

KEY 2026 FINDINGS

1

Access

54% of girls ages 8–18 who’ve never played organized sports say they want to.

This year, 45% of girls played sports, compared to 52% of boys. The gap is structural, not attitudinal. Girls and boys express equal interest in playing — but girls are priced out, coached out, or never invited in. The demand exists. The access doesn’t.

2

Belonging

By high school, **1 in 3** girls doesn’t feel that sports are “for someone like her.”

At ages 8–10, 80% of both girls and boys feel like they belong in sports. But by 14–18, that number is 66% for girls vs. 73% for boys. Girls lose their sense of belonging in sports at more than twice the rate of boys across adolescence.

3

Cost

It costs **25%** more to be a girl in sports than a boy.

More than 1 in 3 parents of girls who play spends \$1,000 or more on sports-related expenses. For lower-income families, cost is the wall: 24% say it’s the main reason their daughter has never played.

4

Income & Race

31% of lower-income girls play sports versus **58%** of higher-income girls. A 27-point income gap — four times the gender gap.

46% of Black girls and 47% of Hispanic girls have never played any sport, versus 33% of white girls. The participation divide runs across both income and race, revealing disparities that the overall gender gap alone does not capture.

5

Visibility

45% of girls can’t name a single professional athlete they look up to — of any gender. Only **2%** of boys named a woman as their favorite athlete.

In the biggest year women’s professional sports have ever had, the boom hasn’t yet reached the girls it’s supposed to inspire — and it hasn’t moved boys toward women athletic heroes either.

6

Rights

79% of girls have never heard of Title IX; **55%** of parents haven’t either.

The law that protects girls’ place in sports is invisible to the girls it was built to protect. Rights you can’t name are rights you can’t claim — and the industry’s leaders name Title IX rollbacks as the single greatest threat to everything women’s sports have gained.

7

Policy

Not one of seven major policies governing women’s professional, elite, or college sports earns a passing grade from the expert panel.

Professional league collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) come closest to a passing grade, at roughly 40% effective among familiar experts. Every other policy scores lower, including Title IX enforcement itself.

8

Progress

More experts say progress toward gender equity in college sports got worse this year than better, while they agree professional sports showed significant gains for women.

Slightly more of our industry experts say that conditions for women actually went backwards than forwards this year in college. The opposite was true for professional sports, with near-unanimous agreement on improvement — many calling it significant. For elite and Olympic sports, progress was real but shallow. Just over half say it improved, but few said it was significant.

Youth data: YouGov Girls Sports Index, n=3,065 parent-child dyads ages 8–18, weighted to national targets, May–June 2026. Expert panel: WSF Expert Panel, n=60, June–July 2026, leaders across leagues, media, brands, law, NGBs, athlete representation, coaching, and academia.