

# Clinical Practice in Pediatric Psychology

## Participation in Organized Physical Activity and Discomfort with Locker Rooms Among Youth Across Sexual, Gender, and Racial Identities

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## BRIEF REPORT

Participation in Organized Physical Activity and Discomfort  
with Locker Rooms Among Youth Across Sexual, Gender, and  
Racial IdentitiesBenjamin Parchem<sup>1</sup>, Jonathan Poquiz<sup>1</sup>, Ryan L. Rahm-Knigge<sup>1</sup>, Elizabeth Panetta<sup>1</sup>,  
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**Objective:** Participation in organized physical activity contributes to well-being and positive youth development. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender diverse, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) youth, across racial identities, experience barriers to organized physical activity, including discomfort with locker rooms. The current quantitative analysis expands existing qualitative evidence to understand the relation between discomfort with locker rooms and participation in organized physical activity among youth across diverse sexual, gender, and racial identities. **Method:** High school students ( $N = 13,469$ ) in the Midwestern United States completed questions about physical activity and discomfort with locker rooms. Independent sample  $t$  tests assessed differences in mean participation in organized physical activity by discomfort with locker rooms across LGBTQ+ and racial identities. **Results:** LGBTQ+ youth endorsed half the participation and eight times the discomfort with locker rooms as cisgender/heterosexual peers. Discomfort with locker rooms was less impactful for LGBTQ+ youth of color than white LGBTQ+ youth. Locker rooms were also less of a concern for white LGBTQ+ youth who were active in organized physical activity relative to white LGBTQ+ youth who were not active in organized physical activity. **Conclusions:** Locker rooms may be a larger barrier to any engagement in organized physical activity rather than frequency of activity, and strategies to promote engagement must consider the intersection of LGBTQ+ and racial identities. Pediatric psychologists can intervene through supporting youth's problem-solving and self-advocacy skills while also advocating directly with schools and community spaces for the restructuring of the binary nature of gendered locker rooms to be more accessible and inclusive for youth with diverse identities.

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**Implications for Impact Statement**

Feeling uncomfortable in locker rooms is a frequently endorsed barrier to engaging in any organized physical activity among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender diverse, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) youth, who participate at rates nearly half that of their cisgender/heterosexual peers. Pediatric psychologists can help support LGBTQ+ youth explore strategies to navigate binary locker rooms through developing problem-solving skills and self-advocacy skills. Beyond the individual level, pediatric psychologists can also play a role in advocating for restructuring the binary nature of locker rooms given the potential mental and physical health benefits of having more inclusive spaces to access organized physical activity.

*Keywords:* locker rooms, sports, physical activity, LGBTQ+, racial identity

Physical activity is an important component of wellness for youth given the many documented physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and mental health benefits (Janssen & LeBlanc, 2010; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Additionally, engagement in sports or organized physical activity can support positive youth development, such as increased connection with school and peers, improved academic performance, and successful educational and employment outcomes in adulthood (Camiré et al., 2022; Greenspan, Griffith, & Watson, 2019; Holt, 2016). However, sports and organized physical activities are not equitably accessible for all youth. In particular, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender diverse, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) youth engage in sports to a lesser degree than cisgender and heterosexual counterparts, both within and outside of the school context (Clark et al., 2021; Espinoza et al., 2023; Greenspan, Griffith, Hayes, & Murtagh, 2019; Greenspan, Griffith, & Watson, 2019; Kosciw et al., 2020; Kulick et al., 2019). While attributable to a variety of individual and systemic factors, one salient barrier for LGBTQ+ youth is the avoidance of locker rooms (Clark et al., 2021; Greenspan, Griffith, Hayes, & Murtagh, 2019; Greenspan, Griffith, & Watson, 2019; Greey, 2023; Kosciw et al., 2020; Kulick et al., 2019; Renley et al., 2022).

Locker rooms are pivotal access points to physical activity for youth, whether through school-sponsored sports teams, community-organized physical activity, physical education classes, or privatized fitness facilities. The existence of locker rooms is predicated on cisnormative and heteronormative assumptions strictly coded via the false gender binary, which is

ostracizing for LGBTQ+ individuals (Herrick & Duncan, 2020; Sausa, 2005). Many LGBTQ+ youth experience bias-based bullying, victimization and violence, surveillance or scrutiny, harassment, and social rejection in locker rooms creating a need to avoid these spaces for personal safety and well-being (Clark et al., 2021; Greenspan, Griffith, Hayes, & Murtagh, 2019; Greenspan, Griffith, & Watson, 2019; Greey, 2023; Kosciw et al., 2020; Renley et al., 2022).

Concerns related to locker rooms for LGBTQ+ youth are also intersectional, with particular safety concerns endorsed by youth of color (Kulick et al., 2019). LGBTQ+ youth of color face disproportionate rates of school discipline and bias-based bullying, which can contribute to feeling unsafe in school environments, including locker rooms (Chmielewski et al., 2016; Gower et al., 2022). Additionally, transgender and gender-diverse athletes of color disproportionately face exclusionary policies for participation in sports (Sharrow, 2021). The intersection of marginalized identities likely uniquely shapes one's comfort with locker rooms and subsequent participation in physical activity.

The existent literature on participation in physical activity and locker rooms among youth has primarily focused on qualitative approaches and does not often consider the intersection of sexual, gender, and racial identities. The current study aimed to expand the knowledge base with a quantitative approach to: (Aim 1) examine rates of participation in organized physical activity and discomfort with locker rooms across the intersection of LGBTQ+ and racial identities and (Aim 2) explore the relation between discomfort with locker rooms and participation in

organized physical activity across LGBTQ+ and racial identities.

## Method

### Data Source and Study Design

Data are from the 2015 Dane County Youth Assessment (DCYA) of high school youth (9–12th grade). The DCYA is a triennial survey of youth in 7–12th grades in an urban county in Wisconsin. Analyses focused specifically on high school youth in the 2015 wave of data collection because the variable regarding locker rooms was only included in the survey for this cohort. The survey was administered online and participation was voluntary; the original study used a passive parental consent process where caregivers could opt out of research participation for their child. The total sample included 13,905 high school youth, with 436 youth removed from analyses via listwise deletion due to missing data, resulting in an analytical sample of 13,469 students. The University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board determined the current study was "not human subjects research" because it is a secondary analysis of existing deidentified data.

### Measures

#### *Discomfort with Locker Rooms*

Youth were asked, "What things stop or limit you from exercising, either in sports, organized exercise programs or on your own?" with one response option that stated, "Uncomfortable in the locker room." There were 12 other response options that included time limitations, health problems, lack of skills, lack of interest, cost, transportation, or lack of access. This analysis focused on locker rooms given the research question; this variable was dichotomized to reflect those who endorsed discomfort with locker rooms and those who did not.

#### *Participation in Organized Physical Activity*

Youth were asked, "How many days a week do you participate in the following organized activities before or after school or on the weekend?" One activity included "Sports (school or club) and group exercise, including practice, competition, or private lessons" with response options of "Never involved in this activity," "Less than 1 day per week," "1–2 days," "3–4 days," "5 or more

days." The survey asked about four other organized activities including tutoring, the arts, leadership, religious activities, and other after-school programs. This analysis focused on sports and organized physical activity given the research question. For comparisons of means, this frequency of participation in organized physical activity was treated as continuous in analyses, a reasonable approach when the ordinal scale has five or more categories (Robitzsch, 2020; Torra et al., 2006).

#### *LGBTQ+ Identity and Racial Identity*

Youth were asked, "Which of the following best describes you?" with response options of "straight/heterosexual," "gay or lesbian," "bisexual," "questioning my sexual orientation," and "other." Youth were also asked, "Do you identify yourself as transgender?" with response options of "yes," "no," and "I don't know what transgender means." Schools in one particular school district were also asked, "What is your gender identity?" with response options of "male," "female," "neither," and "both." Given the limited framing of these questions, sexual and gender-diverse identities were collapsed into one category. Youth who reported a sexual identity other than heterosexual (i.e., "gay or lesbian," "bisexual," "questioning," or "other"), identified as transgender (i.e., "yes"), or reported a nonbinary gender identity (i.e., indicated "both" or "neither") were categorized as having an LGBTQ+ identity. The variable was dichotomized to differentiate between LGBTQ+ youth and cisgender, heterosexual youth.

Regarding racial identity, youth were asked "What is your race?" with response options of "Asian (not Hmong)," "Black or African American," "Hispanic or Latino," "Hmong," "Middle Eastern/Arab American," "Native American," "Multiracial," and "Other." Due to small sample sizes and parsimony of analyses, for comparisons with only LGBTQ+ youth, racial identity was dichotomized as white (non-Hispanic) LGBTQ+ youth and LGBTQ+ youth of color.

### Data Analysis Plan

All analyses were performed in SAS Version 9.4 (SAS Institute Inc., 2016). Aim 1 was assessed with descriptive frequencies and chi-square. Aim 2 was assessed with independent samples *t* tests to

examine differences in mean participation in organized physical activity by discomfort with locker rooms between cisgender/heterosexual and LGBTQ+ groups and between white LGBTQ+ youth and LGBTQ+ youth of color. To explore whether discomfort with locker rooms was a barrier to any participation versus frequency of participation, the differences in mean participation were also assessed between all youth compared to active youth (i.e., those who reported a participation greater than “never”). Schools in a large school district were weighted in the independent samples *t* tests to ensure representation of the entire student bodies. A Bonferroni adjusted *p* value of .01 was used for all *t* tests.

## Results

The sociodemographic characteristics of the sample and descriptive statistics for the variables of interest are displayed in Table 1. As shown in Table 2, LGBTQ+ youth (45.8%) reported participating in organized physical activity at nearly half the rate of cisgender/heterosexual youth (73.8%) and endorsed discomfort with locker rooms at nearly 8.5 times the rate of cisgender/heterosexual youth (20.3% vs. 2.4%). A higher proportion of LGBTQ+ youth of color reported participating in organized physical activity (50.5% vs. 43.3%) and endorsed discomfort with locker rooms (23.4% vs. 18.7%) than white LGBTQ+ youth.

For cisgender and heterosexual youth (Table 3), any discomfort with locker rooms was associated with a significantly lower mean participation in organized physical activity (2.16 vs. 3.31), including for those who were active (i.e., participating more than “never”) (3.60 vs. 4.18). Discomfort with locker rooms was associated with significantly lower mean participation in organized physical activity among white LGBTQ+ youth (1.53 vs. 2.25), but this pattern did not hold for white LGBTQ+ youth who were active (3.87 vs. 3.74). No significant difference in means was found for LGBTQ+ youth of color (2.23 vs. 2.44), including for those who were active in organized physical activity (3.80 vs. 3.73).

## Discussion

Consistent with previous literature, LGBTQ+ youth had a lower participation in organized physical activity than cisgender and heterosexual

**Table 1**

*Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Sample and Descriptive Statistics of Variables of Interest (N = 13,469)*

Characteristic	<i>N</i>	%
Gender identity		
Cisgender	13,275	98.6
Transgender or nonbinary <sup>a</sup>	186	1.4
Sexual identity		
Straight/heterosexual	12,149	90.2
Sexually diverse <sup>b</sup>	1,319	9.8
Racial identity		
White	10,263	76.2
Asian <sup>c</sup>	661	4.9
Black	666	4.9
Hispanic or Latino/x/a	731	5.4
Middle Eastern/Arab American	67	0.5
Native American	76	0.6
Multiracial	848	6.3
Other	157	1.2
LGBTQ+ identity		
Not LGBTQ+	12,108	89.9
LGBTQ+	1,361	10.1
White	890	65.4
Youth of color <sup>d</sup>	471	34.6
Asian <sup>c</sup>	107	7.9
Black	90	6.6
Hispanic or Latino/x/a	72	5.3
Middle Eastern/Arab American	17	1.2
Native American	18	1.3
Multiracial	124	9.1
Other	43	3.2
Discomfort with locker rooms		
Not endorsed	12,897	95.7
Endorsed	572	4.3
Participation in organized physical activity		
Never	3,905	29.0
Less than 1 day per week	816	6.1
1–2 days	1,621	12.0
3–4 days	2,276	16.9
5 or more days	3,851	36.0

*Note.* LGBTQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender diverse, and queer/questioning.

<sup>a</sup> Transgender or nonbinary includes those who self-identified as transgender or reported their gender identity as neither or both when presented with male and female options. <sup>b</sup> Sexually diverse includes those who self-identified as gay or lesbian, bisexual, questioning, or other. <sup>c</sup> Asian includes both Hmong and not Hmong identities. <sup>d</sup> Percentages reflect the proportion of LGBTQ+ youth who identify with each racial identity. Percentages are based on total *N* who responded to each question.

peers (Clark et al., 2021; Greenspan, Griffith, Hayes, & Murtagh, 2019; Greenspan, Griffith, & Watson, 2019; Kosciw et al., 2020; Kulick et al., 2019). The current study also supports previous studies indicating that LGBTQ+ youth more frequently endorse discomfort with locker rooms as a barrier to engaging in physical activity

**Table 2**  
*Participation in Organized Physical Activity and Discomfort With Locker Rooms*

Comparison	Participation in physical activity					Discomfort with locker rooms				
	None		Any		$\chi^2$	None		Any		$\chi^2$
	N	%	N	%		N	%	N	%	
<b>Between-group differences by LGBTQ+ identity</b>										
Cis/Het ( <i>N</i> = 12,108)	3,167	26.2	8,941	73.8	468.2**	11,812	97.6	296	2.4	957.0**
LGBTQ+ ( <i>N</i> = 1,361)	738	54.2	623	45.8		1,085	79.7	276	20.3	
<b>Within-group differences by racial identity</b>										
White LGBTQ+ youth ( <i>N</i> = 890)	505	56.7	285	43.3	6.6*	724	81.4	166	18.7	4.2*
LGBTQ+ youth of color ( <i>N</i> = 471)	233	49.5	238	50.5		361	76.7	110	23.4	
Total sample	3,905	29.0	9,564	71.0		12,897	95.7	572	4.3	

*Note.* Cis/Het refers to youth of any racial identity who identified as cisgender and heterosexual and LGBTQ+ refers to youth of any racial identity who identified as sexually diverse, transgender, or nonbinary. Chi-square compared proportions between cis/het and LGBTQ+ youth (of any racial identity) as well as white LGBTQ+ youth and LGBTQ+ youth of color. LGBTQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender diverse, and queer/questioning.

\* *p* < .05. \*\* *p* < .0001.

(Clark et al., 2021; Greenspan, Griffith, Hayes, & Murtagh, 2019; Greenspan, Griffith, & Watson, 2019; Greey, 2023; Kosciw et al., 2020; Renley et al., 2022). Within the group of LGBTQ+ youth, discomfort with locker rooms was associated with lower mean participation in organized physical activity for white LGBTQ+ youth but not LGBTQ+ youth of color, and not white LGBTQ+ youth who were active in physical activity.

For white LGBTQ+ youth, locker rooms may primarily be a barrier to engaging in any organized physical activity, rather than the frequency of physical activity. LGBTQ+ youth, across racial identities, who participate in organized physical activity may have greater tolerance of locker rooms, or the benefits of participation may outweigh discomfort with locker rooms. For LGBTQ+ youth of color, locker rooms may be

a less salient barrier to participation in organized physical activity relative to other structural factors (e.g., cost, transportation, availability of opportunities for organized physical activity). Importantly, over half of LGBTQ+ youth were not engaging in any organized physical activity, and while LGBTQ+ youth may engage in private physical activity to achieve the associated health benefits, the compounded benefits attributed to being on a team are less accessible—including a sense of belonging, social connection, and self-efficacy (Bruner et al., 2014; Camiré et al., 2022; Greenspan, Griffith, & Watson, 2019; Holt, 2016; Reverdito et al., 2017).

**Implications**

Locker rooms are clearly uncomfortable for many LGBTQ+ youth, across racial identities,

**Table 3**  
*Differences in Mean Participation in Organized Physical Activity by Identity and Activity Level*

	Cis/Het youth		LGBTQ+ youth		White LGBTQ+ youth		LGBTQ+ youth of color	
	All ( <i>N</i> = 12,108)	Active ( <i>N</i> = 8,941)	All ( <i>N</i> = 1,361)	Active ( <i>N</i> = 623)	All ( <i>N</i> = 890)	Active ( <i>N</i> = 385)	All ( <i>N</i> = 471)	Active ( <i>N</i> = 238)
Discomfort with locker rooms								
None	3.31	4.18	2.32	3.73	2.25	3.74	2.44	3.73
Any	2.16	3.60	1.80	3.83	1.53	3.87	2.23	3.80
<i>T</i> score	13.05*	6.79*	5.39*	-0.69	6.57*	-0.64	1.12	-0.39

*Note.* Cis/Het refers to youth who identified as cisgender and heterosexual. The “all” column includes all youth in that identity group and the “active” column includes youth who reported a participation in organized physical activity greater than “never.” LGBTQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender diverse, and queer/questioning.

\* *p* < .01.

likely contributing to decreased participation in organized physical activity. Pediatric psychologists and related health professionals have the training to support LGBTQ+ youth to explore strategies to navigate binary locker rooms such as fostering problem-solving skills or self-advocacy skills. However, individual-level interventions (e.g., a student using a gender-neutral bathroom to change), while accommodating, are also individuating and do not address the underlying problem of inequitable access to locker rooms. Interventions could instead be physically structural (e.g., creating gender-neutral locker rooms) or institutional-level by promoting inclusive and safe environments for youth with diverse identities. Pediatric psychologists and related health professionals can also play a role in advocating for policy-level change that would restructure the binary nature of locker rooms given the potential mental and physical health benefits of having more inclusive spaces to access organized physical activity. This can be challenging to achieve within the context of school systems due to the politicized discourse pertaining to restrooms and locker rooms, particularly related to transgender and gender-diverse identities (Hughes et al., 2022). However, because school systems aim to facilitate the positive development of youth, beyond intellectual and cognitive functioning, pediatric psychologists are uniquely positioned to support schools in effecting policy change that will promote the mental and physical health for all youth, but particularly marginalized youth.

### Limitations and Future Directions

The current analysis contributes important quantitative evidence to existing literature regarding the potential impact of discomfort with locker rooms on participation in organized physical activity. Due to limitations in how questions were framed in the original survey, specific identities were collapsed into dichotomous variables, which restricts the ability to detect heterogeneity among sexual, gender, and racially diverse youth. This is a particular limitation for youth of color who are often collapsed into a homogenous group in analyses due to sample size constraints. As such, over-sampling youth with minoritized racial identities should be a priority for future studies on physical activity barriers. Additionally, there are other barriers to physical activity

experienced by LGBTQ+ youth beyond discomfort with locker rooms, and future research should examine how barriers at multiple levels can influence organized physical activity participation among LGBTQ+ youth. Future analyses will want to consider other structural constructs related to locker rooms and physical activity (e.g., school environment, availability of opportunities for physical activity, sense of safety within locker rooms, salience of LGBTQ+ or racial identity). While a more contemporary dataset may be more optimal, the binary nature of locker rooms has likely not changed in the last decade, and, if anything, locker rooms have likely become even more uncomfortable for LGBTQ+ youth given the recent wave of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and legislation in the United States (ACLU, 2023).

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