Women's Sports Foundation®

WSF Sport Report™ 2026

An annual snapshot of participation, perception, and progress for girls and women in sports.



WHAT'S IN THIS REPORT

WSF Sport Report™ 2026 is the first in an annual series built from two original data sets: a nationally representative survey of more than 6,100 Americans — 3,065 children ages 8–18 and their parents — and a separate survey of 60 senior leaders across the women's sports industry. Together, they trace a single pipeline — from the 8-year-old girl deciding whether playing sports is for her to the professional athlete negotiating for fair pay. This report shows where that pipeline is under pressure and identifies the people and policies with the power to strengthen it.

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A NOTE FROM OUR CEO

For more than 50 years, the Women's Sports Foundation has championed the power of sports to transform the lives of girls and women. And after more than **100 published research reports**, the evidence is clear: when girls have the opportunity to play, the benefits can last a lifetime, contributing to better health outcomes, stronger leadership skills and greater economic mobility.

Sports don't just shape athletes. They help shape healthier, more confident and more empowered girls and women who carry the lessons they learn through sport into their classrooms, careers and communities.

But access to sports and the benefits they provide has never been equal.

That is why we are proud to introduce the **inaugural WSF Sport Report™**, a new annual body of research designed to take stock of the state of girls' and women's sports and track how that landscape changes over time. Each year, we will look across the sports pipeline to better understand where progress is being made, where barriers persist and where greater attention and action are needed.



This first report arrives at a remarkable moment. Women's sports are experiencing extraordinary growth and visibility, but we wanted to look beyond the headlines and examine the full sports pipeline, from a girl's first opportunity to play through the collegiate and professional levels. Where are we making progress? Where are girls and women still being left behind? And what will it take to build a future in which everyone has an equal opportunity to participate, compete and lead?

The findings offer both tremendous reason for optimism and a clear mandate for action.

One finding in particular gives me hope: **54% of girls ages 8–18 who have never played organized sports say they want to**. Girls are telling us clearly that the desire to play is there. Our responsibility is to make sure opportunity meets that demand.

But another finding underscores just how much work remains. More than 50 years after Title IX transformed opportunities for generations of girls and women, **79% of girls ages 8–18 say they have never heard of it, and just 3% say they know a lot about it.**

That is a powerful reminder that progress cannot be taken for granted. The opportunities girls have today were fought for, protected and expanded by generations before them. Now, it is our responsibility to build on that progress and ensure the next generation has even greater opportunities to play, compete and lead.

That is ultimately what **WSF Sport Report™** is about. It gives us a way to measure where we stand, hold ourselves accountable to where we need to go and, year after year, track whether progress is reaching girls and women at every level of sports.

We hope this report inspires action. Whether you are a parent, coach, educator, funder, policymaker, sports leader or partner in this movement, each of us has a role to play in breaking down the barriers that keep girls on the sidelines and building a stronger sports ecosystem for generations to come.

The demand is there. The talent is there. The potential is there.

Now, it is up to all of us to ensure the opportunity is there, too.



Danette Leighton
Chief Executive Officer
Women's Sports Foundation

"Girls deserve an equal chance to get in the game, the resources to stay there, a place where they know they belong, and the knowledge to stand up for their rights. We fought, and continue to fight, for Title IX because every girl deserves an equal chance to discover what sports can give her. These findings remind us that progress has to be understood, protected, and pushed forward."

— Billie Jean King, Founder and Honorary Chair of the Women's Sports Foundation

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.

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.

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.

SECTION ONE

WHO'S PLAYING — AND WHO ISN'T

Girls want in. Opportunity hasn't kept pace.

The story of girls' participation in sports doesn't begin with dropout — it begins with access. Long before many girls decide whether sports are for them, they're already navigating more barriers to participate.

This section establishes the baseline: who is playing, who has never had the chance to start, and where participation gaps widen across age, race, and income.

The Gender Gap — Girls vs. Boys

45% of girls ages 8–18 currently play organized sports. For boys, it's 52%.

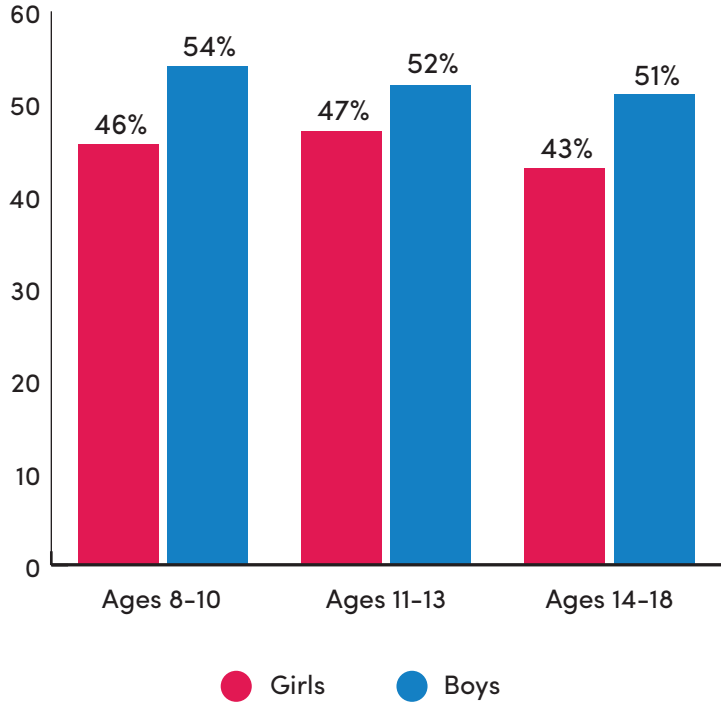
The participation gap begins earlier than many assume. Girls trail boys by eight percentage points as early as ages 8–10 (46% vs. 54%) — before puberty, before many of the social pressures often blamed for girls leaving sports, and before most competitive pathways begin to narrow. The gap persists across every age group. Girls never catch up because they don't start on an even playing field.

61% of girls have played sports at some point in their lives, but 39% have never played.

In every age band, girls are more likely than boys never to have played at all. Among ages 8–10, 44% of girls have never participated in organized sports compared with 37% of boys.

The Gap That Never Closes

Participation by Age Band — Girls vs. Boys



WHY OUR NUMBERS MAY LOOK DIFFERENT: *You may have seen higher national participation figures. Many national surveys count any child who played on a team or took a lesson at any point across varying age ranges. This report asks a different question:* ***Is this child currently participating in organized sports?*** *We've defined that as a team or individual sport with a coach, scheduled practices, or competition. By measuring sustained participation rather than occasional involvement, this report provides a clearer picture of who has a consistent place in sports today.*

The Girls Who Want In

54% of girls who've never played want to — the same rate as boys.

Girls on the sidelines are just as interested in playing as boys (54% vs. 52%) — and interest is even higher among girls of color: 61% of Hispanic girls and 58% of Black girls who've never played say they want to. The desire is just as strong; the participation isn't.

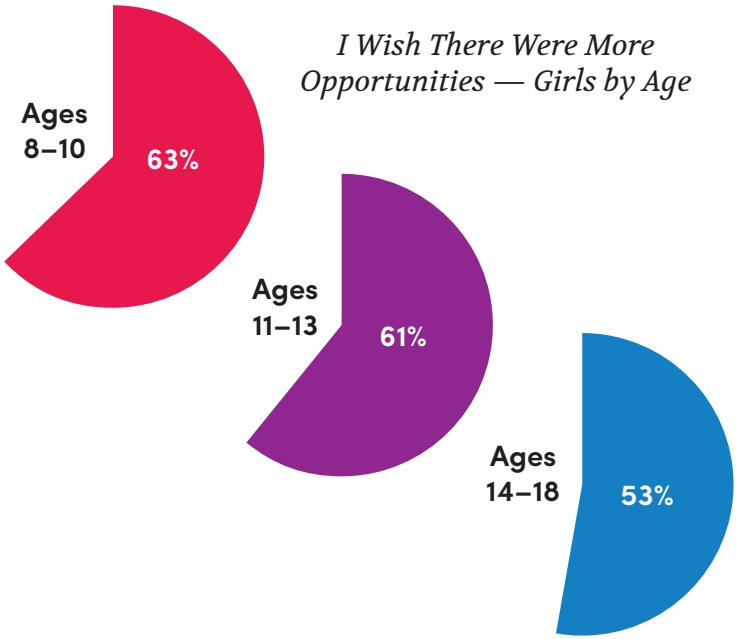
The Opportunity Gap

58% of all girls say they wish there were more opportunities to play sports.

Their parents feel it too: 64% of parents of current or past girl athletes wish there were more teams and leagues for their daughters, rising to 75% of Hispanic parents and 72% of Black parents.

The Wish Doesn't Go Away

I Wish There Were More Opportunities — Girls by Age



The majority of girls at every age said they "wish there were more opportunities" to play sport.

85% of parents believe the playing field is equal — while 64% wish opportunities were greater for their daughters.

85% of all parents believe boys and girls have equal opportunity to play sports in their community. Yet nearly two-thirds of parents of girl athletes wish there were more teams and leagues available for their daughters. Communities may perceive opportunity as equal while still experiencing shortages. Recognizing that — while opportunities are perceived as equal, they may still be insufficient — is the first step toward closing them.

Girls' high school sports participation has grown more than tenfold since the passage of Title IX — from roughly 294,000 in 1971–72 to 3.5 million today.

Source: National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), 1971–72 participation figures and *2024–25 High School Athletics Participation Survey.*

And yet, girls today still have 1.2 million fewer opportunities to play high school sports than boys — 3,539,596 girls compared to 4,726,648 boys nationally.

Source: National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), *2024–25 High School Athletics Participation Survey*

SECTION TWO

DROPOUTS — WHO LEAVES AND WHEN

By high school, more than 1 in 5 girls has already walked away from sports.

22% of girls 14–18 have played and quit, versus 17% of boys.

Girls and boys quit on average at the same age: 11.9 vs. 11.7.

The difference isn't when girls leave. It's how many leave — and how many were never invited in. These findings challenge a common assumption. Girls aren't leaving sports earlier than boys — the data suggests they're leaving in greater numbers, while many others never had the chance to participate at all.

Left Out — The Gaps Beyond Gender

52% of lower-income girls have never played a sport — and higher-income girls are nearly twice as likely to be playing.

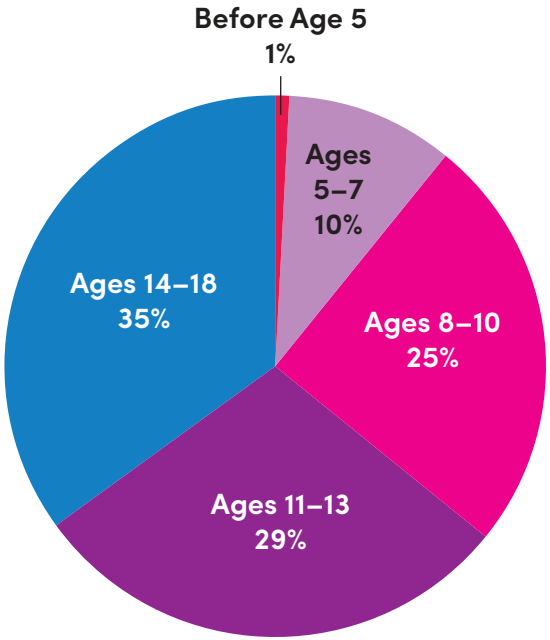
Among girls, household income divides the playing field more than gender does: 31% of girls in households under $50K currently play, versus 58% of girls in households over $100K — a 27-point gap, nearly four times the size of the gender gap itself. The income gap further exacerbates the participation gap girls are already facing.

46% of Black girls and 47% of Hispanic girls have never played — versus 33% of White girls.

Current participation also differs substantially by race and ethnicity: 50% of White girls currently play, compared to 40% of Hispanic girls and 39% of Black girls. Together, these findings reveal disparities in access that extend beyond the overall gender gap.

When Girls Drop Out

Among Girls who Stopped Playing Organized Sports, the Share who Exited at Each Age



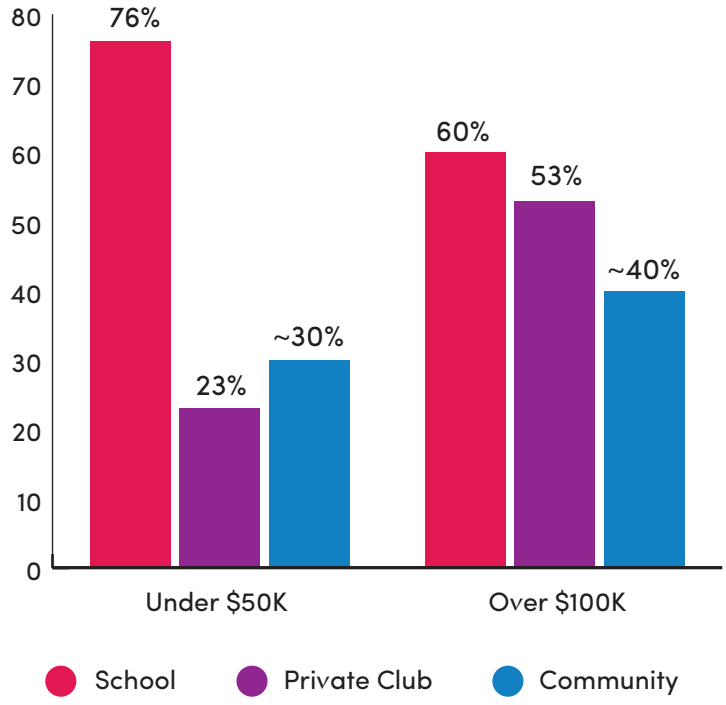
Where Girls Play

Of girls who play, 66% play through school — but much of the game happens elsewhere.

Many girls play in multiple settings: 42% of girls are playing sports through private clubs or travel programs, and 36% through community programs. School sports remain the backbone of girls' participation; about 30% of girl players participate exclusively through school, particularly for lower-income families. But roughly a third play exclusively outside of school sports through clubs, travel teams, or community sports. Looking only at school-based participation overlooks the growing role of outside programs — and the inequities in who can afford to access them.

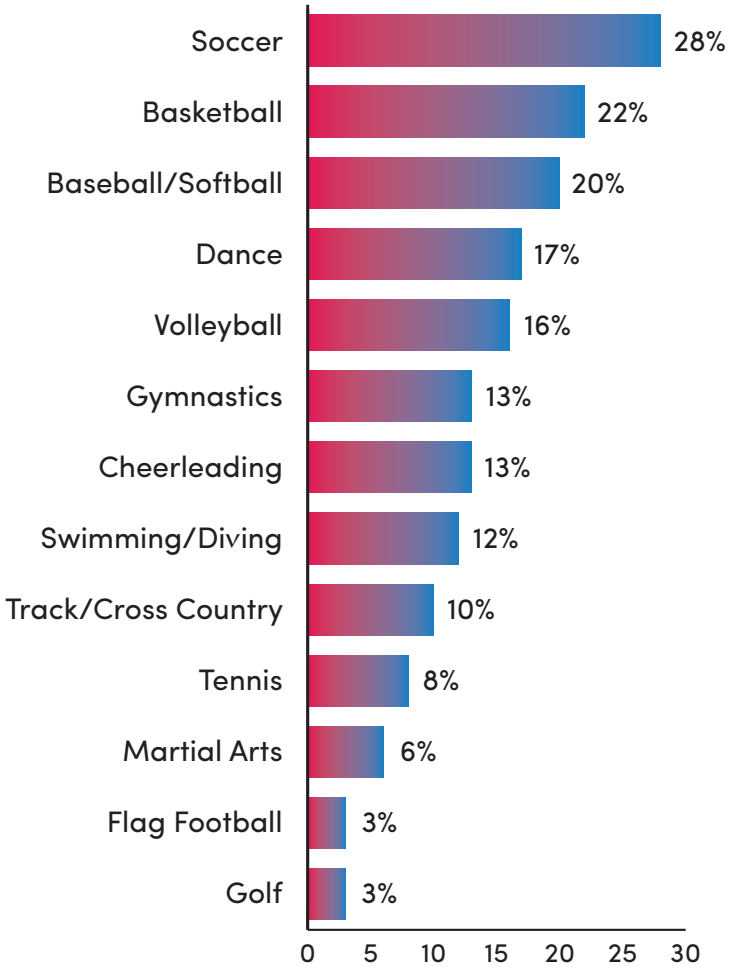
The Channel Gap

How Girls Access Sport, by Income



76% of lower-income girl players participate through school, versus 60% of higher-income girl players. Only 23% of lower-income girls access private clubs or travel teams, versus 53% of higher-income girls. For lower-income girls, school sports aren't simply one pathway — they're often the only pathway. When those opportunities disappear, there may be no affordable alternative.

What Girls Are Playing in 2026



Note: Among girls who currently play organized sports (n=704). Respondents could select multiple sports, so percentages do not sum to 100. All other sports surveyed fall below 2% and are not shown individually.

SECTION THREE

BARRIERS — WHY GIRLS LEAVE AND WHAT IT COSTS TO STAY

The reasons girls leave sports often sound ordinary. The patterns behind those reasons are anything but. This section looks beyond the top-line responses to examine where girls' experiences begin to diverge from boys' — and how relationships, confidence, cost, and access shape whether girls stay in the game.

Why Girls Quit

41% of girls who quit say sports stopped being fun. So do 41% of boys.

"Not having fun" is where girls' and boys' stories begin — not where they end. After the top response, their experiences diverge. Among girls who quit, a larger share cite other activities, confidence, relationships, and body image than that of boys — barriers that point to the environment surrounding sport, not simply individual preference.

Parents of girls are twice as likely to say another activity pulled their daughter away.

30% of girls' parents cite a competing activity — arts, volunteering — versus 14% of boys' parents. Girls themselves say the same (32% vs. 19%, the largest gender gap among those who quit sports). Girls don't simply drift away from sports — they're more likely to be pulled toward competing priorities when the sport experience no longer feels rewarding enough to keep them engaged.

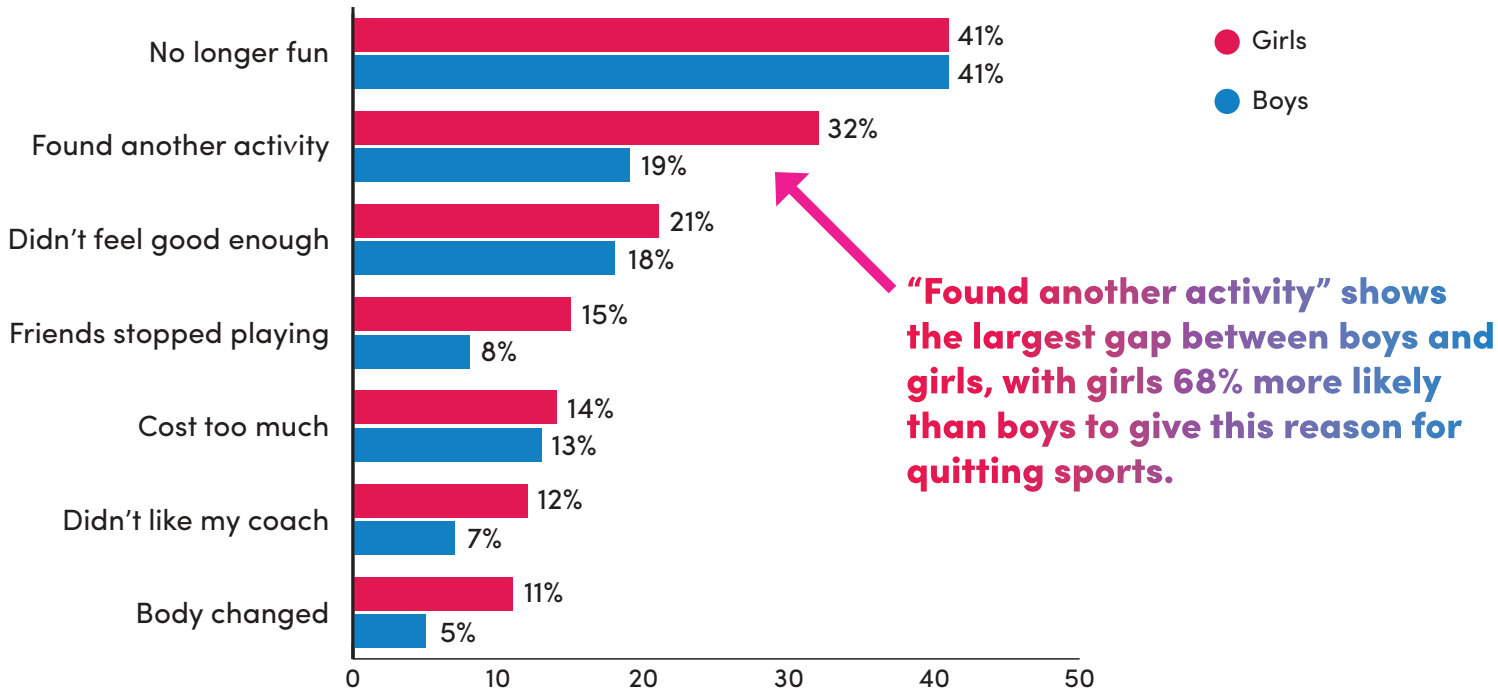
Girls are nearly twice as likely as boys to say their changing body pushed them out.

Parents of girls cite physical or body changes during puberty at nearly twice the rate of boys' parents (9% vs. 5%) — and girls themselves are more than twice as likely to say a changing body made them want to stop (11% vs. 5%). Puberty isn't the barrier — the environments surrounding it can be. Girls report changing bodies as a reason for leaving at more than twice the rate of boys, pointing to opportunities for coaches, organizations, and sports environments to better support girls through adolescence.

The data suggests girls who quit are more likely to be pushed out by people, not logistics.

The reasons girls cite for quitting are more likely to be social — not feeling good enough (21% vs. 18%), not having friends on the team (15% vs. 8%), or not liking their coach (12% vs. 7%). Boys' exits look logistical — they're the ones more likely to cite getting to practice (13% vs. 8%).

Why Girls Leave Sports — Girls vs. Boys



Before Middle School — The Youngest Leavers

For the youngest girls we surveyed — ages 8 to 10 — the gender gap in why kids quit is wider than at any other age. Before puberty even enters the picture, boys and girls are leaving for different reasons.

41% of the youngest girl dropouts found another activity they enjoyed more — versus 18% of boys.

29% of the youngest girl dropouts quit because they didn't feel good enough — versus 20% of boys.

15% of the youngest girl dropouts quit because of their coach — 3x the rate of boys (5%).

15% quit to focus on schoolwork — 4x the rate of boys (4%).

Many of these findings point to something adults control: whether a coach keeps a young girl engaged, and whether school and sport get treated as a trade-off for girls in a way they don't for boys.

All four ages 8–10 stats are directional: Girl dropout base at this age is n≈56.

The Cost of Play

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

The median annual sports spend for girls is $500, compared to $400 for boys. Average spending runs higher — $1,262 versus $906 — pulled up by families at the high end. More than 1 in 3 parents of girls who play spend $1,000 or more on sports expenses.

Girls from lower-income homes are more than twice as likely to say cost keeps them out of sports entirely.

Among girls who've never played, 21% of those in households under $50K cite cost as a barrier — versus 8% of girls in households over $100K. Their parents are even more direct: 24% of lower-income parents say cost is the main reason their daughter has never played, versus 5% of the highest-income group.

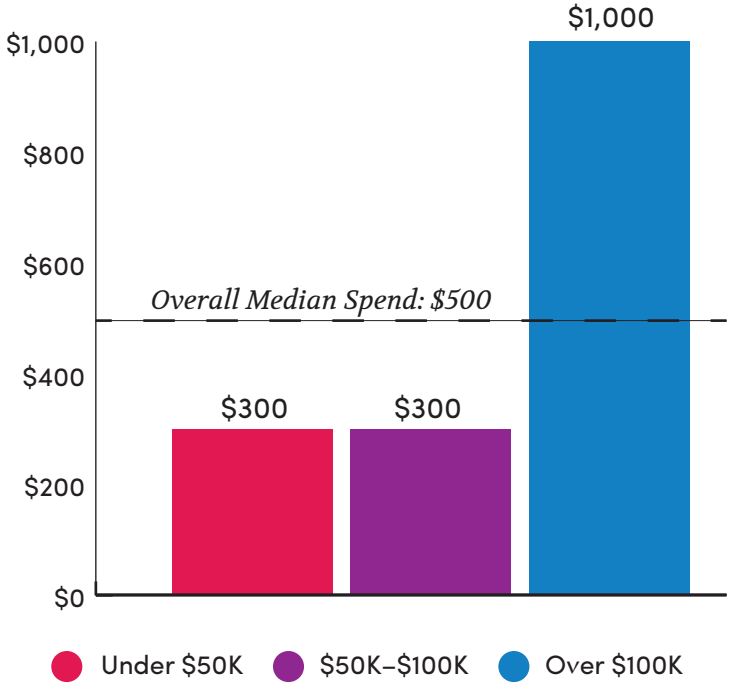
Cost is not a uniform barrier: it concentrates among the girls already facing the steepest access gaps.

Directional — based on unweighted income cut within girl dropouts (n=229 total).

Families of girl players earning over $100K spend more than 3x as much on sports expenses as lower-income families.

The cost gap isn't just between boys and girls. Below $100K, most families spend around $300 a year. Above it, they typically spend over $1,000/year. The sport a child can access depends heavily on which side of that line her family falls on.

Median Annual Spend on Girls' Sports, by Family Income



The costs measured in this section are financial and practical. The next section explores another cost that's harder to quantify, but just as important: whether girls continue to believe sports are a place where they belong.

SECTION FOUR

ARE SPORTS FOR SOMEONE LIKE ME?

Of everything this report measured, one finding cuts the deepest: at age 8, girls and boys feel equally that sports are for someone like them — both at 80%. By the teen years, that parity is gone.

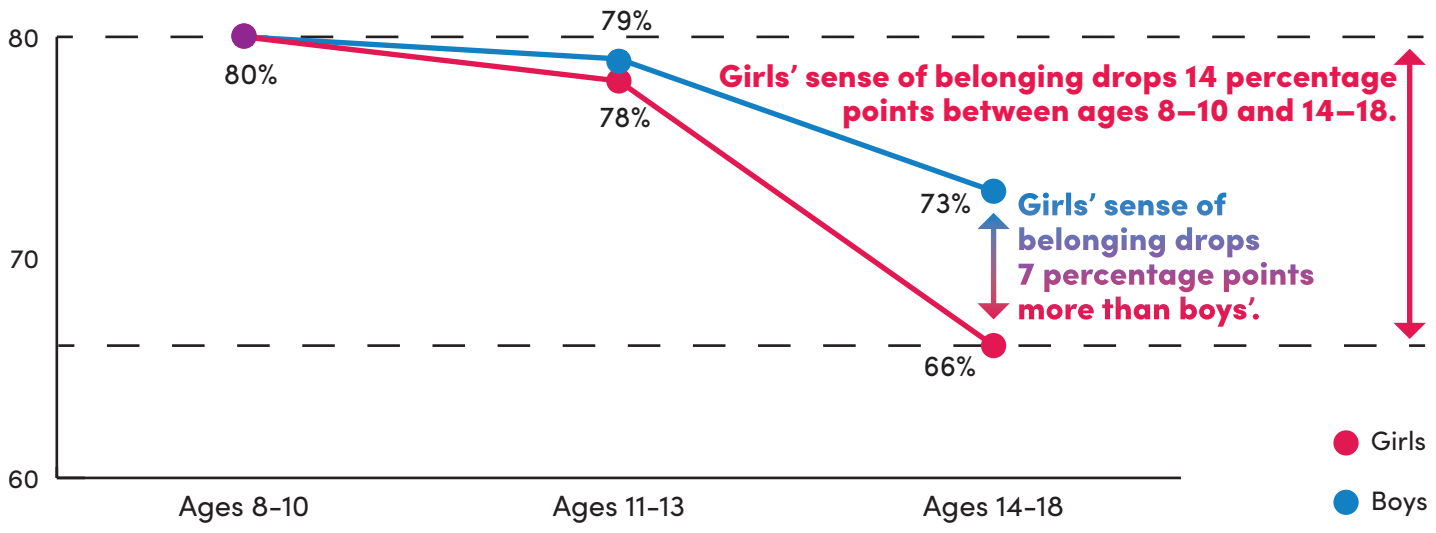
Belonging — the belief that sports are a place where you fit, matter, and can succeed — shapes nearly everything else in this report. It influences whether girls stay in sports, how far they aspire to go, and whether they see a future for themselves in the game. What follows tracks how that sense shifts with age, what it takes away when it goes, and where the gap between girls' experiences and their parents' perceptions sits.

Belonging — Equal at 8, Gone by 18

At ages 8-10, 80% of girls feel sports are "for someone like me." By 14-18, it's 66%. Boys start at the same place — and fall half as far.

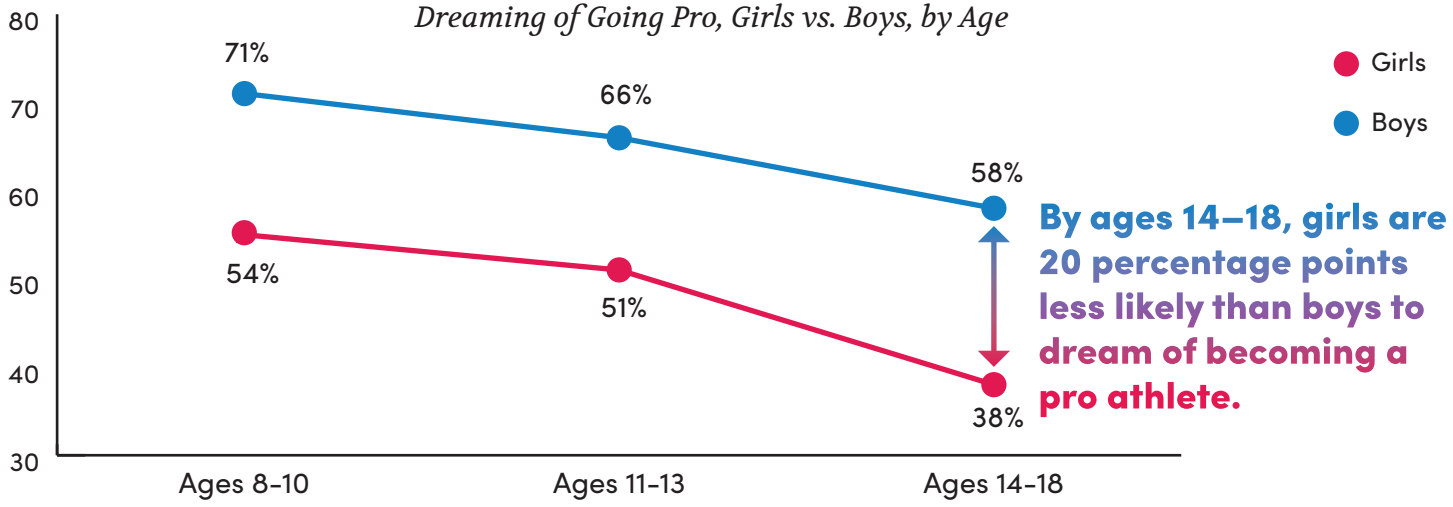
Among high schoolers, 1 in 3 girls does not feel that sports are "for someone like her." Girls and boys start in exactly the same place — 80% of each feel a sense of belonging in sports at ages 8–10. Among 14- to 18-year-olds, only 66% of girls still feel that way. Among boys the same age, it's 73%. Girls show a 14-point difference across age groups. Boys show just a 7-point drop.

Belonging Over Time — "Sports Are for Someone Like Me," by Age



The Gap That Widens With Age — The Dream Gap

Dreaming of Going Pro, Girls vs. Boys, by Age



Note: base = current + past players only. Age group figures are directional.

The Pro Dream

45% of girls currently play organized sports versus 52% of boys — a 7-point gap. But among children who play, the gap in dreaming of becoming a pro athlete is 17 points: 54% of girl players at ages 8–10 hold the dream versus 71% of boy players. By the teen years, it's 38% of girls versus 58% of boys.

This isn't a measure of career choice. It's a measure of possibility. By adolescence, girls are far less likely than boys to picture a future for themselves in sports — even during one of the biggest periods of growth in women's professional sports.

For boys, "pro athlete" is the most exciting career. For girls, it doesn't crack the top four.

Asked which careers sound exciting, boys put "pro athlete" first (39%). Girls rank it fifth (22%) — behind doctor, artist, teacher, and scientist. The data suggests that the dream fades with age for girls: from 27% at ages 11–13 to just 17% by 14–18.

How Children See Girl Athletes

Only 4% of children call girl athletes "masculine." They call them strong (68%), confident (67%), and cool (58%).

The stereotype adults still argue about barely exists for children — boys included. Girls are also 15 points more likely to call girl athletes inspiring (49% vs. 34%). Today's children largely reject stereotypes that have historically surrounded women athletes. The opportunity now is ensuring the systems around youth sports evolve just as quickly.

85% of girls who play say they feel powerful when they play.

Girls and boys who play sports report feeling powerful in equal measure (85%). Girls who have played overwhelmingly describe sports as empowering, and boys report nearly identical experiences. The benefits of sports are remarkably consistent. The challenge isn't whether sports work for girls — it's whether every girl has the opportunity to experience them.

SECTION FIVE

IF SHE CAN'T SEE IT

Women's sports just posted record audiences, record valuations, and record attention. Yet much of the momentum hasn't reached the 8- to 18-year-old girls.

Section Four shows that girls' sense of belonging falls steadily as they age. This section asks what it would take to change that. The data on role models and rights literacy points to the same gap. Visibility creates possibility. Awareness creates agency. These findings suggest too many girls are missing both.

The Role-Model Gap

45% of girls can't name a favorite professional athlete — of any gender. For boys, it's 29%.

Nearly half of girls have no favorite pro athlete or can't name one. And it's fairly consistent as they age: the share of girls answering "none" or "don't know" climbs slightly from 43% at ages 8–10 to 45% at 11–13 to 47% at 14–18. The question asks girls to name their favorite professional athlete — not just a woman athlete. The fact that nearly half can't name anyone suggests the challenge extends beyond representation alone. Too many girls aren't forming meaningful connections with athletes at all.

Only 2% of boys name a woman athlete as their favorite — vs. 23% of girls who name a woman.

Both figures include all children who were asked the question, including those who named no one. Girls grow up in a world where admiring female athletes is the exception, not the norm — for boys, it barely registers. Role models help shape who children believe belongs in sports. These findings suggest girls still grow up in environments where women athletes are admired far less often than men.

The most-named woman? Caitlin Clark — at 5%.

Roughly 1 in 18 girls name Caitlin Clark as their favorite athlete — just ahead of Serena Williams (3%) and Simone Biles (3%).

The visibility gap runs deeper for lower-income girls.

Among girls in households under $50K, 14% name a woman athlete as their favorite — versus 27% of girls in households over $100K. The girls facing the greatest barriers to participation are also the least likely to identify a woman athlete they admire — a reminder that access and visibility often reinforce one another.

88% of parents of girls say their daughter has good sports role models. Yet 45% of girls can't name a professional one.

Parents overwhelmingly believe positive athlete role models are available. But at least 45% of girls aren't seeing those role models in professional athletes. Closing that perception gap may be just as important as expanding visibility itself.

The Rights Gap — Title IX Literacy

79% of girls ages 8–18 say they have never heard of Title IX. Only 3% know a lot about it.

Just 21% of girls are aware the law exists. Even among girls 14–18 — one of the groups the law most directly protects — awareness is only 26%.

Among Black girls, Title IX awareness is 17%. Among White girls, it's 23%.

The awareness gap runs along racial lines too — the girls who face compounding barriers of race and gender are least likely to know the law that is supposed to protect them.

Among the lowest-income girls, Title IX awareness falls to 13%.

The girls least likely to be playing are also least likely to know their rights — 13% awareness among girls in households below $50K versus 30% among girls in households over $100K. The protection is weakest exactly where it's needed most.

55% of parents have never heard of Title IX either.

Only 12% fully understand how it applies to their children. 54 years in, the law that changed everything is invisible to the girls it protects.

> *"Title IX is one of the most important pieces of legislation in our country and it certainly changed my life and opened doors for me and many women in sports. It's important we always work to protect Title IX so it can continue to provide opportunities for girls and women in and out of sports."*
>
> **— Kendall Coyne Schofield, Olympic Gold Medalist, U.S. Women's Hockey**

Rights you can't name are rights you can't claim. The next section shows why that matters right now: The leaders of this industry name the rollback of this exact law as the single greatest threat to everything women's sports has gained.

SECTION SIX

THE STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

The first five sections of this report were about girls — from elementary to high school — helping to trace the women's sports pipeline from the bottom: who is playing, who is leaving, and who feels like sports are built for them.

This section turns to the levels they're trying to reach.

To assess the state of college, professional, and elite women's sport, WSF convened a panel of 60 senior leaders — among them league and team executives and owners, conference commissioners and national governing body leaders, current and former professional athletes and their representatives, and the brand executives and media companies that fund and broadcast the sport. Nearly half have 20 or more years in the industry. Their job was to evaluate the past year's progress and the coming year's risks at every level women play.

Their verdict: real momentum, resting on unstable foundations.

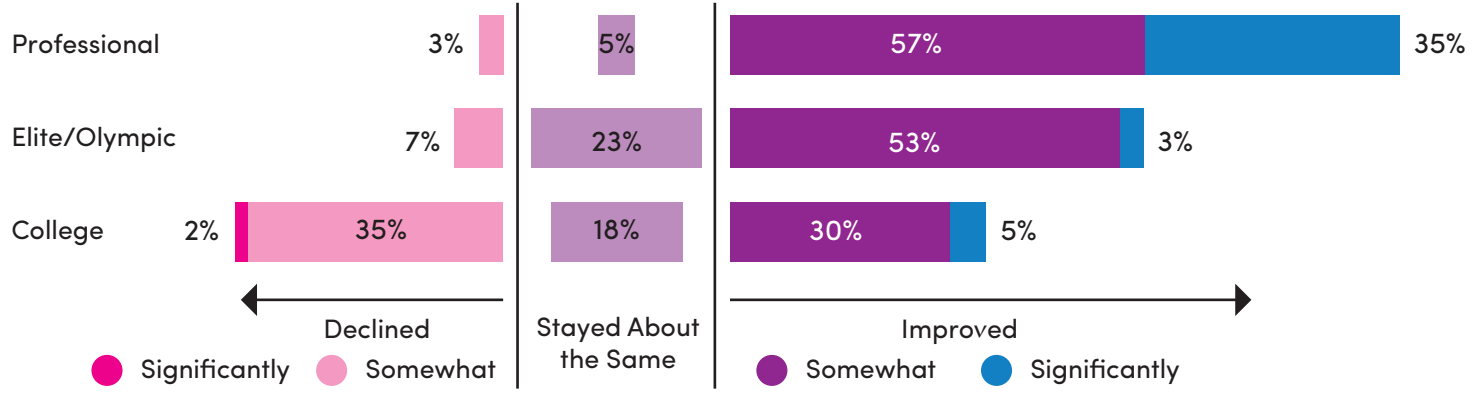
Three Levels, Three Different Stories

Near-unanimous improvement at the professional level. The only genuine split among experts — and the only net decline — is at college.

93% of experts say professional women's sports improved this year. 57% say the same for elite and Olympic. At the college level: 35% say conditions improved — and 37% say they declined.

The Three-Level Verdict

Compared to a year ago, how much progress has women's sports made toward true equality at each level?



The Greatest Threats in the Coming Year

The No. 1 threat to gender equity progress in sport: Title IX rollbacks — named by nearly half of experts.

Nearly half of experts (47%) identify Title IX rollbacks or weakened enforcement as the biggest risk to progress in the next 12 months, reflecting broader anxiety about the direction of college sports and the potential for new inequities in resources, as well as Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) and implementation of the *House v. NCAA* settlement.

The No. 2 threat: the boom going bust. A pullback in investment could stall the momentum women's sports has built.

More than one-quarter of experts (26%) cite financial contraction or retreat in investment as the greatest threat, with another 16% pointing to political interference in women's sports governance — suggesting that both economic and policy instability could undermine recent gains.

Who Holds the Power

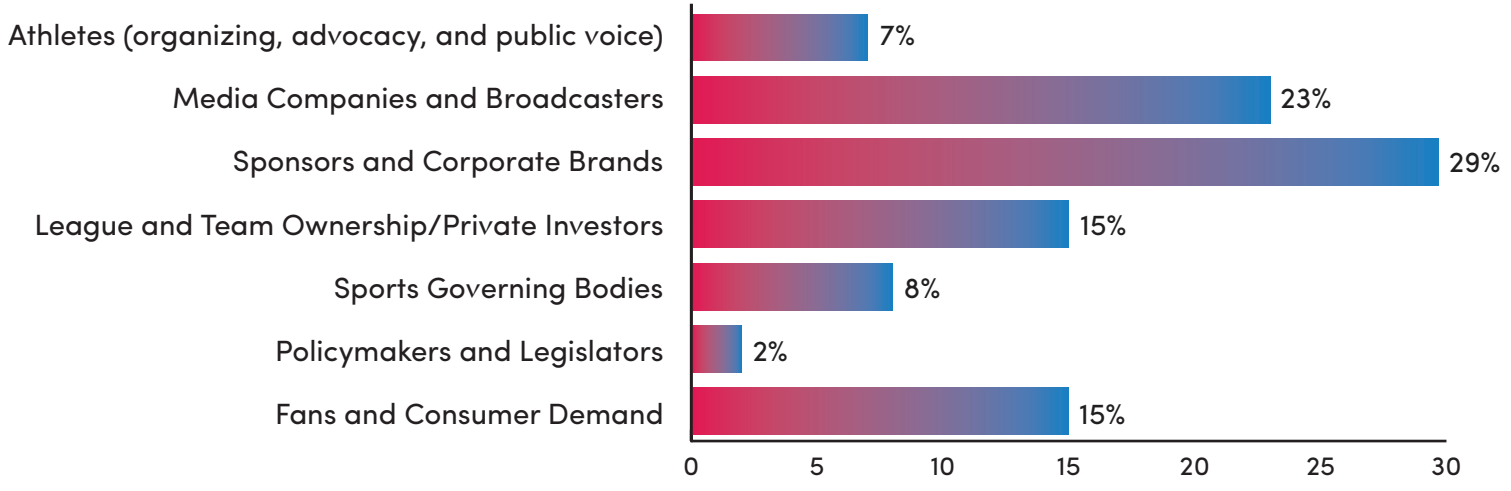
Who has the greatest power to accelerate growth for women's sports? Brands and media come out on top.

Experts say that the power to drive growth isn't wielded by the institutions that govern; it's wielded by the market. Experts most often point to sponsors and corporate brands (29%), followed by media companies and broadcasters (23%), underscoring the importance of advertising, visibility, and sustained coverage in driving women's sports forward.

Beyond sponsors and media, experts identify league/team owners and private investors (15%) and fans and consumer demand (15%) as important forces — suggesting that continued growth will depend heavily on where audiences, businesses, and investors choose to put their attention and resources, rather than on governing bodies, policy, or institutional mandates.

Who Holds the Power?

Who has the greatest power to accelerate women's sports growth?



The Policy Report Card

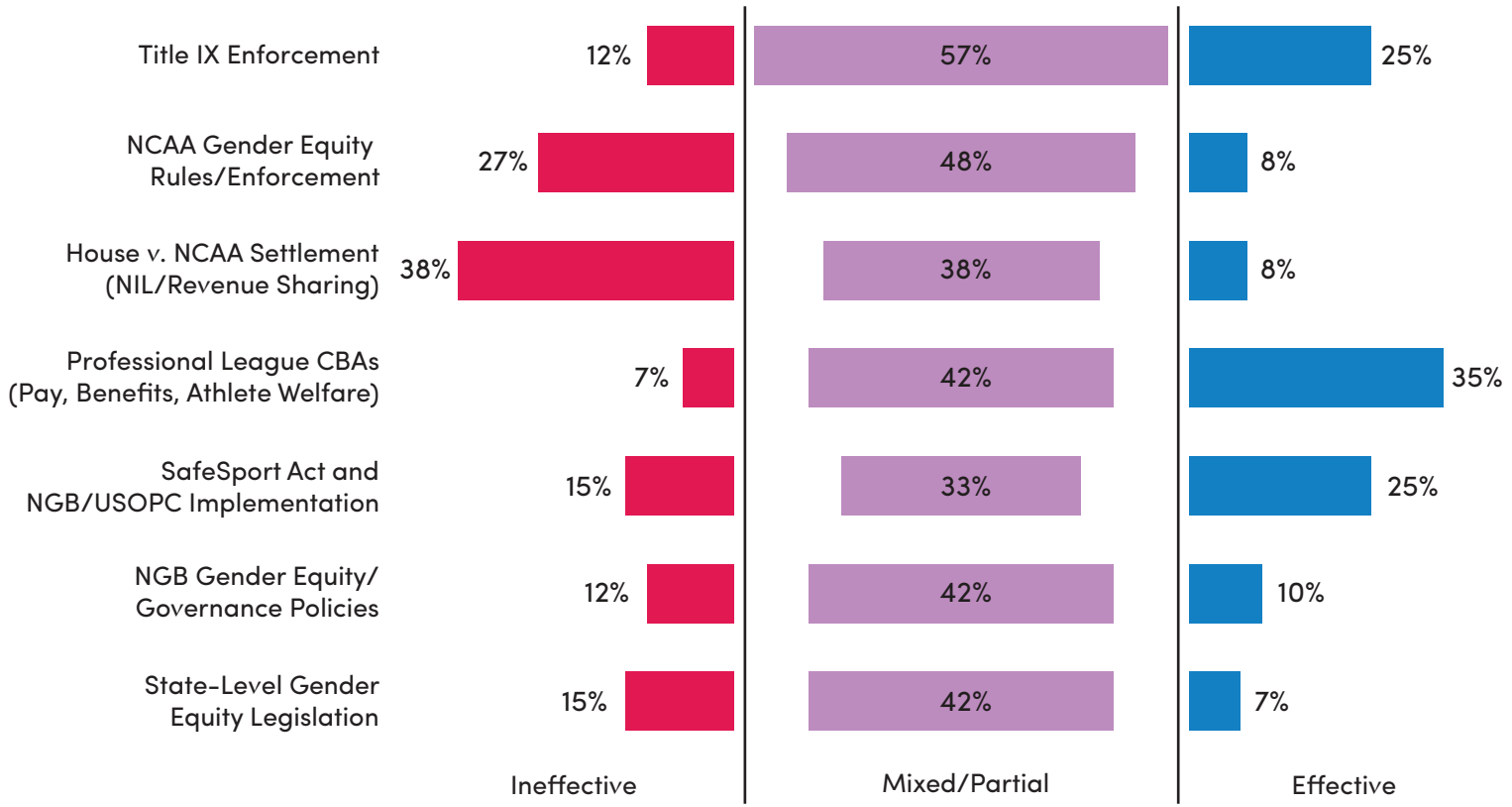
Across seven major policies, not one earns a passing grade from this panel.

Across most policy areas, experts are far more likely to rate current protections as "mixed or partial" than fully effective. Professional league collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) come closest — roughly 40% of familiar panelists call them effective. SafeSport implementation follows at about 35% effectiveness among those who know it. Title IX enforcement: about 27% effective. The *House v. NCAA* settlement fares worst — fewer than 1 in 10 familiar panelists call it effective, and nearly half call it outright ineffective.

The strongest call to action is collegiate. When asked which single policy would have the greatest positive impact if strengthened in the next year, 37% of experts name Title IX enforcement — more than double the next choice. NCAA gender equity rules (17%) and *House v. NCAA* settlement implementation (15%) follow. College policy and governance is the clearest area for urgent reform.

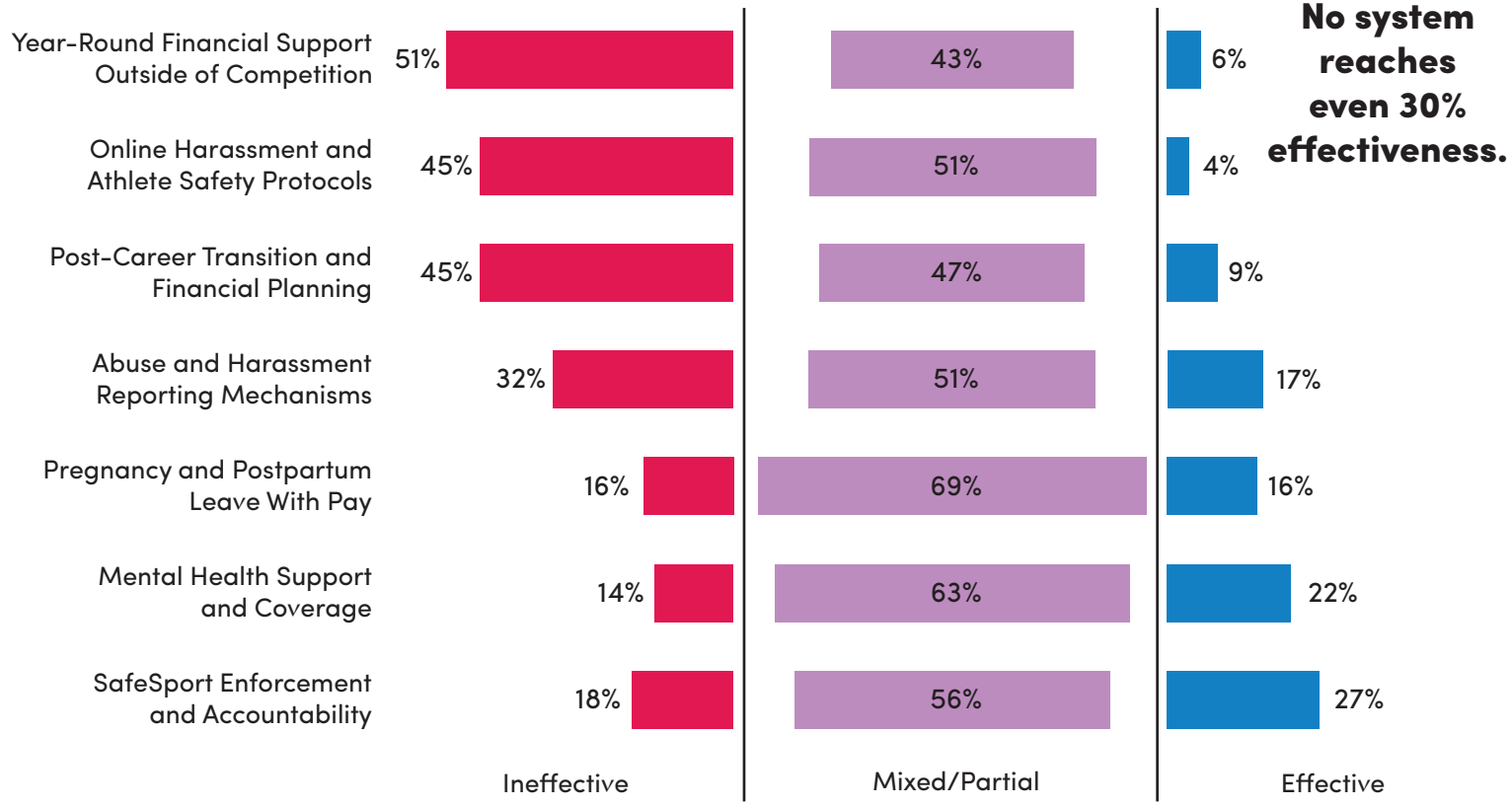
The Policy Report Card

Effectiveness of Policies for Women's Sports, as Rated by WSF Expert Panel



The Athlete Welfare Report Card

Effectiveness of Support Systems for Women Athletes, as Rated by WSF Expert Panel



The Athlete Welfare Report Card

Not one of seven athlete support systems earns a passing grade.

The same panel that graded seven major policies also rated the support systems women athletes rely on across all levels. The verdict mirrors the policy report card almost exactly: Across every system, experts are far more likely to call current protections mixed or partial than fully effective — and for the systems athletes depend on most, outright ineffective ratings dominate.

Year-round financial support outside competition windows is the lowest-rated system: just 6% of familiar experts call it effective, while 51% call it outright ineffective. Online harassment protocols fare nearly as poorly — 4% effective (and 45% ineffective) among those who know them. Post-career transition support scores 9% effective, with 45% calling it ineffective. SafeSport enforcement is the highest-rated system on the list, at 27% effective — still far from a passing grade.



The gap they can't stop naming: online harassment.

When asked to name the single most urgent athlete protection gap not receiving adequate public or institutional attention, online harassment is the most frequently cited response — named more than any other issue, including financial support. The volume of mentions suggests the formal systems aren't keeping pace with the scale of the problem athletes are actually experiencing.

The gap that isn't on the list: women's health.

Reproductive health, hormonal health, and menstrual health surface repeatedly in open-ended responses as protection gaps that existing frameworks don't adequately address. Pregnancy and postpartum leave is rated in this survey — and scores poorly, with just 16% of familiar experts calling it effective. But experts indicate the health gaps extend well beyond that single window into areas the field hasn't yet built formal systems around.

Professional women's sports are surging. Elite and Olympic sport is making real but uneven progress. College is the only level where more experts say conditions worsened than improved — a warning sign not only for women college athletes, but also for the professional and elite pipeline they help sustain. The next three sections take each in turn.

SECTION SEVEN

COLLEGE — THE LEVEL OF GREATEST CONCERN IN 2026

More money is moving through college sports than at any point in history. The panel's verdict on what that influx is doing for women is grim: College is the only level where more experts say conditions got worse this year than better — 37% say declined, 35% say improved. A split verdict may be more damning than a clear decline; there is no shared read on whether this level is moving forward at all.

Participation

Women make up 43% of NCAA athletes — 240,498 of 556,687 — despite constituting 58% of the college-age population. Fewer than 1 in 14 girls who play sports in high school go on to compete at the college level — a compression that happens before the resource gaps on this page even begin (*Sources:* NCAA, 2024–25; NCES, fall 2021).

The Greatest Barrier

When asked to name the single greatest barrier women athletes face at the college level, WSF's Expert Panel's answers split along a clear fault line: money, or everything else.

The money isn't reaching women.

Nearly 4 in 10 experts point to money as the core problem — inequitable resource allocation compared to men's programs (23%) and NIL disparities (15%) are different symptoms of the same finding: the college boom is being distributed away from women athletes.

In 2024–25, men received $534 million more in athletic scholarships than women ($2.9B vs. $2.4B).

Source: EADA

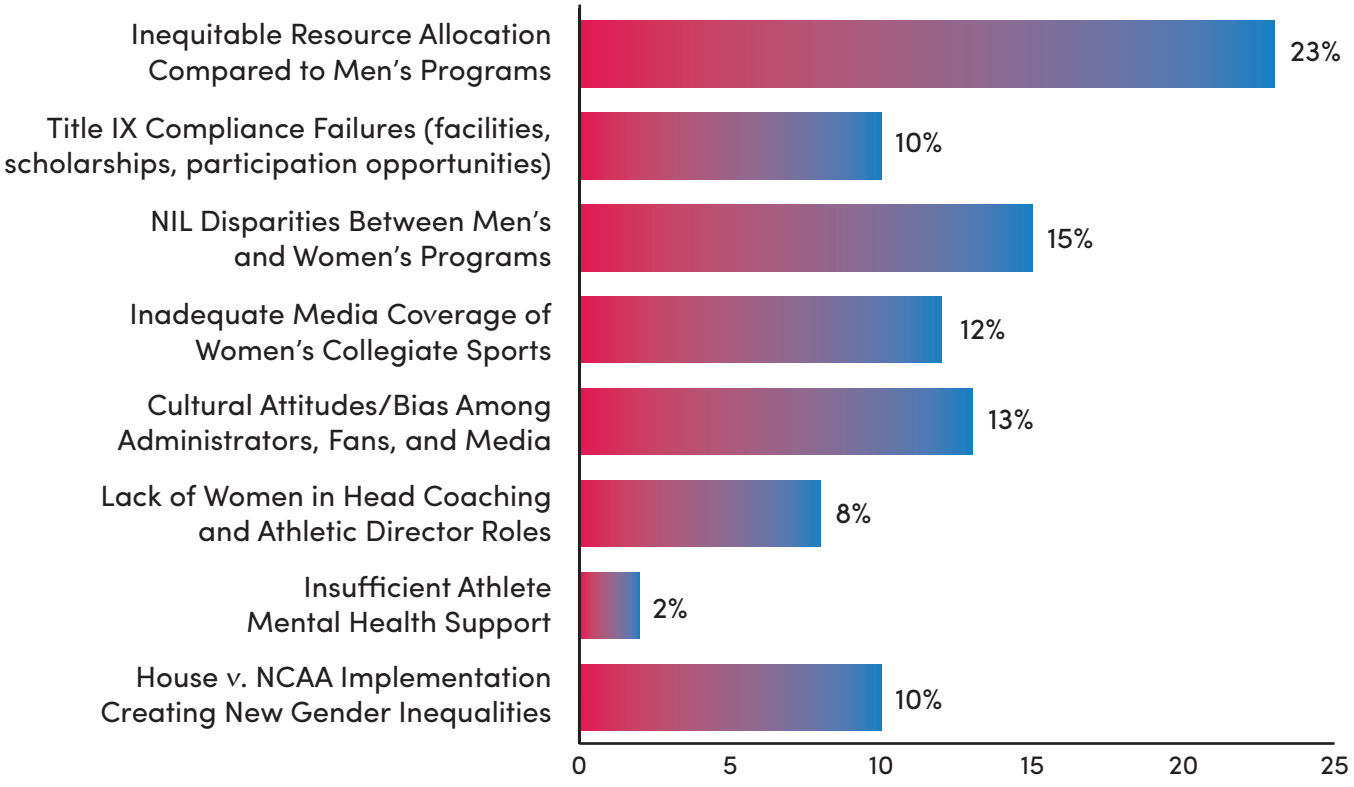
A failing grade: *House v. NCAA*

Roughly 1 in 10 experts who know the House v. NCAA settlement call it effective for women. Nearly half call it outright ineffective. The open-ended responses reflect concern that NIL and revenue-sharing are deepening the resource gap rather than closing it — and the schools and programs with the least leverage to begin with are the ones most at risk of being left behind.

Fear of backsliding

Experts say they worry inequities are growing. 40% say the barrier they named has worsened over the past year, versus just 16% who say it's improving — the worst trajectory reading of any level in this survey.

Single Biggest Barrier to Women Collegiate Athletes



While the Power Five women student-athletes continue to benefit from significant NIL opportunities, there is an incredible opportunity to expand that same level of investment and support across HBCU athletics. By strengthening collective infrastructure, growing donor engagement and creating meaningful partnerships with national brands, we can build stronger NIL pathways for HBCU women student-athletes. NIL has the potential to be a powerful driver of opportunity and empowerment for women, and we are committed to ensuring that HBCU student-athletes are an important part of that progress.

— Tara A. Owens, VP, Athletics & Recreation, University of Maryland Eastern Shore

When It Comes to Policy: Title IX is What They'd Fix First

Given one policy to strengthen in the next 12 months — enforce the law that already exists.

Title IX enforcement is the panel's top priority by a wide margin — named by 37% of experts, more than double the next choice. NCAA gender equity rules (17%) and fixing *House v. NCAA* implementation itself (15%) follow. The ask isn't new policy. It's accountability for what's already on the books.

> *"Despite Title IX being on the books for more than half a century, a vast majority of schools are not in compliance with the law. They rarely face meaningful repercussions, though, as there's no real proactive enforcement."*
>
> **— Sarah Spain, Host,** *Good Game with Sarah Spain*

Only 21%

of girls ages 8–18 have heard of Title IX — the law these experts say they'd fix first.

(See page 18)

Gaps in Leadership

Women hold just 1 in 4 head coaching positions and athletic director positions across all three NCAA divisions.

Only 5 of 60 experts name the lack of women in coaching and athletic director roles as their single greatest barrier, but in open-ended responses, it surfaces repeatedly. The numbers support the concern.

According to NCAA 2024-25 demographic data, women make up 41% of head coaches for women's NCAA teams — meaning nearly 6 in 10 women's programs are led by men. Only 8% of those roles are held by BIPOC women. Across all head coaching positions combined, women hold just 25%. And women coaching men's sports is nearly absent: fewer than 1 in 16 head coaching roles on men's teams are held by women.

Athletic directors tell the same story: Women hold 26% of athletic director positions across all three NCAA divisions; 5% are BIPOC women.

What happens at the college level does not stay there. College sports serve as a critical bridge to professional, Olympic, and Paralympic competition — developing the athletes, coaches, and leaders who shape the levels above. If opportunities and resources for women erode here, the effects could weaken the entire pipeline just as women's sports are reaching new heights.

SECTION EIGHT

PROFESSIONAL — THE BREAKTHROUGH LEVEL

At the college level, the picture is split nearly down the middle: improved and declined in roughly equal shares. The professional level reads nothing like that.

An overwhelming 93% of experts say progress toward gender equality in professional women's sports improved over the past year, by far the strongest assessment of any level. The caution is in what they say is still broken. The barriers they name aren't growing pains — they're foundational.

Participation: The Momentum is Real

Women's professional sports show no signs of slowing in 2026.

American audiences spent 28.6 billion minutes watching women compete in just the first half of the year — up 18% from 2025 — and more than half the U.S. population now actively follows the space *(Source: Nielsen, The Commercial & Cultural Evolution of Women's Sports, August 2026).*

The momentum spans every corner of sport: Individual professional sports have a long history of driving visibility for women athletes. This year, the WTA continued to focus on closing the gender pay gap beyond the Grand Slams, the LPGA entered the year with a record purse, and Athlos nearly tripled its prize money in just its second season.

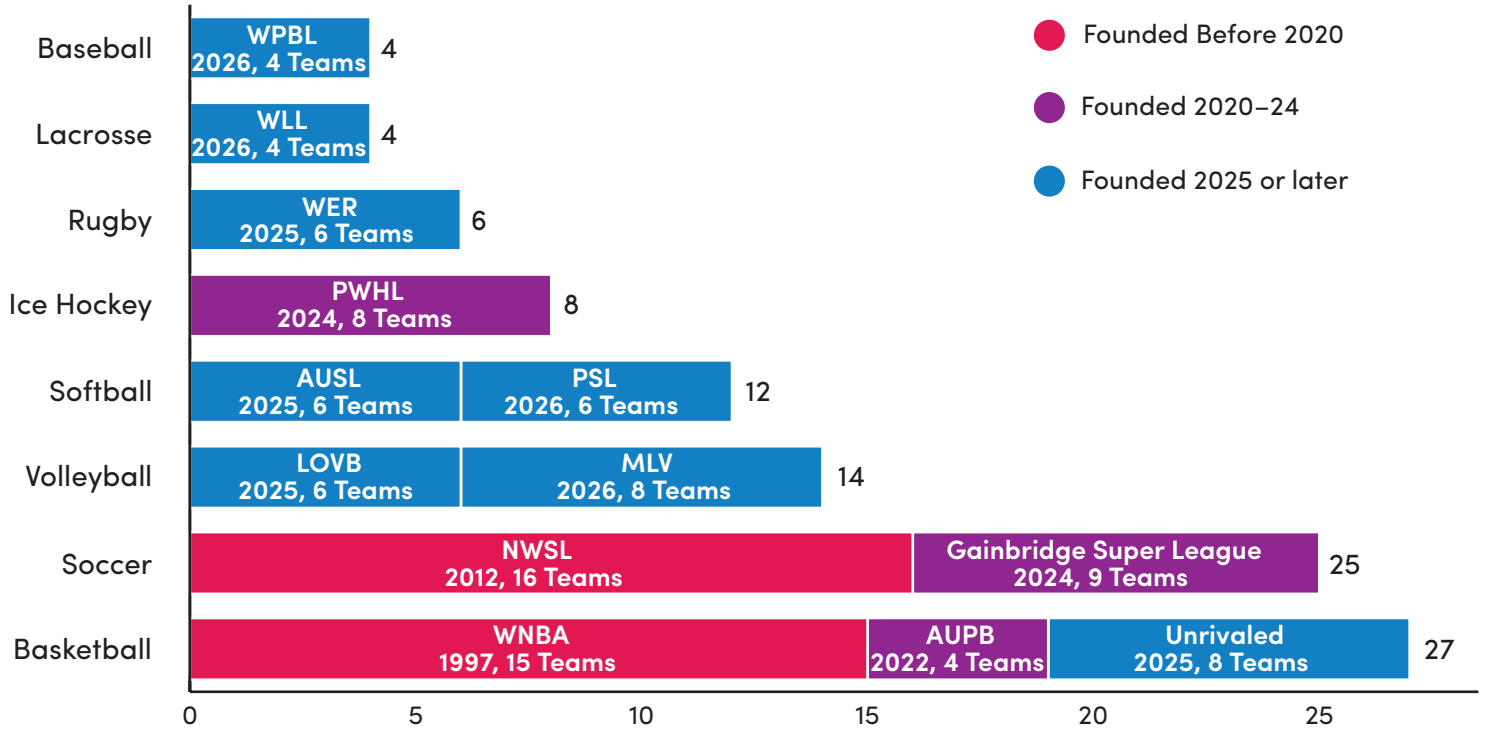
Team sports have driven much of that growth, fueled by a new generation of leagues willing to rethink the traditional model.

Rather than simply following the structures long established in men's sports, emerging women's leagues are experimenting with new formats, ownership models, athlete experiences, and ways to reach fans. The result is a professional landscape that is both expanding and evolving: eight sports, 13 leagues and more than 100 teams. The chart on the following page captures where that expansion is happening among team-based, salaried, U.S. leagues — and just how much of it is still new.

The WNBA, founded in 1997, remains the oldest active women's professional team sports league in the country. NWSL, founded in 2012, is the second-longest running league. Nearly everyone else on this chart launched in 2022 or later. Some have already paused. The expansion is real, but so is the fragility.

Women's Professional Team Sports Leagues — 2026

8 Sports – 13 Leagues – 100 Teams; Leagues by Number of Teams and Year Established



Note: Chart captures team-based women's professional sports in U.S.-based leagues operating beyond a pay-to-play model.

More than half

of girls who play sports (54%) dream of becoming a professional athlete at ages 8–10. Among boys the same age, it's 71%. But by the teen years, the gap widens: Only 38% of girls still hold that dream, versus 58% of boys.

(See page 16)

The Greatest Barriers

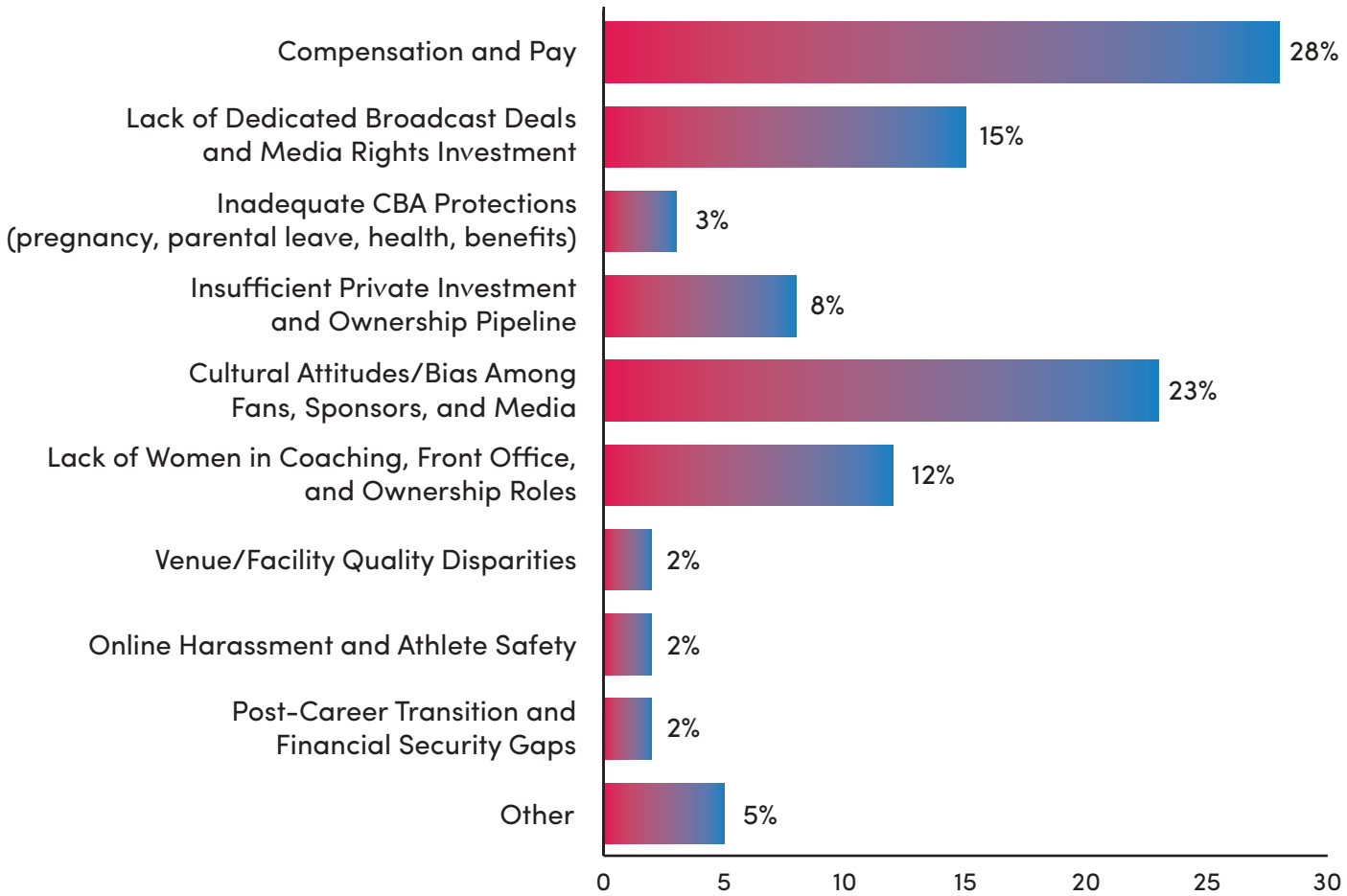
Pay. Bias. And a media deal that hasn't fully arrived.

The expert panel's read on the professional level is the most optimistic of any level in this survey: 55% say the barrier they identified is improving, versus just 14% who say it's getting worse. But a positive trajectory isn't a cleared barrier. Compensation and pay (28%) remain the most frequently cited obstacle, followed by cultural attitudes and bias (23%). Another 15% point to insufficient broadcast deals and media-rights investment — and that last finding contains the clearest contradiction in this whole report.

The gatekeepers are the growth engine.

The same sponsors and media companies the panel identifies as holding the greatest power to accelerate women's sports are also the seat of its greatest remaining barrier. Visibility fueled the breakthrough. Sustaining it will require the same gatekeepers to keep going.

Single Biggest Barrier to Professional Women Athletes



Leadership

The boom is being built — but not always by women.

12% of experts name the lack of women in coaching, front office, and ownership roles as the single greatest barrier at the professional level. Another 8% point to an insufficient private investment and ownership pipeline. Combined, nearly 1 in 5 experts flag some dimension of who holds power — and who doesn't — as the professional level's central problem.

The coaching pipeline is a particular gap — one that shapes not just who leads teams, but who girls and women see as possible futures for themselves in the sport.

The Risk Underneath the Boom

More than 1 in 5 experts name the same fear: a professional women's league goes under.

22% of panelists identify the financial collapse or contraction of a professional women's league as the single greatest risk to progress in the year ahead — the No. 2 overall risk in this survey.



> *The growth in women's sports is real — but who's coaching matters as much as who's playing. The pipeline of women into coaching and leadership roles is where the next chapter gets written, and right now that pipeline needs more support, more resources, and more people willing to invest in it.*
>
> **— Scott Pioli, NFL Executive**

SECTION NINE

ELITE, OLYMPIC, AND PARALYMPIC — THE UNFINISHED LEVEL

The professional level is breaking through in ways that didn't exist five years ago. The elite, Olympic, and Paralympic level tells a different story: the one place in this survey where the performance is undeniable and the infrastructure behind it earns failing grades from the people closest to it.

Participation

47% of athletes. 43% of medal events.

Women made up 47% of Olympic athletes at Milano Cortina — up from 45% in Beijing, but still short of parity. And the numbers only tell part of the story: Just 50 of 116 medal events were women's events. Nordic combined remained the only Olympic Winter sport with no women's competition at all.[1]

American women are carrying the flag.

Milano Cortina marked the sixth consecutive Olympic Games — summer and winter — where U.S. women won more gold and more total medals than U.S. men. American women took home 67% of U.S. gold and 61% of all U.S. medals at Milano Cortina. The performance is not in question. The infrastructure behind it is.[1]

The Greatest Barrier

67% of experts name the same answer: no money between competitions.

Two in three panelists identify inadequate year-round financial support outside competition windows as the single greatest barrier facing elite women athletes — more than six times the next response. Financial vulnerability extends beyond competition: Post-career transition and financial security gaps rank second (10%), and prize money disparities come third (7%), suggesting that athletes need stronger support not only while competing, but also across the full arc of their careers.

> *"Too many athletes are still expected to compete at the highest level while piecing together income from multiple sources."*
>
> **— Haley Rosen, Founder & CEO, Just Women's Sports**

1 *Bass, A., Houghton, E. J., Pieper, L. P., & Smith, M. M. (2026). Women in the 2026 Olympic and Paralympic Games: An Analysis of Participation, Leadership, and Media Coverage. Women's Sports Foundation (publication forthcoming Fall 2026), Women's Sports Foundation, All Rights Reserved.*

I think the biggest threat to continued progress is the lack of women coaches at the elite Olympic and Paralympic level. The expectations and requirements needed to be a coach at that level are determined purely by men.

— Kristen Bourne, XC World Cup Coach at US Ski and Snowboard

The Leadership Gap

Not one woman served as head coach of a U.S. Olympic or Paralympic sport or team at Milano Cortina.

Among the U.S. coaching staff, men outnumbered women more than 4 to 1. Head coaching at the Olympic level is the pipeline's final stage. If women aren't there, the problem isn't just visibility — it's the compounding loss of mentorship, hiring influence, and what gets modeled as possible.[1]

Progress — But Shallow

45% say conditions are staying the same. Only 22% say they're improving.

Compare this to the professional level, where 55% see improvement. The boom hasn't reached the podium pipeline. LA28 is two years away. A Games on American soil means American women will carry the medal count — supported by the very systems this panel just graded. The time to act is now. There is no later.

METHODOLOGY

The *WSF Sport Report 2026* represents a new research format for the Women's Sports Foundation, designed to complement WSF's longstanding body of rigorous, in-depth scholarship with a timely and responsive view of the state of girls and women in sport. By combining quantitative youth data with qualitative perspectives from leaders across the sports ecosystem, the report is able to surface emerging issues, illuminate current experiences, and place evolving issues and priorities in a broader context. This approach allows WSF to bring credible evidence and expert insight to the issues shaping the field now — creating a more accessible, topical research product that can inform conversation, decision-making, advocacy, and action.

It draws on two original research initiatives conducted in spring and summer 2026. What follows is an overview of each.

Youth Survey

This quantitative online survey was conducted by YouGov from May 28 to June 15, 2026, among a nationally representative sample of more than 6,100 respondents, comprising U.S. parents and their children, ages 8 to 18. Parents completed a survey covering their household's experiences with youth sports — including cost, access, and barriers to participation — and identified an eligible child to participate. The youth survey was then completed independently by the selected child ages 8–18. The resulting data represent 3,065 children, with roughly equal numbers of girls and boys across three age groups: 8–10, 11–13, and 14–18. The median survey length was 15 minutes.

Minimal weighting was applied to align the parent sample with U.S. Census demographics. Subgroup analyses — including dropout age comparisons by gender and age-bin dropout distributions — are based on smaller subsamples and should be interpreted as directional rather than precise estimates. All age-group comparisons in this report are cross-sectional: They reflect differences between groups of children of different ages at a single point in time, not changes within the same children over time. Spending analyses exclude approximately 16% of current players who did not provide a response to the participation cost question; median figures are used throughout to limit the influence of high-end outliers.

Expert Survey

The Women's Sports Foundation conducted an expert survey with 60 professionals working across the women's sports ecosystem between June 25 and July 22, 2026. Respondents represented a range of perspectives, including athletes, researchers, coaches, athletic administrators, league and team executives, business and media leaders, legal professionals, and policy and nonprofit advocates, with experience spanning collegiate, professional, and elite (Olympic and Paralympic) sport.

Respondents were intentionally selected as senior thought leaders with deep and varied experience across the women's sports ecosystem. While participants represented different sectors and professional roles, they were chosen for the breadth of their experience, leadership, and demonstrated understanding of the field beyond their current

positions. Nearly three-quarters of respondents had more than 10 years of professional experience in women's sports, including 47% with 20 or more years of experience. All results are unweighted.

Together, these studies provide complementary perspectives on the state of women's sports, pairing the experiences of young people with insights from professionals working across the industry.

Questions?

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Acknowledgements

The Women's Sports Foundation is grateful to the team at the University of Massachusetts, Tatishe Nteta, Ph.D., Jesse Rhodes, Ph.D., and Adam Eichen, Ph.D. candidate, for their careful review of the survey data and analysis. The WSF is also indebted to Phil Veliz, Ph.D., and Laura Burton, Ph.D., who reviewed the narrative and provided invaluable feedback.

The Women's Sports Foundation thanks its National Partners; Bank of America; Delta Air Lines, ESPN, Gatorade, Michelob ULTRA and NBC Sports for their year-round support and commitment to help strengthen and expand opportunities for all girls and women through all sports.



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