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Corresponding author:

Virginia Pohl

virginia.pohl@hmn.org

Author Affiliation:

Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine.

Sports Participation and Mental Health Among Transgender and Gender-Diverse Youth and Young Adults: A Scoping Review Protocol

Pohl, V; Apopei, A; Fattahi, H; Pauselli, L.

ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION**Support** - No support.**Review Stage at time of this submission** - Data analysis.**Conflicts of interest** - None declared.**INPLASY registration number:** INPLASY202690063**Amendments** - This protocol was registered with the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (INPLASY) on 14 September 2026 and was last updated on 14 September 2026.**INTRODUCTION**

Review question / Objective This scoping review aims to characterize the existing literature examining sports participation, sports-related experiences, and mental health and psychosocial outcomes among transgender and gender-diverse (TGD) youth and young adults aged 30 years or younger. Specifically, the review seeks to: (1) describe patterns of sports participation; (2) identify barriers and facilitators to sports participation, including discrimination, bullying, exclusion, and supportive experiences; (3) summarize reported mental health and psychosocial outcomes associated with sports participation or sports-related experiences; and (4) identify gaps in the existing literature.

Using the Population–Concept–Context framework, the population consists of TGD individuals aged 30 years or younger; the concept includes sports participation, sports-related experiences, barriers, facilitators, and associated mental health or psychosocial outcomes; and the

context includes organized, recreational, school-based, collegiate, and competitive sports settings. This scoping review aims to characterize the existing literature examining sports participation, sports-related experiences, and mental health and psychosocial outcomes among transgender and gender-diverse (TGD) youth. Specifically, the review seeks to: (1) describe patterns of sports participation among TGD youth and young adults; (2) identify barriers and facilitators to sports participation, including discrimination, bullying, exclusion, and supportive experiences; (3) summarize reported mental health and psychosocial outcomes associated with sports participation or sports-related experiences; and (4) identify gaps in the existing literature.

Using the Population–Concept–Context framework, the population is TGD youth and young adults; the concept includes sports participation, exclusion, barriers, facilitators, and associated mental health or psychosocial outcomes; and the context includes organized, recreational, school-based, and competitive sports settings.

Background Participation in sports and physical activity during adolescence and young adulthood has been associated with psychological and social benefits, including greater social connectedness, self-esteem, and well-being and lower levels of depressive symptoms. Transgender and gender-diverse (TGD) young people experience disproportionately high rates of mental health concerns while also facing unique barriers to sports participation, including discrimination, bullying, exclusion, concerns regarding gendered facilities, and policies restricting participation according to gender identity. Conversely, affirming and inclusive sports environments may provide opportunities for social connection, belonging, physical activity, and psychological well-being. Although a growing literature has examined sports experiences among TGD youth and young adults, evidence regarding participation, barriers, and associated mental health outcomes remains dispersed across quantitative and qualitative studies. Participation in sports during adolescence has been associated with psychological and social benefits, including greater social connectedness, self-esteem, and well-being and lower levels of depressive symptoms. Transgender and gender-diverse (TGD) youth and young adults experience disproportionately high rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidality compared with their cisgender peers, while also participating in organized sports at lower rates. TGD youth and young adults may encounter unique barriers to sports participation, including discrimination, bullying, exclusion, concerns regarding gendered facilities, and policies restricting participation according to gender identity. Conversely, affirming and inclusive sports environments may provide opportunities for social connection, belonging, physical activity, and psychological well-being. Although a growing literature has examined sports experiences among TGD youth and young adults, evidence regarding participation, barriers, and associated mental health outcomes remains dispersed across quantitative and qualitative studies.

Rationale Previous reviews have examined physical activity, exercise, and sport participation experiences among transgender and gender-diverse populations, including a 2024 scoping review of individuals aged 10–25 years. However, the literature has continued to expand, and the relationship between sports participation and specific mental health and psychosocial outcomes among TGD youth and young adults has not been comprehensively mapped using recent evidence. This scoping review focuses specifically on sports participation, barriers and facilitators, sports-

related experiences, and associated mental health and psychosocial outcomes among TGD individuals aged 30 years or younger. By incorporating literature through April 2026, this review will update and extend prior syntheses and identify areas of consistency, emerging evidence, and remaining gaps.

METHODS

Strategy of data synthesis PubMed and APA PsycINFO were searched on April 10, 2026. The PubMed search yielded 84 records and the APA PsycINFO search yielded 161 records, for a total of 245 records. After removal of 13 duplicate records, 232 unique records remained for title and abstract screening.

PubMed search strategy:

(transgender[Title/Abstract] OR "gender diverse"[Title/Abstract] OR "gender minority"[Title/Abstract] OR "gender nonconforming"[Title/Abstract] OR "gender-expansive"[Title/Abstract] OR "trans youth"[Title/Abstract] OR "transgender youth"[Title/Abstract] OR "sexual and gender minorities"[MeSH])

AND

(sport*[Title/Abstract] OR athletic*[Title/Abstract] OR athlete*[Title/Abstract] OR "physical activity"[Title/Abstract] OR "physical education"[Title/Abstract] OR exercise[Title/Abstract] OR "school sports"[Title/Abstract] OR "team sports"[Title/Abstract] OR "extracurricular activities"[Title/Abstract])

AND

("mental health"[Title/Abstract] OR depression[Title/Abstract] OR anxiety[Title/Abstract] OR suicid*[Title/Abstract] OR "psychological distress"[Title/Abstract] OR wellbeing[Title/Abstract] OR "school connectedness"[Title/Abstract] OR belonging[Title/Abstract] OR "self esteem"[Title/Abstract] OR stigma[Title/Abstract] OR discrimination[Title/Abstract] OR psychosocial[Title/Abstract])

AND

(adolescent[MeSH] OR child[MeSH] OR "young adult"[MeSH] OR pediatric*[Title/Abstract] OR youth[Title/Abstract] OR "young adult"[Title/Abstract])

This search yielded 84 records.

APA PsycINFO search strategy:

(transgender* OR "gender diverse" OR "gender minority" OR "gender nonconforming" OR "gender-expansive" OR "trans youth" OR "transgender youth")

AND

(sport* OR athlet* OR "team sport*" OR "school sport*" OR "competitive sport*" OR "organized sport*")

AND

("mental health" OR depression OR anxiety OR suicid* OR "psychological distress" OR wellbeing OR "school connectedness" OR belonging OR "self esteem" OR stigma OR discrimination OR psychosocial)

AND

(adolescen* OR youth OR child* OR pediatric* OR "young adult*" OR college OR university).

This search yielded 161 records.

Because of anticipated heterogeneity in study designs, sports-related exposures and experiences, and mental health or psychosocial outcomes, meta-analysis was not planned. Findings will instead be synthesized descriptively and thematically. Quantitative findings will be summarized according to sports participation or sports-related exposure and reported mental health or psychosocial outcomes. Qualitative findings will be organized according to recurring themes, including barriers and facilitators to participation, discrimination, exclusion, belonging, and perceived psychological and social effects of sports participation.

Eligibility criteria Population: Studies examining transgender and gender-diverse children, adolescents, youth, and young adults 30 years old or younger were eligible. Studies were excluded if the population of interest was older than 30.

Concept: Eligible studies examined sports or athletic participation, sports-related experiences, barriers or facilitators to participation, exclusion from sports, sports-related discrimination or bullying, or policies affecting participation, together with a mental health or psychosocial outcome or experience. Outcomes of interest included depression, anxiety, suicidality or self-harm, psychological distress, well-being, self-esteem, social connectedness, belonging, stigma, discrimination, and related psychosocial outcomes.

Context: Sports participation across organized, recreational, school-based, collegiate, club, or competitive settings was considered.

Types of evidence: Peer-reviewed original quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies were eligible. Reviews, editorials, commentaries, protocols, and publications without original data were excluded. Studies were also

excluded if they did not examine a transgender or gender-diverse population 30 years or younger, a sports-related exposure or experience, or a relevant mental health or psychosocial outcome.

Source of evidence screening and selection

The database searches identified 245 records. After removal of 13 duplicates, 232 unique records underwent title and abstract screening against prespecified eligibility criteria. Potentially eligible records then underwent full-text review. Screening was conducted using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, including a population age cutoff of 30 years or younger. Disagreements regarding eligibility between reviewers were resolved through discussion and consensus, with referral to a senior review team member if consensus could not be reached. Reasons for exclusion at the full-text stage were documented. The study selection process will be reported using a PRISMA flow diagram.

Data management Search results were imported into Rayyan for duplicate removal and title/abstract and full-text screening. Screening decisions and reasons for exclusion were recorded in Rayyan. Data from included studies were charted and managed in Google Sheets using a standardized extraction form capturing study characteristics, participant characteristics, sports-related exposures or experiences, mental health and psychosocial outcomes, and key findings. Any changes to the data-charting framework were documented as the review progressed.

Reporting results / Analysis of the evidence

Included studies will be summarized using descriptive and narrative synthesis. Study characteristics will be described according to publication year, country, study design, sample characteristics, sports-related exposure or experience, and mental health or psychosocial outcomes. Because substantial heterogeneity in study designs, exposures, and outcome measures is anticipated, meta-analysis is not planned. Quantitative findings will be summarized descriptively, while qualitative findings will be organized thematically to identify recurring experiences, barriers, facilitators, discrimination, exclusion, belonging, and perceived psychological or social effects associated with sports participation. Areas of consistency, heterogeneity, and gaps in the literature will also be identified.

Presentation of the results Study selection will be presented using a PRISMA flow diagram. A study characteristics table will summarize included studies by author, year, country, study design,

sample characteristics, sports-related exposure or experience, mental health or psychosocial outcomes, and principal findings. Additional tables or figures may organize findings according to sports participation, barriers and facilitators, discrimination or exclusion, and mental health outcomes. Narrative synthesis will accompany these tables to describe major patterns, themes, and gaps in the evidence.

Language restriction Only studies published in English were included.

Country(ies) involved United States of America.

Other relevant information This protocol was registered retrospectively. Database searches were conducted on April 10, 2026. The searches identified 245 records; after removal of 13 duplicates, 232 unique records underwent screening. At the time of registration, study selection had been completed and data extraction and synthesis were underway. Retrospective registration was undertaken to improve transparency and provide a publicly accessible record of the review methodology.

Keywords transgender; gender diverse; youth; young adults; sports; athletics; mental health; psychosocial outcomes; sports participation; discrimination; inclusion.

Dissemination plans Findings will be submitted for presentation at relevant scientific conferences and prepared for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. Results may also be disseminated through academic presentations and educational forums related to child and adolescent psychiatry, young adult mental health, LGBTQ+ health, and sports participation.

Contributions of each author

Author 1 - Virginia Pohl - Conducted the database searches and primary title/abstract and full-text screening; contributed to data extraction, analysis, and manuscript drafting and revision. Author 1 did the initial records search, abstract screening, and full text screening. They also assisted with data extraction and helped draft the manuscript.

Email: virginia.pohl@hmhn.org

Author 2 - Adrian Apopei - Conducted independent second-reviewer title/abstract and full-text screening; contributed to data extraction and manuscript drafting and revision. Author 2 conducted a second abstract & full text screening. They also assisted with data extraction and helped draft the manuscript.

Email: adrian.apopei@hmhn.org

Author 3 - Hossein Fattahi - Contributed to development of the eligibility criteria and review methodology and contributed to manuscript drafting and revision. This author contributed to developing the selection criteria, and helped draft the manuscript.

Email: hossein.fattahi@nyu.edu

Author 4 - Luca Pauselli - Provided project supervision, adjudicated review decisions when disagreements arose, and contributed to manuscript drafting and critical revision.

Email: luca.pauselli@hmhn.org