142	66	14
11. Golf	4.4%	126	47	80	37	16
12. Gymnastics	15.4%	444	332	175	33	12
13. Ice Hockey	1.4%	39	19	19	11	5
14. Ice Skating	5.4%	157	121	60	16	9
15. Lacrosse	1.2%	35	13	26	6	4
16. Martial Arts (Karate, Taekwondo, etc.)	4.1%	115	79	44	22	10
17. Rugby	1.0%	25	10	13	14	4
18. Soccer	21.8%	616	442	299	84	28
19. Softball	30.6%	900	625	449	159	67
20. Swimming / Diving	18.2%	517	346	305	93	19
21. Tennis	15.3%	430	225	262	91	31
22. Track and Field / Cross Country	17.8%	516	260	369	53	12
23. Water Polo	1.3%	37	12	24	8	5
24. Weightlifting	2.5%	70	20	48	23	10
25. Wrestling	1.4%	37	24	20	8	4
26. Volleyball	27.4%	795	392	518	124	39
99. Other	5.9%	173	82	107	31	8

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