

# The Healing Power of Sport: COVID-19 and Girls' Participation, Health, and Achievement

This is one of the first studies to examine ways in which sports participation among girls was impacted during the pandemic and how sport served as a protective factor against some of COVID-19's negative impacts on behavior, mental health, and academic achievement.



## During the first full year of the pandemic, teens' sport participation declined.

Teen sport participation:

76%

in 2019-20



70%

in 2021

This translates to a loss of roughly:

1 million

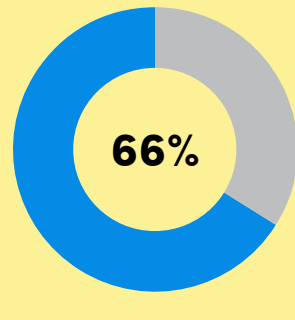
sport participants in U.S. high schools.

Even greater declines took place in the percentage of adolescents participating in two or more sports:

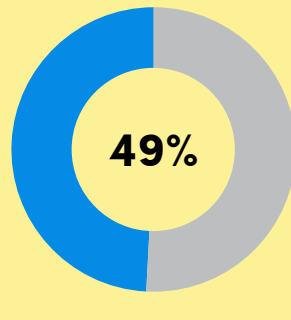
from 49% to 40%.

The greatest declines in girls' sport participation overall were among 12<sup>th</sup> graders across all regions (17 percentage points) and girls in rural communities (8 percentage points).

12<sup>th</sup>-grade girls:

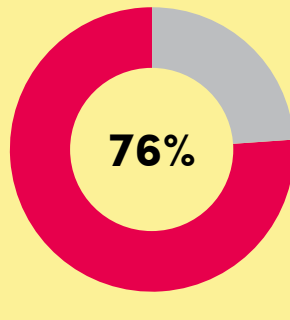


2019-20

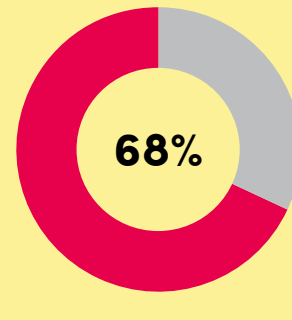


2021

Rural girls:



2019-20



2021

## COVID-19 exacerbated sport drop-out rates for girls of color.

The biggest decline among girls playing at least one sport occurred among Hispanic girls:

62% ⇒ 53%

in 2019-20

in 2021



The biggest declines among girls playing two or more sports occurred among:

Black girls:

39% ⇒ 28%

in 2019-20

in 2021

and Hispanic girls:

33% ⇒ 23%

in 2019-20

in 2021

## Sports participation was protective against the negative impacts of COVID-19.

The pandemic negatively impacted multiple markers of girls' well-being, with notable declines in physical health behaviors, mental health and academic achievement.

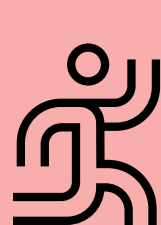
For example, among 12<sup>th</sup>-grade girls, the data shows:

- a decline in self-esteem and social support,
- an increase in depression, and
- a decline in the belief they will attend a four-year college.

Participation in sports protected against many detrimental impacts of the pandemic. Girls who played sports during the first year of the pandemic fared significantly better than those who did not.

This was especially true for those who participated in more than one sport.

12<sup>th</sup>-grade girls who played sports had:



Greater likelihood of exercising vigorously and for 60 minutes daily



Higher levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and social support

More positive self-perceptions of their academic achievement and goals



Lower levels of loneliness, self-derogation, fatalism, and depression



12<sup>th</sup>-grade girls who played sports also showed more positive achievement outcomes and higher expectations about their academic future.

12<sup>th</sup>-grade girls who participated in at least one sport were

30%

more likely to indicate an average grade of an

A/A-

than their peers who did not participate in any sport.

12<sup>th</sup>-grade girls who participated in at least one sport were

1.5x

more likely to indicate that they will definitely graduate from a four-year college than peers who did not participate in any sport.

Given the significant impact of the pandemic on today's teens, sports participation — and the support it provides — may be more important than ever before.



From: Zarrett, N., & Veliz, P. T. (2023). The Healing Power of Sport: COVID-19 and Girls' Participation, Health, and Achievement. Women's Sports Foundation.

This report used cross-sectional data from the 2019, 2020, and 2021 Monitoring the Future (MTF) study. The MTF study is an annual self-administered survey conducted with nationally representative samples of eighth-, 10<sup>th</sup>-, and 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students in U.S. secondary schools. This report compares data from the pre-pandemic period (2019 and Q1 2020) with data from the first full year of the pandemic (2021).