# **Four Myths About Trans Athletes, Debunked**

Upholding trans athletes' rights requires rooting out the inaccurate beliefs underlying harmful policies sweeping through state legislatures.

**FACT: Including trans athletes will benefit everyone.**

**MYTH: The participation of trans athletes hurts cis women.**

Many who oppose the inclusion of trans athletes erroneously claim that allowing trans athletes to compete will harm cisgender women. This divide and conquer tactic get it exactly wrong. Excluding women who are trans hurts all women. It invites gender policing that could subject any woman to invasive tests or accusations of being “too masculine” or “too good” at their sport to be a “real” woman. In Idaho, the ACLU represents two young women, one trans and one cis, both of whom are hurt by the law that was passed targeting trans athletes.

Further, this myth [reinforces stereotypes](https://www.aclu.org/blog/lgbt-rights/transgender-rights/banning-trans-girls-school-sports-neither-feminist-nor-legal) that women are weak and in need of protection. Politicians have used the “protection” trope time and time again, including in 2016 when they tried banning trans people from public restrooms by creating the debunked [“bathroom predator”](https://abcnews.go.com/US/sexual-assault-domestic-violence-organizations-debunk-bathroom-predator/story?id=38604019) myth. The real motive is never about protection — it’s about excluding trans people from yet another public space. The arena of sports is no different.

On the other hand, including trans athletes will promote values of non-discrimination and inclusion among all student athletes. As long-time coach and sports policy expert Helen Carroll explains, efforts to exclude subsets of girls from sports, “can [undermine team unity](https://www.aclu.org/legal-document/hecox-v-little-carroll-declaration) and also encourage divisiveness by policing who is ‘really’ a girl.” Dr. Mary Fry adds that youth derive the most benefits from athletics when they are exposed to [caring environments](https://www.aclu.org/legal-document/hecox-v-little-fry-declaration) where teammates are supported by each other and by coaches. Banning some girls from athletics because they are transgender undermines this cohesion and compromises the wide-ranging benefits that youth get from sports.

**FACT: Trans athletes do not have an unfair advantage in sports.**

**MYTH: Trans athletes’ physiological characteristics provide an unfair advantage over cis athletes.**

Women and girls who are trans face discrimination and violence that makes it difficult to even stay in school. According to the [U.S. Trans Survey](http://www.ustranssurvey.org/reports#USTS), 22 percent of trans women who were perceived as trans in school were harassed so badly they had to leave school because of it. Another 10 percent were kicked out of school. The idea that women and girls have an advantage because they are trans ignores the actual conditions of their lives.

Trans athletes vary in athletic ability just like cisgender athletes. “One high jumper could be taller and have longer legs than another, but the other could have perfect form, and then do better,” explains [Andraya Yearwood](https://www.aclu.org/blog/lgbt-rights/transgender-rights/banning-trans-girls-school-sports-neither-feminist-nor-legal), a student track athlete and [ACLU client](https://www.aclu.org/cases/soule-et-al-v-ct-association-schools-et-al). “One sprinter could have parents who spend so much money on personal training for their child, which in turn, would cause that child to run faster,” she adds. In Connecticut, where cisgender girl runners have tried to block Andraya from participating in the sport she loves, the very same cis girls who have claimed that trans athletes have an “unfair” advantage have consistently performed as well as or better than transgender competitors.

“A person’s genetic make-up and internal and external reproductive anatomy are [not useful indicators](https://www.aclu.org/legal-document/hecox-v-little-safer-declaration) of athletic performance, ”according to Dr. Joshua D. Safer. “For a trans woman athlete who meets [NCAA standards](https://www.ncaa.org/sites/default/files/Transgender_Handbook_2011_Final.pdf), “there is no inherent reason why her physiological characteristics related to athletic performance should be treated differently from the physiological characteristics of a non-transgender woman.”

**FACT: Trans girls are girls.**

**MYTH: Sex is binary, apparent at birth, and identifiable through singular biological characteristics.**

Girls who are trans are told repeatedly that they are not “real” girls and boys who are trans are told they are not “real” boys. Non-binary people are told that their gender is not real and that they must be either boys or girls. None of these statements are true. Trans people are exactly who we say we are.

There is no one way for women’s bodies to be. Women, including women who are transgender, intersex, or disabled, have a range of different physical characteristics.

“A person’s sex is made up of multiple biological characteristics and they [may not all align](https://www.aclu.org/legal-document/hecox-v-little-safer-declaration) as typically male or female in a given person,” says Dr. Safer. Further, many people who are not trans can have hormones levels outside of the range considered typical of a cis person of their assigned sex.

When a person does not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth, they must be able to transition socially — and that includes participating in sports consistent with their gender identity. According to Dr. Deanna Adkins, excluding trans athletes can be [deeply harmful and disruptive](https://www.aclu.org/legal-document/hecox-v-little-adkins-declaration) to treatment. “I know from experience with my patients that it can be extremely harmful for a transgender young person to be excluded from the team consistent with their gender identity.”

**FACT: Trans people belong on the same teams as other students.**

**MYTH: Trans students need separate teams.**

Trans people have the same right to play sports as anybody else. “For the past nine years,” [explains Carroll](https://www.aclu.org/legal-document/hecox-v-little-carroll-declaration), “transgender athletes have been able to compete on teams at NCAA member collegiates and universities consistent with their gender identity like all other student-athletes with no disruption to women’s collegiate sports.”

Excluding trans people from any space or activity is harmful, particularly for trans youth. A trans high school student, for example, may experience [detrimental effects](https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/AFSP-Williams-Suicide-Report-Final.pdf) to their physical and emotional wellbeing when they are pushed out of affirming spaces and communities. As Lindsay Hecox says, [“I just want to run.”](https://www.acluidaho.org/en/press-releases/aclu-legal-voice-file-lawsuit-challenging-idahos-law-targeting-transgender-student)

According to Dr. Adkins, “When a school or athletic organization denies transgender students the ability to [participate equally](https://www.aclu.org/legal-document/hecox-v-little-adkins-declaration) in athletics because they are transgender, that condones, reinforces, and affirms the transgender students’ social status as outsiders or misfits who deserve the hostility they experience from peers.”

Believing and perpetuating myths and misconceptions about trans athletes is harmful. Denying trans people the right to participate is discrimination and it doesn’t just hurt trans people, it hurts all of us.

1. **Do trans athletes have an unfair advantage?**

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlCbA6GMtiA**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlCbA6GMtiA)

1. **Trans women vs women in sport**

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mZVQa4Pv\_k**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mZVQa4Pv_k)

1. **Transgender athletes banned**

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUPF3MWbZYw**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUPF3MWbZYw)

**Most Americans against trans athletes**

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By [Matt Lavietes](https://www.nbcnews.com/author/matt-lavietes-ncpn1280564)

More Americans than before oppose transgender athletes competing in sports that align with their gender identity and say transitioning genders is “morally wrong,” according to a [report](https://news.gallup.com/poll/507023/say-birth-gender-dictate-sports-participation.aspx) from Gallup released Monday.

The survey — conducted from May 1 to May 24 via telephone interviews with roughly 1,000 adults living in the U.S. — found that 69% of people say that transgender athletes should only be allowed to compete on sports teams that correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth, compared with 62% in 2021. It also shows that a slightly higher share of Americans, 55%, consider “changing one’s gender” to be more “morally wrong” than in 2021, when it was 51%.

Gallup’s findings come amid an unprecedented number of anti-LGBTQ bills, [491](https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights?state=), introduced by conservative lawmakers in state legislatures across the country, according to the American Civil Liberties Union, with the majority of the legislation affecting trans Americans.

“The attacks on trans people have been very acute and vicious,” Alejandra Caraballo, a trans activist and clinical instructor at Harvard Law School’s Cyberlaw Clinic, said. “It’s basically been the only thing that the far-right talks about so it’s not surprising that, in light of all of these concentrated attacks against trans people, that support has started to dip.”

Within the last handful of years, 22 states have enacted bills that would restrict trans athletes from competing on sports teams that correspond with their gender identities, and 20 states have enacted measures to restrict transition-related health care, according to Movement Advancement Project, an LGBTQ think tank.

Supporters of the legislation argue that trans athletes — specifically trans girls and women — have unfair competitive advantages in sports, and that it is necessary to protect children from making transition-related decisions they may later regret. Critics say that the measures are discriminatory and pose a particular risk to trans youths, who suffer from [disproportionate rates](https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-health-and-wellness/hormone-therapy-improves-mental-health-transgender-youths-new-study-fi-rcna66306) of suicidal ideation.

A majority of the nation’s top medical associations in the U.S. — including the [American Medical Association](https://www.ama-assn.org/press-center/press-releases/ama-states-stop-interfering-health-care-transgender-children), the [American Academy of Paediatrics](https://publications.aap.org/aapnews/news/12780?autologincheck=redirected) and the [American Psychological Association](https://www.apa.org/about/policy/resolution-supporting-gender-diverse-children.pdf) — oppose legislation restricting transition-related care.

Josie Caballero, who is the director of the U.S. transgender survey and special projects at advocacy group the National Centre for Transgender Equality, said that although Gallup’s data showed a short-term uptick in opposition to some trans freedoms, she is “hopeful” things will turn around in the coming years.

She pointed to long-term sentiments on same-sex marriage, which mirrored the current ebb and flow of trans rights throughout the early 2000s and 2010s. During that time, marriage equality was heavily debated at the state and federal level, until the Supreme Court legalized marriage equality nationwide in 2015.

Support for same-sex marriage has increased almost steadily since 2015, rising to an all-time-high of 71% last year, according to a separate [report](https://news.gallup.com/poll/506636/sex-marriage-support-holds-high.aspx) from Gallup released this month.

Caballero added that majority opposition to trans people competing in sports and people transitioning genders could be because the majority of Americans do not personally know a trans person.

Only 39% of Americans say they know someone who is trans, compared with 31% in 2021, according to the new poll. Those who know a trans person are [more likely to say](https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/majority-americans-support-trans-troops-oppose-trans-athletes-gallup-f-rcna1034) trans athletes should be able to play on a team of their gender identity versus those who don’t know a trans person — 30% compared with 23%.

“It’s natural for people to have questions when they’re learning something new,” Caballero said.

Caraballo and Caballero noted that the new data shows that future generations of policymakers are more likely to be in favour of trans people.

On the issue of trans inclusion in sports, young adults are also more supportive than other subgroups and are one of the only subgroups whose support has grown since 2021, with 41% of them in favour now versus 35% in 2021. And 60% of 18- to 29-year-olds say changing one’s gender is morally acceptable, compared with less than a third of Americans over the age of 50.