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Thriving Through Sport:

The Transformative Impact on Girls' Mental Health

Executive Summary

Letter from the CEO

America's youth are experiencing a mental health crisis, and their futures are on the line. Across the nation, we have witnessed an alarming increase in mental health challenges among young people, and while mental health concerns were exacerbated by COVID-19, these issues were prevalent long before the pandemic. National surveys reveal increases in anxiety and depression among young people, as well as a lack of adequate resources for prevention and intervention.

That is why when the U.S. Surgeon General beckoned the nation to prioritize young people's mental health, we did not hesitate to answer the call.

Mental health is indeed complex, and we know sports can have powerful impacts. When it comes to sport and mental health, and especially, but not exclusively, at the most competitive levels of play, sport environments that are toxic can lead to adverse mental health consequences. We have heard far too many stories about athletes whose mental health has suffered; and for some, their experiences have been devastating.

But the converse also holds true. Getting it right in sport, creating healthy sport environments with coaches that prioritize mental health can lead to positive and protective mental health outcomes, as evidenced in this new research.

For 50 years and counting, the Women's Sports Foundation has recognized the powerful connection between sport and physical and mental health. We have advocated tirelessly for greater access to sport for girls and women and supported community programs to ensure girls have more opportunities to play.

The Women's Sports Foundation's new research report, *Thriving through Sport: The Transformative Impact on Girls' Mental Health*, provides new evidence that underscores the critical role that sport can play in boosting positive mental health. It offers an examination of how sport can protect against anxiety and depression and promote protective factors, such as social connectedness and building a sense of meaning and purpose.

Above all, the data in this new report is a call to action for coaches, educators, pediatricians, mental health practitioners, parents, and others. When girls play sport in programs that elevate girls' voices, emphasize personal growth, and foster healthy relationships – girls thrive.

There is still a lot of work to be done to ensure that all girls have equitable access to sport. 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. Equitable access is especially important given this new research, which shows that mental health benefits of sport can be a great equalizer. When girls play in sport environments that prioritize well-being, they are able to play, compete and lead – in sport and in life.

The Women's Sports Foundation is deeply grateful to the Kozmetsky Family Foundation for the generous funding which made this report possible.

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 sport, youth development, education, medicine, and mental health to ensure that all girls have an opportunity to thrive in sport. Doing so will ensure that girls succeed in all areas of their lives, from family and community life to school and the workplace. All girls. All women. All sports®
#KeepPlaying



Danette Leighton
CEO, Women's Sports Foundation

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About the Kozmetsky Family Foundation

The Kozmetsky Family Foundation arose from the RGK Foundation, an Austin-based family foundation formed in 1966 by Ronya and George Kozmetsky. Over a 50-year span, the RGK Foundation awarded more than 3,500 grants totaling over \$133 million, with an emphasis on programs that serve vulnerable populations and build the institutional capacity of the nonprofit sector. Its signature investments over the years include support for the creation of the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service at the University of Texas at Austin's LBJ School of Public Affairs. In order to allow the family's third and fourth generations to contribute and to continue the legacy of serving their communities, the Kozmetsky Family Foundation was formed in 2017 and is committed to sparking meaningful impact through grants for basic needs, education, and health, with special emphasis given to veterans, women, and children.

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

Today's youth are at an increasingly high risk of mental health disorders (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021). The ongoing mental health crisis of children and adolescents was only worsened by the confluence of issues brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Hiebert & Kortess-Miller, 2021) with continued growing rates of anxiety and depression as well as elevations in suicidal ideation and thoughts of self-harm among today's youth (Reinert et al., 2021). Given the popularity and reach of sport, along with promising research on positive developmental impacts, The Women's Sport Foundation (WSF) commissioned the *Thriving Through Sport: The Transformative Impact on Girls' Mental Health* report to examine the relationship between sport participation and mental health in adolescent girls.

Over the past two decades, researchers examining the broad-scale benefits of sport participation have reported a positive association between sport participation and mental health of young people (e.g., Easterlin et al., 2019; Graupensperger et al., 2021; Murray et al., 2021;

Zuckerman et al., 2020). This literature has indicated that compared to non-participants, youth who participate in sport tend to report a wide range of better mental health outcomes including higher self-esteem/self-concept (Wiersma et al., 2008; Findlay & Coplan, 2008), positive affect (Findlay & Coplan, 2008), life satisfaction (Michaud et al., 2006), fewer depressive symptoms (Boone & Leadbeater, 2006; Gore et al., 2001; Zarrett, Veliz, & Sabo, 2018), and less anxiety, stress, hopelessness/fatalism or suicidality (Dimech & Seiler, 2011; Taliaferro et al., 2011; Taliaferro et al., 2008; Zarrett, Veliz, & Sabo, 2018).

However, not all evidence for the relationship between sport and mental health has been positive, with previous studies showing that sport can do harm (e.g., Massey & Whitley, 2021). Further, many studies that do exist do not clearly indicate whether sport participation leads to better mental health outcomes, or whether those who have better mental health are more likely to participate in sport. Mixed findings of previous studies have likely resulted because few studies have considered the unique



qualities of youth participation (e.g., degree of exposure and commitment) or the quality of the sport setting (e.g., team cohesion, coach–player relationships). Further, little is known about whether participation may be more beneficial for certain demographic groups or whether youth across race, genders, sexual orientation, socioeconomic conditions, and disability benefit similarly.

The present report set out to examine:

1. What is the relationship between sport participation and mental health in adolescent girls?
2. How do the characteristics of the sport environment affect the relationship between sport participation and mental health?
3. Does the relationship between sport and mental health differ across contexts and demographic groups?

The research used for this report entailed three major components. First, we extracted data from the Adolescent Brain and Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study (Barch et al., 2018) to examine sport participation and clinical levels of mental health for a nationally representative sample of 11,875 children. With these data, we examined how participation in sport, duration of participation in sport, and number of sports played influenced rates of clinical mental health problems in girls

and boys. Next, we commissioned eight focus groups with 45 girl athletes to better understand how girls themselves perceived the relationship between sport and mental health, and what factors facilitated or impeded this relationship. With the knowledge gained from these two data sets, the WSF commissioned a nationally representative survey of 2,956 girls between the ages of 12 and 17 and their parent/guardian. The data included girls who currently participate in sport ($n = 1,677$), girls who previously participated in sport ($n = 343$), and girls who have never participated in sport ($n = 936$). The survey examined the relationship between sport participation and depression, anxiety, peer relationships, and a sense of meaning and purpose. Results give insights into the unique contribution of sport to mental health, the conditions under which sport is most beneficial for mental health, and the relationship of sport and mental health across a range of socio-demographic groups.



Key Findings

1. **Playing sport has a significant impact on girls' mental health.** When girls play sport in high-quality environments, they benefit in multiple areas of mental health, from decreased levels of depression and anxiety to stronger peer relationships and greater levels of meaning and purpose.
2. **Sport participation can lower anxiety and depression.** Girls who play sport in positive environments report significantly lower levels of anxiety and depression than those who previously played or never played. Aligned with previous research that has examined the relationship between sport and mental health (Easterlin et al., 2019; Graupensperger et al., 2021; Murray et al., 2021), girls in the study sample who currently participate in sport had significantly lower depression and anxiety scores when compared to girls who had previously played sport and girls who had never played sport. The odds of having a moderate-to-high depression or anxiety score were nearly twice as high for girls who never participated in sport than for girls who currently participate in sport. See Figures 8 and 10 on pages 24 and 25 in the full report.
3. **Sport helps girls thrive.** Girls in the study who currently participate in sport had significantly higher reports of peer relationships and meaning and purpose when compared to girls who had previously played sport and girls who had never played sport. The odds of having a moderate-to-high peer-relationship or meaning and purpose score were approximately 1.5 times higher for girls who currently participate in sport compared to girls who never participated in sport. See Figures 12 and 14 on page 26 in the full report.
4. **The quality of the sport environment is a driving factor for mental health.** The findings in this report point to the importance of the environment created within sport. Coaches are tasked with being key actors in delivering a quality program to promote engagement and positive health outcomes. When winning and social comparisons are the focus, mental health outcomes are no better, and sometimes worse, than not playing sport at all. However, when winning and social comparisons are de-emphasized in favor of other goals (e.g., mastery, collaboration, personal development), the benefits to mental health can be substantial, as data in the current study indicate. To support youth's needs for autonomy (defined as an individual's sense of having choice, an internal perceived locus of causality, and volition), autonomy-supportive coaching (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2017) involves engaging youth in dialogue (two-way communication), providing youth meaningful choices, acknowledging athletes' feelings and seeking to understand youth's perspectives, and



- providing opportunities and demonstrating shared values for youth input and voice. These components are critical in ensuring sport is structured to optimize the mental health of participants. See Figures 50–53 on pages 39–40 in the full report.
5. **The protective and promotive benefits of sport for mental health are unique relative to other extracurricular activities.** Findings in this study suggest that sport might provide additional benefits above and beyond participation in non-sport extracurricular activities. When comparing the number of activities, number of years engaged, and hours a week of participation, girls who participate in sport have lower levels of depression and anxiety, and higher levels of peer relationships and meaning and purpose than girls who only participate in non-sport extracurricular activities. One explanation for this might be that sport programming is a primary setting for youth to acquire the recommended levels of 60 minutes or more of daily moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. In turn, several reviews have indicated that engaging in regular daily physical activity is protective against depression and anxiety symptoms (Ahn & Fedawa, 2011; Biddle et al., 2019) and can significantly reduce depression, anxiety, psychological stress, and emotional disturbances in both clinical and nonclinical samples of children and adolescents. In our study, we also saw significant improvements in peer relationships the more time girls spent in sport, a finding we did not observe for other activities. See Figures 15–16 on page 27 in the full report.

6. **Lack of access remains a hurdle for many girls.** Data in the current study show an ongoing trend of inequity in access to sport, particularly for girls with intersectional identities of groups that have been historically marginalized in both sport and society. Girls who identify as White were significantly more likely to be sport participants than not (57% vs. 44%), whereas girls who identify as Black (11% vs. 17%), Hispanic (23% vs. 27%), or other races (8% vs. 12%) were significantly less likely to be sport participants. Girls also were significantly more likely to be sport participants if their reported household income was over \$100,000 annually and significantly less likely to be sport participants if their annual household income was less than \$50,000. Girls with disabilities were significantly less likely to be sport participants (4% of sport participants reported a disability vs. 11% of non-sport participants), as were girls who identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community (6% of sport participants identified as LGBTQ+ vs. 12% of non-sport participants). See Figure 73 on page 50 in the full report.
7. **Girls from all backgrounds benefit.** There is a clear positive connection between girls' sport participation and positive mental health outcomes across race, family income, parent education, sexual identity, and disability status. Thus, when girls are able to access sport, there is a clear positive connection between girls' sport participation and positive mental health outcomes with data in the current study showing those outcomes consistent across race, family income, parent education, sexual identity, and disability status.
8. **Coaches play a vital role in optimizing mental health.** Coaches who create a high-quality environment, are supportive, and foster team cohesion, can have a significant impact on the mental health of girls. Our data showed that fostering a motivational climate that took the focus away from winning, comparing athletes against each other, and focusing on the athletes with the most skill, had the most substantial benefits for mental health. See Figures 39 and 41 on pages 35 and 36 in the full report.
9. **Relationships with the coach matter.** In the current study, all mental health outcomes were affected by the coach-athlete relationship in girls' primary sport. For girls reporting low or medium levels of positive relationships with their coaches, depression and anxiety scores were similar or worse than those of non-sport participants. However, those reporting high levels of coach relationships have significantly lower depression scores and anxiety scores than all other participants. Our data show that only 13.4% of girls in the high coach relationship group were categorized in the moderate-to-high depression group, which is significantly lower than the 28.9% of girls with moderate-to-high depression scores in the medium coach relationship group. Similarly, only 8.9% of girls in the high coach relationship group were categorized in the moderate-to-high anxiety group, compared with 21.9% and 20.8% of girls in the medium and low coach relationship groups respectively. See Figure 67 on page 46 in the full report.
10. **Sport sampling versus specialization leads to significantly better mental health outcomes.** While we did not find difference in mental health outcomes based on type of sport (i.e., team vs. individual), the competition level in sport (i.e., recreational vs. competitive), or the contact level (i.e., non-contact vs. contact), we did find that girls who participated in multiple sports reported significantly better outcomes for depression, anxiety, peer relationships, and meaning and purpose (see Figure 28 on page 32 in the full report). In addition, data we analyzed from the ABCD study showed rate of clinical depression was 3.3 times lower for girls who participated in at least two sports than for those who did not participate in sport (1.1% vs. 3.6%). Similar decreases existed for clinical levels of somatic complaints (2.5% vs. 4.1%; 1.6 times lower), social problems (1.2% vs. 2.2%, 1.8 times lower), thought problems (2.4% vs. 4.9%, 2 times lower), aggressive behavior (1.2% vs. 3.3%, 2.8 times lower), ADHD symptoms (1.9% vs. 3.9%, 2 times lower), and conduct problems (1.8% vs. 5.0%, 2.8 times lower) when comparing girls who play two or more sports to girls who do not participate in sport.
11. **Long-term engagement in sport matters for mental health.** While the type of sport may not determine girls' mental health, playing individual and/or team sport(s) over a longer period of years can contribute to positive mental health benefits. Data analyzed from the ABCD study showed a clear trend that longer engagement in sport led to reduced mental health disorders for girls, with the largest decreases in clinical mental health issues for girls participating in sport for at least five years.



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When compared to non-sport participants, girls playing for five years or more were 5 times less likely to have clinical levels of conduct problems (1.0% vs. 5.0%); 4.7 times less likely to have aggressive behavior problems (0.7% vs. 3.3%); 3.6 times less likely to be clinically depressed (1.0% vs. 3.6%); 2.8 times less likely to have clinical levels of ADHD symptoms (1.4% vs. 3.9%); 2.4 times less likely to have clinical levels of thought problems (2.0% vs. 4.9%); 2.4 times less likely to have somatic complaints (1.7% vs. 4.0%); and 1.8 times less likely to have clinical levels of attention problems (1.8% vs. 3.3%). See Figure 5 on page 19.

- 12. For girls with disabilities, among the many benefits sport provides is an increased level of meaning and purpose.** In the current study, girls with disabilities reported lower levels of sport participation and worse mental health outcomes than the general study population. However, girls with disabilities who participate in sport reported lower levels of depression and anxiety and higher levels of peer relationships and meaning and purpose than girls with disabilities who have never played sport. Data in the current study showed that the largest gains for girls with disabilities were for a sense of meaning and purpose. See Figure 78 on page 52.

- 13. Girls who play sport are more involved in other activities.** Sport participation is a driver of youth engagement more broadly. Those who play sport also are more likely to participate in other clubs/activities than those who don't play sport. Our data show that current sport participants are significantly more likely than non-sport participants to participate in school clubs (40.4% vs. 25.9%), music (34.6% vs. 29.0%), community service (34.5% vs. 21.4%), religious activities (28.0% vs. 17.8%), and academic enrichment activities (22.6% vs. 15.3%). Thus, sport may provide a positive reinforcement loop, which motivates young people to be involved in other positive developmental activities, thereby amplifying the overall benefit from sport. See Figure 27 on page 31.



Policy and Practice Recommendations

Coaches

1. Establish physical and emotional safety from day one. Create team expectations and invite athlete input on what should be expected and how everyone should treat one another.
2. Create a positive, safe, and fun environment that builds strong connections between coach and athletes, as well as among the athletes. Create an environment where each individual athlete feels valued and a sense of belonging.
3. Create an environment that focuses on the whole person, rather than just the athlete. Demonstrate care beyond just their athletic abilities.
4. Build community outside of the athletic environment and tap into other key figures in athletes' lives, such as parents, caregivers, teachers, and mentors.
5. Ask girls what their goals are with sport. Find out what they want from the experience and what motivates them.
6. Listen to athletes' concerns and ideas. Invite input. Ask athletes what they like and what can improve. Let them lead, not just follow.
7. Model empathy. Be aware of your own biases and assumptions. Create space for athletes to share their feelings without judgment.
8. Let improvement and effort drive the culture. Ensure you are highlighting the small wins that happen every day, not just the outcomes of competition. Instead of comparisons with other athletes, encourage individual progress over time and collaborative activities in which the athletes work together to achieve success.
9. Encourage risk taking and treat mistakes as opportunities to learn, as opposed to failures.
10. Seek out ongoing learning opportunities. Creating an environment that prioritizes mental health requires ongoing development of skills and adaptation to cultural and environmental situations rather than the one-time learning of a skill set.



Coach Training

1. Train coaches in cultural proficiency and sensitivity to create a welcoming and supportive environment for athletes from diverse backgrounds. Reinforce the benefits of how a culturally responsive positive youth sport experience can contribute to mental health.
2. Mandate that all coaches receive training on creating a sport environment that helps kids thrive physically and promotes positive mental health outcomes. Design and/or prioritize coach training that focuses on promoting autonomy, mastery, positive relationships, and psychological and physical safety.
 - a. In places where limited mandates for coach training exist (often school-based sports at the state level), add these trainings to current requirements.
 - b. In places where no mandates exist (most sport environments, including parks and recreation, community clubs and travel sports), work to implement this requirement in a way that meets the unique needs of the coaching population.
 - c. In places where there are extensive coach training systems and requirements (often sports-based youth development organizations), encourage programs to track and incentivize these trainings through a centralized system.

As examples, provided below are several training programs that local districts can adopt for mandated training on mental health in sport:

- i. Positive Coaching Alliance: “Coaching with Empathy,” “Developing Competitors through Positive Coaching”
 - ii. National Federation of High School Sports: “Sportsmanship,” “Bullying, Hazing, and Inappropriate Behavior,” and “Implicit Bias”
 - iii. The Center for Healing and Justice through Sport: “Sports-Based Youth Development,” “Trauma Informed Sport,” “Girls in Sport”
3. Institutionalize a system for tracking the credentials of youth coaches such that: 1) it is easy for a coach to share the trainings that they have completed; 2) it is easy to update a coach’s background; and 3) parents know how much training their child’s coach has received and what is mandatory. Ensure that a tracking/credentialing system has the option to publicly revoke credentials of coaches who do not meet standards.
 4. Incentivize schools and community-based organizations to ensure their coaches receive training. Consider a reward system for coaches that consistently provides high-quality sport environments for youth. Include the quality of the sport environment as part of a coach’s core evaluation and success metrics.



5. Explore resources to expand successful coach training programs and consider compensating coaches for any required additional training. Since many coaches currently work on stipend pay, it’s essential to acknowledge the added time and effort required for additional certifications and training.
6. Incentivize coaches to participate in on-going training and professional development through which they continue to hone their skills, learn and develop new strategies, and expand their understanding of how to support athletes’ mental health.

Physical/Mental Health Practitioners

1. Encourage sport participation in supportive settings (i.e., programs that prioritize personal development as well as sport skills) as a means to promote positive mental health and thriving among all young people.
2. Learn more about the neurobiological mechanisms behind autonomy, mastery, and psychological safety in sport through certification programs like the Neurosequential Model in Sport.
3. Build on the success of ExerciseRX from the Sports Institute at the University of Washington, a platform that allows medical providers to track a patient’s physical activity levels and customize a program that will promote the development of positive habits that contribute to that patient’s physical and mental health.
4. Educate families about the broader purposes of sport beyond performance and competition to include and prioritize holistic development, mental health, and overall well-being.

5. Provide parents with insights and strategies they can apply at home to ensure a positive sport experience for their children.

Educators

1. Advocate for training across school personnel about the benefits of sport for mental health and consider incorporating more physical activity into classroom learning.
2. Advocate for more opportunities for young people to engage in positive sport experiences and call out when those experiences are not present in your school environment.
3. Ensure that other extra-curricular activities promote autonomy, mastery, and physical and psychological safety, which contribute to positive mental health outcomes.
4. Support the expansion of educator training programs, including at the university level, to include the power of sport as a tool to promote positive mental health. Look for ways to integrate more sport opportunities as part of the overall curriculum.
5. Advocate that PE teachers receive additional training on the connection between sport and mental health.

Family

1. Engage in conversations with children to find out their sport preferences, discuss available choices, and empower them to explore various sports.
2. Steer clear of sport specialization. The more sports your child engages in and the longer they participate, the greater the mental health benefits.
3. Encourage participation in sport settings that prioritize holistic development, well-being, and overall enjoyment of sports.
4. Seek environments that prioritize a supportive culture over an exclusively competitive one: emphasize goal setting, feature supportive coaches, and promote team dynamics even in individual sports.
5. Actively listen to your children. When they consistently voice concerns about a coach, it's crucial to recognize that coach relationships significantly impact mental health outcomes. Don't feel compelled to stick with a coach just because they claim to be the sole option in your school/community. Remember, there are always alternatives, and no child should have to endure the risk of compromised mental health for the sake of playing under a particular coach.
6. If you are able, volunteer to be a coach or assistant coach. A caring adult who prioritizes mental health can have a positive effect on the overall sport environment. Modeling a positive sport culture alongside coaches and other parents can have a big impact.

National, State and Local Advocacy

National Level

1. Advocate for awareness, education, and compliance with Title IX to ensure all girls benefit. Title IX legislation, which was passed in 1972, has been a catalyst for gender equity in sport. It was established to rectify deep-seated gender disparities and discrimination, granting girls and women equal access to sport in American educational institutions. Despite substantial progress, disparities still persist in sport, disproportionately affecting girls of color, LGBTQ+ youth, low-income girls, and those with disabilities. This report aligns with existing literature, which highlights the disparities in equitable sport access for girls from marginalized communities.
2. Recognize how the intersection of race, gender, and other marginalized identities impacts access disparities in sport; and prioritize equity for all:
 - a. Advocate for the modification of the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) to include race-specific data on sport participation. Expanding the collection of athletic participation data to encompass not only gender, but also gender broken down by race and ethnicity, acknowledges the importance of intersectionality. A notable example of this approach is found in D.C. Council Code, Chapter 8C, titled "Title IX Athletic Equity." This chapter mandates that all D.C. public and charter schools report their data, considering factors such as race, ethnicity, and financial decisions. Given recent research highlighting the invisibility of marginalized girls in Title IX implementation, adopting this comprehensive approach should become the standard practice for all school districts.



- b. Advocate for the passage of the Fair Play for Women Act by the U.S. Congress, a crucial step in ensuring that all student-athletes have the same opportunities to participate and compete. The Act also would ensure transparency and public reporting of data by K-12 and college athletic programs, hold athletic programs and athletic associations more accountable for Title IX violations and discriminatory treatment, and improve education and awareness of Title IX rights among college and K-12 athletes as well as athletics staff.

State Level

- 1. Educate state legislators on the role that sport participation plays in promoting positive mental health. Legislators have a pivotal role in both implementing essential policies and allocating funding for initiatives aimed at supporting these crucial objectives.
- 2. Emphasize, as a priority, the distribution of resources to underrepresented and low-income areas, addressing the disparities in sport participation and the associated mental health benefits.
- 3. Promote strong state-level oversight of gender equity in school districts, urging the state's Department of Education to proactively investigate and enforce fair practices. It's essential to recognize that inequities in access to sport

create inherent inequities in resources linked to positive mental health.

- 4. Champion the creation of more opportunities in sport for female athletes at the secondary school level within your state.
- 5. Advocate for an intersectional approach when it comes to ensuring sport access for girls.
 - a. As there is currently no federal mandate for data reporting at the secondary school level, it is essential for community members to actively advocate for state legislatures to enact legislation mandating transparency in athletic equity practices, considering factors such as sex, race, and ethnicity. D.C. Council Code, Chapter 8C, titled "Title IX Athletic Equity," can serve as a valuable model to present to the local state legislature for consideration.
 - b. Create incentives for the development of community-based sport programs that specifically address the lower participation rates of girls who identify as Black, Hispanic, or other races, as highlighted in the report. These data show a significant gap in sport participation between these groups and their White counterparts.
 - c. State initiatives might include grants for community sport programs that focus on marginalized/



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underrepresented groups, funding for schools and local organizations to establish culturally relevant sport programs, or partnerships with community groups to develop initiatives that specifically engage and support girls of color in sport.

6. Reach out to your state's high school athletic association to:
 - a. Advocate for policies that ensure equitable access and opportunities in sports for female student-athletes, with a focus on inclusivity of those from marginalized backgrounds.
 - b. Encourage the adoption or expansion of unified sport programs within state athletic associations to foster inclusivity in interscholastic sports. Unified sport integrates students with and without intellectual disabilities onto the same team, promoting teamwork, camaraderie, and mutual respect. In states where unified sport programs are absent, advocate for their establishment to ensure that students with disabilities have equitable opportunities for athletic participation. For states already offering unified sport, advocate for further expansion to include interscholastic sport opportunities specifically tailored for students with physical disabilities, thereby promoting inclusivity across a broader spectrum of abilities.
 - c. Ensure diligent oversight of Title IX compliance and gender equity metrics within member schools. Seek information regarding their annual equity reports to ascertain if girls receive equal access to sport, thus enabling them to access the significant mental health benefits associated with sport participation.

Local Level

1. Advocate for equitable treatment in interscholastic athletics. Reach out to local administrators to emphasize community concerns about decision-making in sport programs.
2. Advocate for transparency in the allocation of financial resources for sport opportunities, ensuring equity from both gender and intersectionality perspectives. This includes advocating for the expansion and implementation of sport programs tailored for students with disabilities. If your local school district does not currently offer unified sport and/or adaptive sport, this presents a prime opportunity to engage policymakers and advocate for the inclusion of such programs, promoting inclusivity and equal access to sport for all students.
3. Encourage local policymakers to expand girls' access to sport opportunities, driven by the report's findings that establish a direct link between sport participation and positive mental health outcomes.
4. Recommend the use of interest surveys to gauge young girls' sport preferences and ensure that these preferences are met with corresponding offerings in their community. If



certain sports are missing, advocate for their introduction to provide comprehensive options.

5. Encourage and facilitate direct input from low-income and marginalized communities, focusing on girls who are underrepresented in sport, such as those of color, with low incomes, and with disabilities.
6. Advocate for policies that drive increased parent and caregiver engagement in their children's sports activities. This involves creating inclusive, accessible opportunities for parents to support their children's sport participation and fostering a community that values parental involvement.
7. Build and strengthen partnerships with local leaders and organizations in low-income communities to support increased sport participation.
8. Establish community sport advisory committees with diverse community representation to ensure sport facilities meet the unique needs of all community members, focusing on accessibility and cultural relevance.
9. Suggest yearly evaluation via surveys, interviews, etc., to regularly assess sport programs for their effectiveness in addressing equity, and refine policies based on community feedback, ensuring that these programs effectively serve marginalized communities, continue to be accessible and meet community needs.
10. Advocate for compliance with state regulations for physical education programs across all school districts. Given that access remains a significant barrier to sport participation, it's imperative for schools to provide opportunities within their physical education departments. This entails ensuring adherence to state mandates by local school districts and securing additional funding to enhance sport opportunities in both secondary and elementary schools. By prioritizing compliance and allocating resources effectively,



policymakers can promote equitable access to sport and physical activity for all students.

Future Research

This report outlines many possible avenues for future research on public policy, the conditions of equality and participation, and the impact of mental health. Examples include:

1. Explore further the impact of specific sport environments on the mental health of girls, aiming to uncover whether distinct settings yield varying mental health outcomes. These specific sport environments encompass secondary school settings, youth organizations, as well as competitive academy or club programs.
2. Conduct targeted research on the characteristics of performance- vs. mastery-driven youth sport climates, including their prevalence and key features. Explore where these differing environments exist and their impact on athletes.
3. Conduct focused research to explore the impact of a coach's gender on the mental health outcomes of female athletes. The national underrepresentation of women in coaching positions is a persistent issue, and the majority of female athletes may go through their entire sporting careers without ever being coached by a woman. There is an urgent need for research to investigate the effects of this lack of representation on young female athletes and their mental health.
4. Conduct targeted research within highly competitive sport environments, where winning is of utmost importance, with a specific focus on strategies to enhance the mental health outcomes of female athletes in these sport environments.
5. Conduct research pertaining to K-12 girl athletes, encompassing challenges related to equity, sport access, and mental health, with a particular emphasis on BIPOC girls, girls with disabilities, and those in low-income communities.
6. Conduct research to determine the most effective methods for educating coaches, athletic directors, family members, and athletes about the findings and implications of this report regarding mental health in sport.

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