



441 G St. N.W.  
Washington, DC 20548

September 14, 2017

The Honorable Lamar Alexander  
Chairman  
The Honorable Patty Murray  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions  
United States Senate

The Honorable Virginia Foxx  
Chairwoman  
The Honorable Robert C. “Bobby” Scott  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Education and the Workforce  
House of Representatives

### **K-12 EDUCATION: High School Sports Access and Participation**

Organized sports have long been a part of the American high school experience for boys. However, the same has not been historically true for girls, who began playing high school sports in large numbers only after the passage of Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments (Title IX). Title IX prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs and activities by recipients of federal financial assistance.<sup>1</sup> Title IX typically is recognized for its role in intercollegiate athletics, but the law also applies to high school interscholastic sports programs. The Department of Education’s Title IX regulations require schools that operate or sponsor interscholastic, intercollegiate, club, or intramural sports to provide equal athletic opportunity for members of both sexes.<sup>2</sup>

Participation in organized sports is associated with many benefits, such as positive health outcomes, improved academic achievement, and increased self-esteem.<sup>3</sup> Schools are uniquely positioned to provide students with opportunities to increase physical activity and maintain active lifestyles through sports programs. However, researchers have found that girls’ access to and participation in high school interscholastic sports programs has not reached parity with

---

<sup>1</sup> Title IX is codified at 20 U.S.C. §§ 1681–1688 and the Department of Education’s Title IX regulations are available at 34 C.F.R. Part 106. Title IX applies to educational programs or activities receiving federal financial assistance, with some exceptions. 20 U.S.C. § 1681(a). For example, Title IX requirements do not apply to the membership practices of social fraternities or sororities receiving federal financial assistance. When we refer to schools in this report, we are only including schools that are recipients of federal financial assistance and thus subject to Title IX. Further, the scope of this report is limited to high school interscholastic sports programs because accurate and reliable data are available at the high school level.

<sup>2</sup> 34 C.F.R. § 106.41(c).

<sup>3</sup> GAO, *K-12 Education: School-Based Physical Education and Sports Programs*, [GAO-12-350](#) (Washington, D.C.: February 29, 2012).

boys.<sup>4</sup> In light of Title IX requirements and interest in the opportunities available to students in public high schools, you asked us to examine access to and participation in high school interscholastic sports programs. This report describes how, if at all, access to and participation in high school interscholastic sports vary by certain school characteristics and sex.

To conduct our review, we analyzed data from two U.S. Department of Education (Education) datasets. We analyzed school year 2013-14 data from Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC)—the most recent year available—on whether public high schools offered sports, the number of sports and teams they offered, and student participation in sports by sex.<sup>5</sup> We supplemented these variables with school year 2013-14 data on school characteristics from the CRDC and Education's Common Core of Data (CCD).<sup>6</sup> We analyzed students' access to high school interscholastic sports in two ways: (1) calculating the percentage of schools that offered sports, and (2) for schools that did offer sports, calculating the total number of students enrolled per team offered at the school and the breakout of sports and teams by sex. We analyzed students' participation in high school interscholastic sports by calculating the participation rate—or participation as a percentage of students enrolled—in schools that offered sports. We determined that both datasets were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report by reviewing documentation about the systems used to produce the data and interviewing Education officials. Our analyses of Education's data in this report are intended to describe access to and participation in sports by selected school characteristics and sex. We did not conduct a legal compliance review, and our analysis of data should not be used to make conclusions about the presence or absence of unlawful discrimination in high school interscholastic sports programs.<sup>7</sup> See enclosure I for more information on our methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from July 2016 to September 2017 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

---

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Bridging the Gap, *Sports Participation in Secondary Schools: Resources Available and Inequalities in Participation - A BTG Research Brief* (Ann Arbor, MI: Bridging the Gap Program, Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, 2012) and Women's Sports Foundation, *Progress Without Equity: The Provision of High School Athletic Opportunity in the United States, by Gender 1993-94 through 2005-06* (Center for Research on Physical Activity, Sport & Health, D'Youville College, SHARP Center, University of Michigan, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the CRDC, see <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/>, accessed September 7, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Specifically, we used data from the CRDC on the type of school and the student racial/ethnic composition of the school, which we used to calculate the percentage of each school's minority population. We used data from the CCD on school locale (urban, suburban, or rural) and the percentage of students in the school eligible for free or reduced price lunch, which we used as a proxy for poverty level. For more information on the CCD, see <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd>, accessed September 7, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Education performs investigations for possible Title IX violations in athletics using a range of criteria described in 34 C.F.R. § 106.41.

## Background

Within Education, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) enforces and implements Title IX<sup>8</sup>—which applies to recipients of federal financial assistance operating any education program or activity at all educational levels, including colleges, universities, and public school districts, with limited exceptions.<sup>9</sup> OCR’s core activities include administering and disseminating the CRDC; responding to civil rights complaints filed by the public and conducting proactive investigations to enforce federal civil rights laws; providing technical assistance to help institutions achieve compliance with the civil rights laws that OCR enforces; and issuing policy guidance to ensure equal access to educational opportunity. For instance, during fiscal year 2015, OCR issued a guidance package that contained a *Dear Colleague* letter describing the specific requirements and duties of Title IX coordinators,<sup>10</sup> a letter to Title IX coordinators, and a Title IX resource guide.<sup>11</sup>

### High School Sports Access and Participation Varied More by School Characteristic than by Sex

#### Access to and Participation in High School Sports Was Lower in Charter, Urban, High-Poverty, and High-Minority Schools

##### Access

The majority of public high schools (77 percent) offered sports to their students in school year 2013-14, based on our analysis of the CRDC. These schools served 88 percent of all public high school students in the nation. The percentage of students served by public high schools offering sports varied somewhat by school characteristic. As shown in figure 1, smaller percentages of students attended charter,<sup>12</sup> urban, high-poverty, or high-minority schools that offer sports compared with traditional, non-urban, lower-poverty, or lower-minority schools.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> The Department of Justice coordinates federal agency implementation and enforcement of Title IX and represents the United States and Education in Title IX enforcement actions raised in federal court litigation.

<sup>9</sup> 20 U.S.C. § 1681(a).

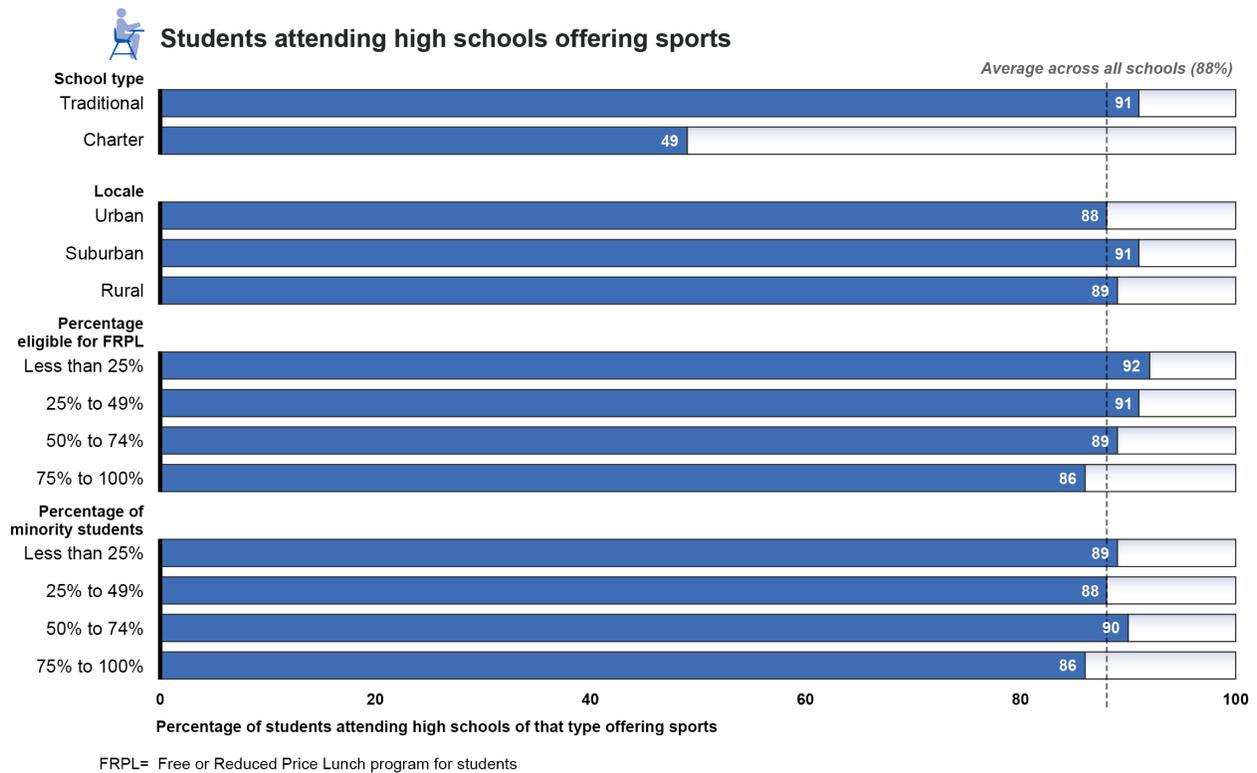
<sup>10</sup> Recipients of federal financial assistance are required to designate at least one employee to coordinate their efforts to comply with Title IX. These designees are typically called Title IX coordinators. See, for example, 34 C.F.R. § 106.8(a).

<sup>11</sup> The Title IX Coordinator guidance package is available at <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/rights/guid/ocr/title-ix-coordinators.html>, accessed August 8, 2017. Earlier Title IX guidance on athletics is available at <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/pro-students/issues/sex-issue04.html>, accessed September 7, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> We determined that the difference between charter and traditional schools was not primarily a function of school size. We divided schools into four size categories (schools with 250 students or less, 251-500 students, 501-1,000 students, and over 1,000 students). For each category, a lower percentage of charter schools offered sports compared with traditional schools. For example, among the largest schools, 60 percent of charter schools offered sports compared to 96 percent of traditional schools.

<sup>13</sup> We defined low-minority schools as those where less than 25 percent of students are minorities; high-minority schools as those where 75 percent or more of students are minorities; low-poverty schools as those where less than 25 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch; and high-poverty schools as those where 75 percent or more of students are eligible. These thresholds align with those used in previous GAO and Education work.

**Figure 1: Percentage of Students Attending Public High Schools That Offer Sports in School Year 2013-14, Overall and by School Characteristic**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection and Common Core of Data, 2013-14. | GAO-17-754R

Note: We determined that the difference between charter and traditional schools was not primarily a function of school size. We divided schools into four size categories (schools with 250 students or less, 251-500 students, 501-1,000 students, and over 1,000 students). For each category, a lower percentage of charter schools offered sports compared with traditional schools. For example, among the largest schools, 60 percent of charter schools offered sports compared to 96 percent of traditional schools. For the purposes of this analysis, we defined minority students as those who were Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, or two or more races.

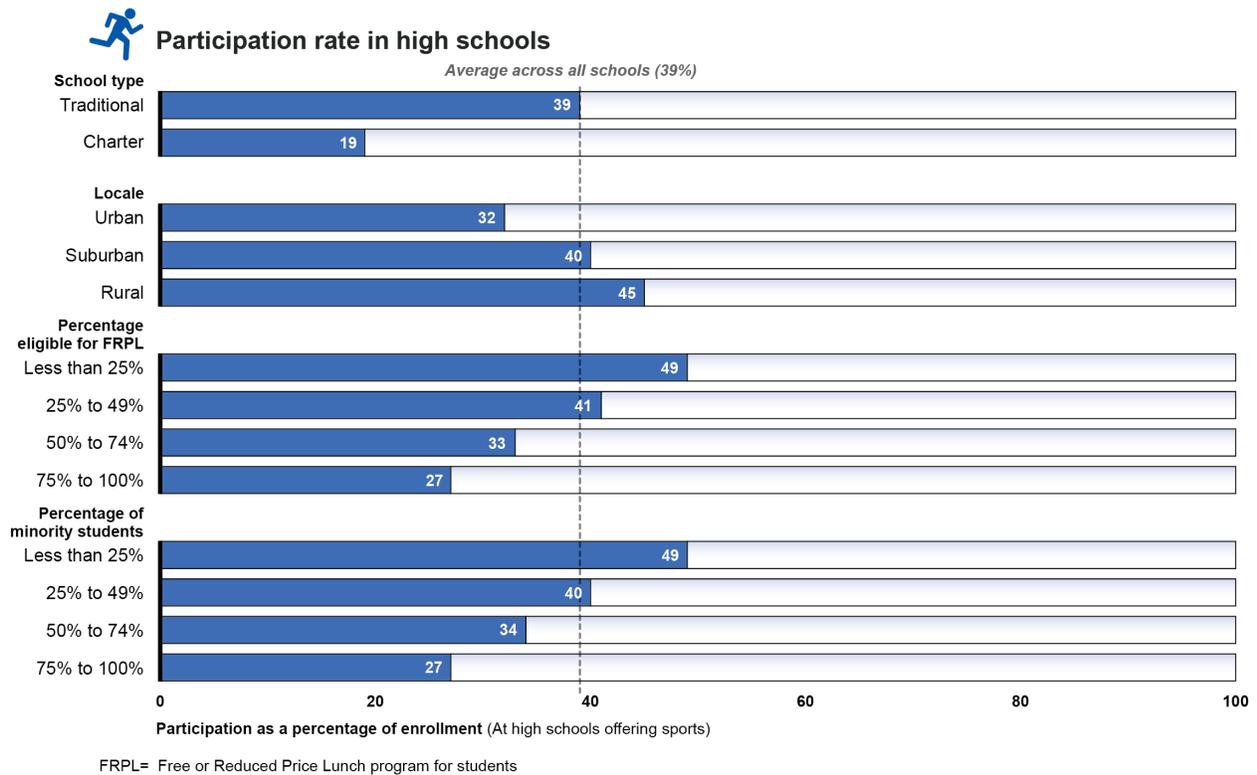
We also examined access by comparing the total number of students attending the school to the number of sports teams offered and found that, across all U.S. public high schools, there was one sports team offered for every 41 students. By this measure, students in charter, urban, high-poverty, and high-minority schools had access to fewer sports teams per capita than students in other schools. For example, charter schools averaged one team for every 68 students, and traditional schools averaged one team for every 40 students.

### Participation

As shown in figure 2, the overall student participation rate in sports—that is, participation as a percentage of enrollment—was 39 percent in school year 2013-14.<sup>14</sup> Participation rates were lower than average at charter, urban, high-poverty, and high-minority schools. For example, traditional schools had a participation rate of 39 percent, compared with 19 percent for charter schools.

<sup>14</sup> The CRDC counts a participant once for each sport he or she participated in. Because some students may participate in multiple sports, this rate does not necessarily mean that 39 percent of students participated in sports. Rather, the participation rate represents each instance of participation as a percentage of enrollment.

**Figure 2: Participation Rates in Public High Schools in School Year 2013-14, Overall and by School Characteristic**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection and Common Core of Data, 2013-14. | GAO-17-754R

Note: The participation rate is the number of sports participants as a percentage of school enrollment. Because the Civil Rights Data Collection counts a participant once for each sport he or she participated in, and some students may participate in multiple sports, this rate does not necessarily represent the percentage of students who participated in sports. Rather, the participation rate represents each instance of participation as a percentage of enrollment. For the purposes of this analysis, we defined minority students as those who were Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, or two or more races.

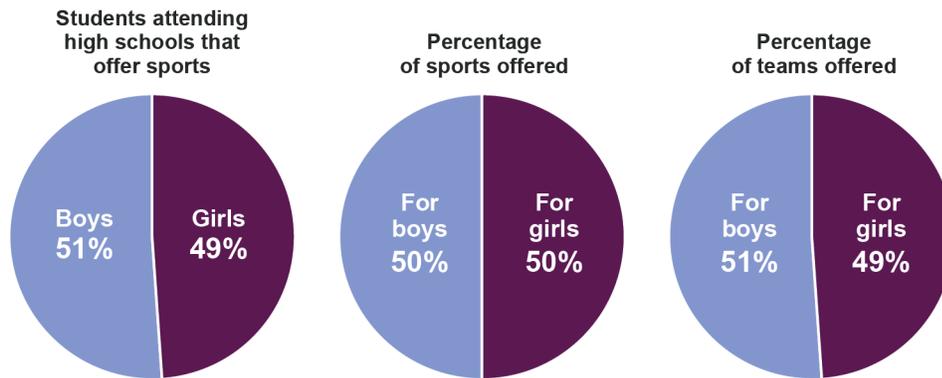
**Overall, Boys and Girls Had Similar Access; Boys Participated at Higher Rates than Girls, and Differences in Participation Rates Varied Among High Schools**

**Access**

In schools that offered sports, boys and girls had similar access to sports and teams.<sup>15</sup> (See fig. 3).

<sup>15</sup> In the CRDC, Education requires schools to report on the number of sports and teams offered for boys and girls—variables we used to measure access—and the number of sports participants of each sex, but does not require them to report data on the number of individual participation opportunities (i.e., the number of available “spots” on teams). According to some high school athletics administrators we interviewed, individual participation opportunities cannot easily be quantified because, for example, some sports teams allow all interested students to participate.

**Figure 3: Boys' and Girls' Shares of Students, Sports, and Teams in Public High Schools Offering Sports, School Year 2013-14**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection, 2013-14. | GAO-17-754R

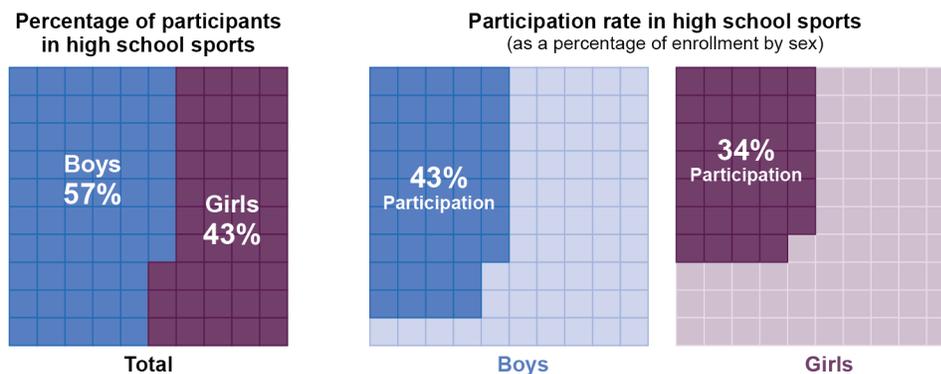
Note: We did not conduct a legal compliance review; and our analysis of data should not be used to make conclusions about the presence or absence of unlawful discrimination in high school interscholastic sports programs.

In addition, for both boys and girls, public high schools offered one sports team for every 41 students, on average. Further, while the overall number of students per team varied across school characteristics, as discussed above, in schools with similar characteristics, the numbers for boys and girls were comparable.

### Participation

Although girls' access to sports and teams was similar to boys' access, boys participated in sports in higher numbers than girls. In terms of the percentage of sports participants of each sex, a higher percentage were boys (57 percent) than girls (43 percent). In terms of participation as a percentage of enrollment, boys participated at a higher rate than girls (43 percent and 34 percent, respectively).<sup>16</sup> (See fig. 4.)

**Figure 4: Boys' and Girls' Percentage of Public High School Sports Participants and Participation Rates, School Year 2013-14**



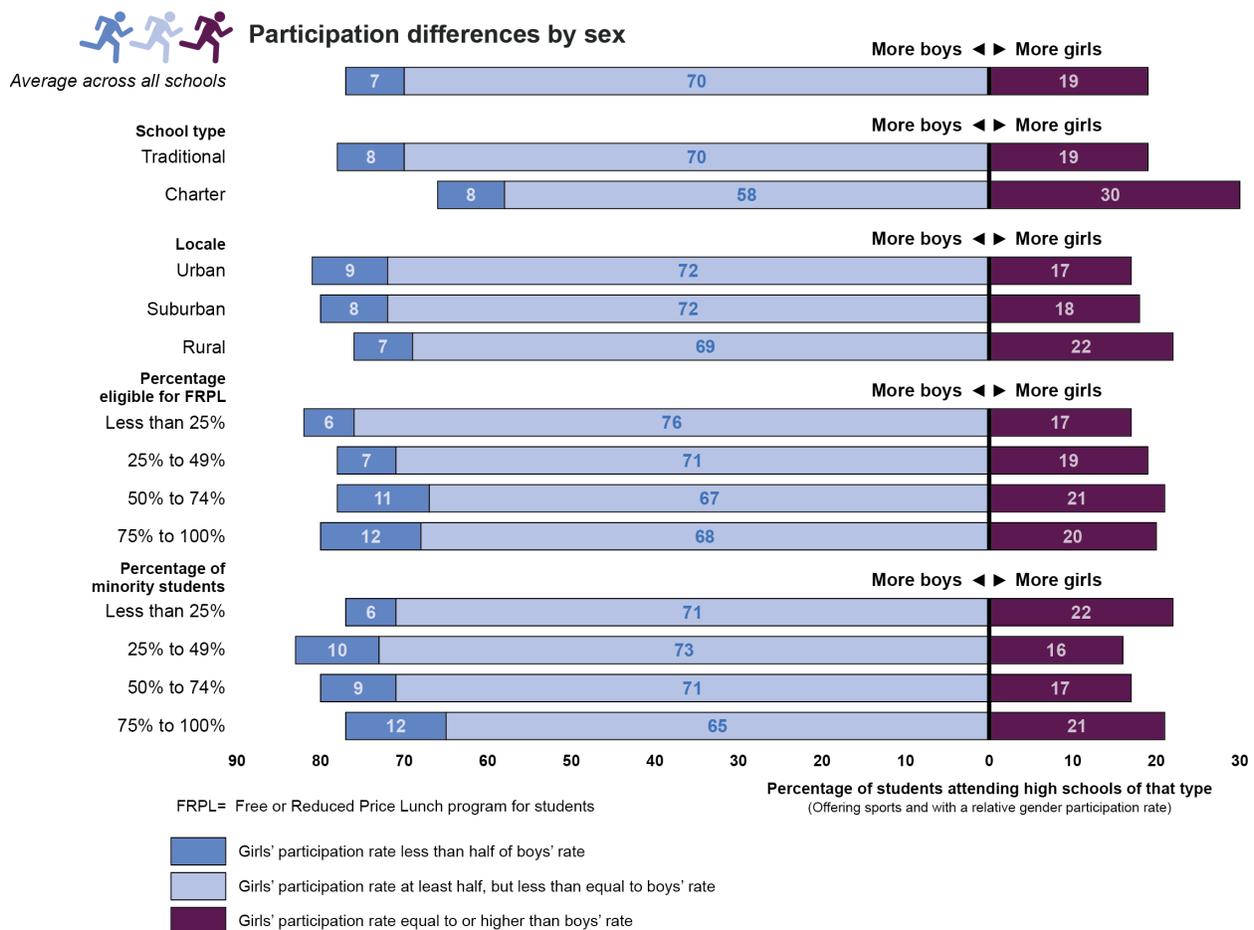
Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection, 2013-14. | GAO-17-754R

<sup>16</sup> Because the CRDC counts a participant once for each sport he or she participated in, and some students may participate in multiple sports, this rate does not necessarily mean that 43 percent of boys and 34 percent of girls participated in sports. Rather, the participation rate represents each instance of participation as a percentage of enrollment.

Note: The participation rate is the number of sports participants as a percentage of school enrollment by sex. Because the Civil Rights Data Collection counts a participant once for each sport he or she participated in, and some students may participate in multiple sports, this rate does not necessarily represent the percentage of students who participated in sports. Rather, the participation rate represents each instance of participation as a percentage of enrollment. These data exclude the 2 percent of high schools offering sports that did not report sports participation data.

While girls participated in sports at lower rates than boys overall, the relationship between girls' and boys' participation rates varied among schools. Among all students attending U.S. public high schools that offered sports, the majority (77 percent) attended schools where girls' participation rates were lower than boys' participation rates. However, 19 percent of students attended schools where girls' participation rates were equal to or higher than their male peers. (See fig. 5.)

**Figure 5. Percent of Students Attending Public High Schools with Different Relative Girls' and Boys' Sports Participation Rates, by School Characteristic, School Year 2013-14**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection and Common Core of Data, 2013-14. | GAO-17-754R

Note: The participation rate is the number of sports participants as a percentage of school enrollment. The Civil Rights Data collection counts a participant once for each sport in which they participated. For the purposes of this analysis, we defined minority students as those who were Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, or two or more races. Percentages do not add to 100 because 2 percent of high schools did not report sports participation data, and due to rounding.

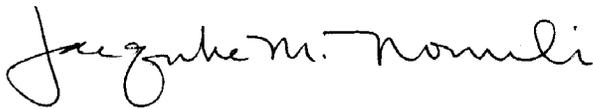
## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of Education for review and comment. Education provided technical comments on the report, which we incorporated as appropriate.

-----

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Education, and other interested parties. In addition, this report will be available at no charge on GAO's website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff members have questions about this report, please contact me at (617) 788-0580 or [nowickij@gao.gov](mailto:nowickij@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Key contributors to this report were Jamila Jones Kennedy, Assistant Director; Lauren Gilbertson, Analyst-in-Charge; James Bennett; Evelyn Calderon; Holly Dye; John Mingus; Benjamin Sinoff; and Andrew Stavisky. Also contributing to this report were Deborah Bland, William MacBlane, Jeffrey Miller, Paul Schearf, Sonya Vartivarian, and Khristi Wilkins.



Jacqueline M. Nowicki  
Director, Education, Workforce,  
and Income Security Issues

## Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The objective of this report was to examine how, if at all, access to and participation in high school interscholastic sports vary by certain school characteristics and sex. To address this objective, we analyzed data from two U.S. Department of Education (Education) datasets—the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) and the Common Core of Data (CCD). The CRDC, administered biennially by Education’s Office for Civil Rights, collects a variety of information on the nation’s public schools, including student enrollment and educational programs and services like interscholastic sports. In school year 2013-14—the most recent year data were available—the CRDC collected data from every public school in the United States, and included data for traditional public schools (pre-K through 12th grade), alternative schools, magnet schools, and charter schools.<sup>17</sup> The CCD is administered annually by Education’s National Center for Education Statistics and collects basic demographic and non-fiscal data about all public schools in the United States. State educational agency officials provide Education with these data for their schools and school districts. We determined that the data from both datasets were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report by reviewing documentation about the systems used to produce the data and interviewing Education officials. Our analyses of Education’s data in this report are intended to describe access to and participation in sports by selected school characteristics and sex. We did not conduct a legal compliance review and our analysis of data should not be used to make conclusions about the presence or absence of unlawful discrimination in high school interscholastic sports programs.<sup>18</sup>

In this report, we use the terms access and participation to describe our analysis of certain variables collected in the 2013-14 CRDC on high school interscholastic sports. To answer the objective, we analyzed students’ access to high school interscholastic sports in two ways: (1) calculating the percentage of students at schools that offered sports, and (2) for schools that did offer sports, calculating the total number of students enrolled per teams offered at the school and the breakout of sports and teams by sex. We analyzed students’ participation in high school interscholastic sports by calculating the participation rate—or participation as a percentage of students enrolled—in schools that offered sports. We calculated the participation rates overall and for each sex from the total number of boys and girls enrolled in high school.<sup>19</sup> We also analyzed differences in access to and participation in high school sports by the following school characteristics: school type (traditional public schools or charter schools); locale (urban, suburban, or rural); poverty level; and minority level.<sup>20</sup> For these analyses, we matched schools

---

<sup>17</sup> In school year 2013-14, there were approximately 17,000 school districts and 96,000 schools.

<sup>18</sup> Education performs investigations for possible Title IX violations in athletics using a range of criteria described in 34 C.F.R. § 106.41.

<sup>19</sup> The CRDC counts a participant once for each sport in which he or she participated. Because some students may participate in multiple sports, the participation rate counts the instances of sports participation as a percentage of enrollment, rather than the percentage of students in the school who participated in sports. Two percent of all high schools that offered sports did not report sports participation data and therefore are not included in this part of the analysis.

<sup>20</sup> We grouped magnet schools with traditional schools for the analysis. Other types of schools such as juvenile justice facilities, special education schools, and alternative schools were excluded from the analysis. For the purposes of this analysis, the high school population was defined as schools that offer grades 9 through 12. Schools in which 25 percent of students or less were eligible for free or reduced price lunch or where 25 percent of students or less were minorities were described in this report as “low-poverty” or “low-minority,” respectively. Schools in which 75 to 100 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced price lunch or where 75 to 100 percent of students were minorities were described as “high-poverty” or “high-minority,” respectively.

## Enclosure I

in the CRDC for school year 2013-14 to schools in the CCD for school year 2013-14 and excluded schools for which there was not a match.<sup>21</sup> We used the rate of students who were eligible for free or reduced price lunch as a proxy to identify the poverty level of schools that offered sports to their students.<sup>22</sup> We determined schools' minority levels using the rate of students who were Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, or two or more races enrolled in schools that offer sports. We grouped schools into quartiles based on poverty and minority levels. We also reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations and literature and interviewed key stakeholder groups and Education officials.

We conducted this performance audit from July 2016 to September 2017 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

(101044)

---

<sup>21</sup> The National Center for Education Statistics collects demographic data through the CCD, including data on locale and student eligibility for free or reduced price lunch.

<sup>22</sup> The Department of Agriculture's National School Lunch Program provides low-cost or free lunches to children in schools. Children are eligible for free lunches if their household income is below 130 percent of federal poverty guidelines or if they meet certain automatic eligibility criteria, such as eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Students are eligible for reduced price lunches if their household income is between 130 percent and 185 percent of federal poverty guidelines. For example, the maximum household income for a family of four to qualify for free lunch benefits was \$30,615 in school year 2013-2014. Recent changes in the school lunch program may result in changes in how schools implement the program and thus how they report counts of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch to Education. These changes could affect data analysis using free or reduced price lunch eligibility as a proxy for poverty. We do not have evidence that these changes substantively affected our analysis.

---

---

This is a work of the U.S. government and is not subject to copyright protection in the United States. The published product may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without further permission from GAO. However, because this work may contain copyrighted images or other material, permission from the copyright holder may be necessary if you wish to reproduce this material separately.

---

---

## GAO's Mission

The Government Accountability Office, the audit, evaluation, and investigative arm of Congress, exists to support Congress in meeting its constitutional responsibilities and to help improve the performance and accountability of the federal government for the American people. GAO examines the use of public funds; evaluates federal programs and policies; and provides analyses, recommendations, and other assistance to help Congress make informed oversight, policy, and funding decisions. GAO's commitment to good government is reflected in its core values of accountability, integrity, and reliability.

---

## Obtaining Copies of GAO Reports and Testimony

The fastest and easiest way to obtain copies of GAO documents at no cost is through GAO's website (<http://www.gao.gov>). Each weekday afternoon, GAO posts on its website newly released reports, testimony, and correspondence. To have GAO e-mail you a list of newly posted products, go to <http://www.gao.gov> and select "E-mail Updates."

---

## Order by Phone

The price of each GAO publication reflects GAO's actual cost of production and distribution and depends on the number of pages in the publication and whether the publication is printed in color or black and white. Pricing and ordering information is posted on GAO's website, <http://www.gao.gov/ordering.htm>.

Place orders by calling (202) 512-6000, toll free (866) 801-7077, or TDD (202) 512-2537.

Orders may be paid for using American Express, Discover Card, MasterCard, Visa, check, or money order. Call for additional information.

---

## Connect with GAO

Connect with GAO on [Facebook](#), [Flickr](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).  
Subscribe to our [RSS Feeds](#) or [E-mail Updates](#). Listen to our [Podcasts](#).  
Visit GAO on the web at [www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov).

---

## To Report Fraud, Waste, and Abuse in Federal Programs

Contact:

Website: <http://www.gao.gov/fraudnet/fraudnet.htm>

E-mail: [fraudnet@gao.gov](mailto:fraudnet@gao.gov)

Automated answering system: (800) 424-5454 or (202) 512-7470

---

## Congressional Relations

Katherine Siggerud, Managing Director, [siggerudk@gao.gov](mailto:siggerudk@gao.gov), (202) 512-4400, U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7125, Washington, DC 20548

---

## Public Affairs

Chuck Young, Managing Director, [youngc1@gao.gov](mailto:youngc1@gao.gov), (202) 512-4800, U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7149, Washington, DC 20548

---

## Strategic Planning and External Liaison

James-Christian Blockwood, Managing Director, [spel@gao.gov](mailto:spel@gao.gov), (202) 512-4707, U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7814, Washington, DC 20548



Please Print on Recycled Paper.