# Left on the Sidelines: A Social Work Commentary on Sports Access Disparities Among Adolescent Girls

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*Despite Title IX's five-decade legacy, adolescent girls in the United States continue to face significant disparities in access to school-based sports programs. This commentary examines the structural, economic, and racial barriers—including the enduring role of structural racism—that sustain these gaps and their consequences for the academic achievement, mental health, and long-term development of girls ages 13–18. Evidence indicates that girls excluded from sports face elevated rates of depression and anxiety, lower academic performance, and diminished long-term outcomes. Critically, these gaps reflect structural exclusion rather than a lack of interest: girls are pushed off the sidelines by policy failures, economic gatekeeping, and resource inequities rooted in histories of residential and economic segregation—barriers that fall hardest on girls from low-income and racially minoritized communities. A three-component framework integrating standardized equity assessment, community sports access hubs, and peer mentorship is proposed, grounded in ecological systems theory and empowerment frameworks. Distinct from public health, education, and sport management, social work's person-in-environment orientation positions the profession to both intervene across systems and anchor the interdisciplinary collaboration these disparities demand. Implications for social work advocacy, policy reform, and community-based practice are discussed.*

*Keywords: sports access, adolescent girls, Title IX, gender equity, social work, pay-to-play, mental health, athletic identity, structural racism*

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# Introduction

In American schools today, adolescent girls face a persistent crisis of opportunity. Despite more than fifty years of Title IX protections, girls still have 1.13 million fewer opportunities to participate in school sports than boys, representing 49% of high school enrollment but only 43% of athletic participants (National Federation of State High School Associations [NFHS], 2023). This disparity is not a residual artifact of history—it is a present-day structural inequity with measurable consequences for health, academic achievement, and life outcomes. The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics calls on practitioners to pursue social justice, challenge social conditions that create barriers to human well-being, and advocate for vulnerable populations (NASW, 2021). By that standard, equitable sports access for adolescent girls is not peripheral to our profession's mission; it is central to it. Gill (2008) argued nearly two decades ago that social work had both the ethical mandate and the skill set to address mental health needs in athletic communities—yet the profession has been slow to answer that call. The sports access crisis facing adolescent girls is precisely the kind of structural, intersectional injustice social work is uniquely equipped to address.

The evidence connecting sports participation to positive youth development is substantial. Female athletes maintain grade point averages 0.4 points higher than non-athletes, demonstrate 15% higher attendance rates, and are 28% more likely to attend college than their non-athletic peers (Yeung, 2022; Dudley et al., 1997). The mental health implications are equally significant. Adolescent girls who do not participate in sports report 2.5 times higher rates of depression symptoms and 1.8 times higher rates of anxiety compared to their athletic peers (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024). These figures take on greater urgency in a context where more than half of teenage girls report persistent sadness or hopelessness—an increase that has continued over the past decade despite modest improvement from 2021 to 2023 (CDC, 2024). When viewed through a social work lens, sports participation functions as a protective factor and a social determinant of health—one that millions of girls are systematically denied.

# Structural Barriers to Equitable Sports Access

## Title IX Enforcement Failures

Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments represented a landmark shift in girls' access to school sports, growing female high school athletic participation from fewer than 300,000 to more than 3.4 million (Women's Sports Foundation, 2020). Yet enforcement has remained inconsistent and often inadequate. Over 80% of schools have been found out of compliance with at least one major Title IX requirement between 2002 and 2018, yet enforcement actions were taken against fewer than 10% of those institutions (Staurowsky et al., 2020). The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has documented persistent resource disparities, including cases where boys' baseball teams play on high-quality turf fields while girls' softball teams use poorly maintained grass fields with drainage problems, inadequate fencing, and insufficient lighting (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

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A critical breakdown occurs at the administrative level. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that 51% of athletics administrators either were unaware of or unsupported by their Title IX coordinator, with 40% reporting they were entirely unaware of who their coordinator was (GAO, 2018). This systemic disconnect between those responsible for enforcing Title IX and those administering athletic programs undermines the law's intent from the inside out. At the collegiate level, the picture is similarly troubling: women's athletic participation lags 14 percentage points behind their enrollment rates, 63% of colleges show significant participation gaps, and 40% of colleges have maintained or reduced varsity sports opportunities for women compared to a decade earlier (GAO, 2024).

**Economic Barriers and the Pay-to-Play Problem**

The commercialization of youth sports has compounded disparities in access. Youth sports have become a $15 billion industry dominated by private clubs, with 63% of parents paying $1,200 to $6,000 per year for their children's participation and nearly one in five paying more than $12,000 annually (Pandya, 2021). The shift from school-based, seasonal sport to club-based, year-round models has created a pay-to-play system that disproportionately excludes low-income families and communities of color, with participation rates highest among White males and increasing directly with household income (Pandya, 2021). This is a structural exclusion problem, not an interest problem—research consistently shows that interest in sports among girls from low-income communities is not lower, but access is (Sabo & Veliz, 2008).

Within public schools, pay-to-play fee policies have proliferated as budgets have tightened. National poll data indicate that only 30% of lower-income families report having a teen playing school sports, compared to 51% of higher-income families, with average school participation fees of $161 per sport, rising to over $408 when equipment, travel, and other costs are included (C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, 2019). Federal poverty data reveal an even starker picture: sports participation stands at just 31.2% among children below the federal poverty level, compared to 70.2% among those at 400% or more of that level—a gap of nearly 40 percentage points (Black et al., 2022). When families face financial constraints, research shows they are more likely to prioritize sons' sports participation over daughters', deepening the gender divide (GAO, 2017).

The economic barriers do not operate in isolation. Sabo and Veliz (2008) documented that economic disparities are among the most consistent predictors of sports participation gaps, with children from lower-income communities—particularly girls of color—facing the most constrained athletic opportunities. These structural conditions create a compounding disadvantage in which girls who would benefit most from sports participation are the least likely to access it.

**Intersecting Disparities: Race, Gender, and Access**

Sports access disparities do not affect all girls equally, and the gaps reflect structural exclusion operating across intersecting systems rather than differential interest or motivation. National health data reveal that non-Hispanic White children participate in sports at a rate of 60.4%, compared to 42.1% for non-Hispanic Black children and 46.9% for Hispanic children

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(Black et al., 2022). At the school level, girls attending high schools where the majority of students are Black and/or Hispanic have only 67% of the athletic opportunities that their male peers have, compared to 82% at predominantly white schools (Staurowsky et al., 2020). Girls of color are more likely than their white peers to rely on school-based sports as their primary avenue for athletic participation, making school-level access failures especially consequential for this population (National Women's Law Center, 2022).

The Aspen Institute's Project Play (2023) data reveal a troubling trend reversal: in 2013, 45% of Black children played sports—actually a higher rate than white peers—yet by 2023 that figure had fallen to 35%, a decade-long decline that coincides precisely with the privatization of youth sport. For girls of color, the compounding weight of gender, racial, and economic barriers is particularly acute. When sport is perceived as a pathway to economic mobility, involuntary exclusion carries implications extending beyond individual opportunity to family and community expectations—yet culturally adapted approaches to addressing these structural barriers remain largely absent from both research and practice (Edison et al., 2021). Sabo and Veliz (2008) observed that girls of color across all income levels had lower sports participation rates than their male counterparts, with the gap widest in urban communities where school athletic programs are most underfunded and club-based alternatives are least accessible.

Naming these patterns matters. The disparities above are not byproducts of neutral market forces but the contemporary expression of structural racism. Historic racial segregation shaped the residential and economic geographies that still determine school-district wealth, and because athletic resources track local property values, girls in racially minoritized districts inherit diminished access to safe facilities, equipment, and programming as a direct legacy of that segregation (Noel-London et al., 2024). When youth sport was privatized, it did not create inequity anew - it reinforced an existing racial hierarchy of access behind the seemingly race-neutral logic of fees. For girls of color, this history compounds with gender: they are the group most dependent on school-based sport (National Women's Law Center, 2022) yet attend the schools least equipped to provide it (Staurowsky et al., 2020).

## Mental Health and Long-Term Developmental Outcomes

The mental health consequences of sports exclusion are significant and well-documented, and social workers are often the first professionals to encounter them. Girls presenting in school-based or community mental health settings with depression, anxiety, social isolation, and poor body image may be experiencing—among other contributing factors—the downstream effects of systematic exclusion from athletic participation and the developmental benefits it provides. Regular team sports participation has been shown to reduce anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation among female adolescents (Jewett et al., 2022), while social connections formed through athletics create a sense of belonging that buffers against isolation. This protective function is particularly relevant given that female students are consistently less likely than male students to feel close to people at school, reflecting a gender gap in school connectedness that sports participation has been shown to reduce (CDC, 2024). In 2023, more than 1 in 4 adolescent girls seriously considered suicide—a trend that has worsened over the past decade—with sports participation emerging as a vital protective intervention against social isolation, academic pressure, and harmful social media comparisons (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023).

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The adolescent years represent a critical window for intervention. Athletic identity increases most significantly between ages 10 and 15 before stabilizing, meaning that the developmental period in which girls are most actively forming their sense of self is also the period during which disparities in sports access do their most consequential damage (Stambulova, 2017). When girls are excluded from sport during these years - whether by economic barriers, inadequate school programs, or enforcement failures - they lose not only the immediate benefits of participation but the identity, confidence, and social scaffolding that athletic involvement builds during a developmentally critical window. Sports participation also supports positive body image; female athletes are more likely than non-athletes to value bodily functionality over appearance, a finding associated with greater overall psychological well-being (Zaccagni & Gualdi-Russo, 2023).

The long-term benefits extend well beyond adolescence. Female athletes are 60% more likely to maintain physical activity into adulthood, with sustained health advantages including lower rates of heart disease, diabetes, and osteoporosis (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2022). Professionally, 94% of women in executive positions report having athletic backgrounds (Women's Sports Foundation, 2020), and women with athletic histories earn an average of 7% higher wages, even when controlling for educational attainment (Kay, 2009). These outcomes are not incidental - they reflect the sustained developmental benefits of early athletic participation, and they are disproportionately inaccessible to girls from low-income and minoritized communities.

## A Social Work Imperative: Toward Equitable Sports Access

Addressing sports access disparities requires intervention at multiple system levels—a framework directly aligned with social work's theoretical traditions. Ecological systems theory illuminates how barriers at every level of a girl's environment—from family financial constraints at the microsystem level, to under-resourced schools at the exosystem level, to federal enforcement failures at the macrosystem level—combine to produce and sustain inequitable outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Empowerment theory complements this framework by centering girls as active agents rather than passive recipients of intervention, recognizing that structural change must be paired with the development of individual confidence, voice, and leadership capacity. Social work's person-in-environment perspective is particularly well-suited to this work: the profession's capacity to assess and intervene simultaneously across individual, family, organizational, and community systems addresses the multisystemic nature of sports access disparities in ways that single-discipline approaches cannot (Gill, 2008).

This distinctiveness is worth stating plainly. Sports access disparities sit at the intersection of several fields, each holding only a partial view: public health sees population-level risk, education sees academic outcomes, sport management sees program economics. None, however, is organized around moving between a struggling individual girl and the systems that shape her circumstances. Social work is. Its person-in-environment orientation and ethical mandate to challenge injustice (NASW, 2021) position social workers not as one more discipline at the table, but as the profession equipped to translate structural analysis into individual advocacy and back again.

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That same orientation makes social work well suited to anchor the collaboration these disparities demand. Complex social problems are rarely solved within a single field, and scholars have called on social work to move beyond participating in interprofessional teams toward operating at the highest level of them (Callahan & Higgins, 2023). Sports access inequity is precisely such a problem: no health system, school, or athletic organization can resolve it alone. Social work's history of brokering across families, schools, and health systems makes it a natural convener for this work. The profession has long had both the mandate and the tools - what is needed now is the will to act.

Three interconnected approaches warrant prioritization. First, schools need standardized assessment tools—such as a Sports Equity Assessment Tool (SEAT) - that proactively identify inequities in resource allocation rather than relying on complaint-driven enforcement systems (Cooky & Messner, 2018). Such tools would shift the compliance burden away from individual families and toward institutional accountability, enabling schools to identify and address disparities before they harden into structural norms. Second, community sports access hubs in underserved areas can address multiple barriers simultaneously through transportation assistance, equipment libraries, sliding-scale fees, and culturally responsive programming. Programs addressing multiple barriers concurrently—rather than targeting isolated obstacles—have consistently demonstrated stronger outcomes for marginalized populations (Sabo & Veliz, 2008). Third, peer athletic mentorship programs that connect high school athletes with middle school girls leverage peer influence during the precise developmental window—ages 10 to 15—when athletic identity is forming most rapidly, and intervention is most likely to shape participation trajectories (Stambulova, 2017). Research indicates that having athletic peers increases the likelihood of sports participation by 22%, making peer-based approaches a cost-effective and developmentally resonant strategy (Jewett et al., 2022).

School social workers are uniquely positioned to operationalize these approaches at the practice level. In schools, they can serve as advocates for equitable resource allocation, Title IX compliance monitoring, and early identification of students at risk of disengagement from sport following transition events such as team cuts or program eliminations. In communities, social workers can facilitate partnerships between schools, nonprofits, and health systems that expand access for underserved girls. At the policy level, the profession can advance legislative advocacy for fully funded school athletic programs and enforcement mechanisms with real accountability. The U.S. Surgeon General's recognition of youth mental health as a national crisis (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023) provides a timely and compelling opening to reframe sports access as both a public health and social justice priority. Social work answered this call-in clinical settings decades ago—it is time to answer it on the field as well.

## Conclusion

The evidence is unambiguous: equitable access to sports is not a luxury but a necessity for adolescent girls' health, academic success, and long-term well-being. The girls who are left on the sidelines are not there by choice. They are there because of inadequate Title IX enforcement, economic gatekeeping through pay-to-play policies, underfunded school programs, and racial and economic inequities that compound one another at every system level. These are not inevitable conditions - they are the products of policy choices, institutional failures, and

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resource allocation decisions that can be changed. From the micro-level interventions of peer mentorship and school-based advocacy to the macro-level imperatives of policy reform and Title IX enforcement, social work has both the tools and the professional mandate to act. The NASW Code of Ethics calls us to challenge injustice wherever it appears—and when millions of girls are systematically denied access to the developmental benefits of sports, injustice is exactly what we are witnessing. It is time the profession treated it with the urgency it deserves.

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