

HOW DEMOGRAPHICS SHAPE PARTICIPATION

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY LEVELS AND EXPERIENCES BY GENDER

Understanding gender differences in physical activity participation often begins with examining girls' early experiences of sport and physical education, as these formative years strongly shape later engagement.

Evidence from the Youth Sport Trust's *Girls Active Survey* (2015), which gathered 17,971 responses from girls aged 5–18 across 137 schools in England, highlights consistent gender gaps in both attitudes and participation. The report found that girls were 3.8 times more likely than boys to say they did not enjoy taking part in PE. Whereas over three-quarters of boys reported wanting additional PE and more active break or lesson time. For girls, PE enjoyment also falls from 86% at age 7–8 to 56% at age 14–15 (Youth Sport Annual Report 2025). Girls were also 3.4 times more likely to lack confidence in physical activity and twice as likely as boys not to achieve the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity.

Recent evidence reinforces that these gender differences persist beyond early schooling and remain visible across the life course. Sport England Active Lives data used by The Youth Sport Trust (2025) reports that boys remain more active than girls overall, with 51% meeting recommended activity levels, compared to 45% of girls. While the gender gap widens at ages 5–7 and narrows slightly in mid-adolescence (13–16), girls still participate less at every stage. Other coverage of the Youth Sport Trust *Girls Active* surveys shows similar gender-based differences in participation and confidence in physical activity -- girls are consistently less active and less confident than boys. Previous reports (e.g., *Girls Active* data from prior years) similarly highlighted that girls have lower physical activity levels and enjoyment compared to boys. The Trust's 2025 data *does not* show the gender gap closing; it shows that girls remain less active than boys, with only marginal differences year-on-year if any. Because the Active Lives and *Girls Active* data series run over multiple years, the persistent 6% gap suggests no substantial narrowing in recent cycles.

This pattern aligns with global data. Guthold et al. (2020), analysing adolescent activity across 146 countries, show that insufficient physical activity is now the global norm. In 2016, 81% of adolescents did not meet recommended guidelines, with girls consistently less active than boys (84.7% vs 77.6%). Importantly, while boys' activity levels showed a small improvement between 2001 and 2016, girls' levels remained largely unchanged, leading to a gradual widening of inequalities over time.

Longitudinal and systematic review evidence indicates that these disparities originate earlier than often assumed. Farooq et al. (2019) demonstrate that declines in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) begin in childhood, from around age 6 in girls and age 9 in boys. Girls' activity falls faster, declining on average 5.3% per year compared with 3.4% in boys. The largest reductions appear around age 9 and again near age 13. Notably, activity decreases occur on

UNDERSTANDING THE NEXT GENERATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS



both weekdays and weekends, with larger drops at weekends, suggesting reductions in informal and self-directed activity alongside school-based sport. Because these findings rely on accelerometer data, they provide objective confirmation that disengagement is gradual, sustained, and established well before adolescence. Many children who begin as active still experience steady declines, meaning low activity patterns are often embedded by the time young people reach secondary school.

Evidence from older age groups suggests these patterns carry forward into higher education. Murphy et al. (2018), using data from over 8,000 Irish university students, found that only 64% met recommended activity levels, with a marked gender gap (72% of males vs 58% of females). Students achieving guidelines reported better self-rated health, stronger mental wellbeing, and greater happiness, with these associations remaining after accounting for demographic differences. This indicates that participation gaps are not only persistent but linked to broader wellbeing outcomes.

Qualitative research helps explain the mechanisms behind these trends. Cowley (2021) identifies fear of judgement as a dominant barrier for girls, with many avoiding activity due to low confidence, anxiety about appearance, and discomfort with being watched or evaluated. Concerns around sweating, clothing, and body image, including worries about looking unfeminine or overly muscular, shape decisions to withdraw, even among girls with strong physical competence. Social dynamics also play a significant role. Participation often depends on trusted friendship groups; when friends disengage, individual involvement frequently drops. Mixed-gender environments can heighten anxiety, and fear of exclusion may outweigh enjoyment. Alongside this, adolescence brings shifting priorities, including academic pressures and reduced free time, which further contribute to declining participation.

Moreno-Vitoria (2024) extends these insights by showing that motivation declines across adolescence and is a strong predictor of dropout. Girls report lower overall motivation than boys unless activity is framed around health or appearance. Intrinsic motivation and enjoyment emerge as the most reliable predictors of continued participation, yet many girls experience low perceived competence and confidence, particularly in mixed-gender environments, which is closely linked to disengagement. Self-presentation concerns such as fear of judgement, embarrassment, and social comparison, especially during puberty, further contribute to withdrawal from PE and sport. Sport identity can also conflict with traditional gender norms, as sport is often perceived as masculine, making participation feel less socially secure for some girls. Negative PE experiences, including limited activity choice, perceived teacher bias, or sexist practices, are associated with longer-term disengagement, whereas supportive environments and social encouragement improve retention. Limited visibility of female role models and persistent stereotypes further weaken girls' sense that sport is "for them." For educational settings, this points to the importance of how sport is delivered as much as what is delivered: prioritising enjoyment, offering meaningful choice, fostering psychologically safe and non-judgemental environments, and increasing visible female role models can strengthen motivation and sustain participation through adolescence.

Gatouillat (2019) further shows that gender differences are also reflected in activity preferences. Boys consistently reported strong and stable preferences for team sports, particularly football, whereas girls' interests were more varied and more likely to shift over time,

UNDERSTANDING THE NEXT GENERATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS



with greater attraction to artistic and aesthetic activities. This suggests that lower participation among girls is not simply a matter of disengagement but may also reflect a mismatch between traditional sport offers and the types of activity some girls find appealing. Recognising diverse preferences and allowing flexibility in how young people engage with physical activity may therefore support broader and more sustained participation.

Feelings of belonging were also linked to participation, with girls almost twice as likely as boys to feel they did not belong in PE at school. Inequality further compounded these patterns: girls with two or more additional characteristics of inequality were significantly more likely to dislike physical activity, lack confidence, and feel a weaker sense of belonging compared with those without these characteristics. The report emphasises that social relationships are the strongest predictor of engagement, with friendship groups and supportive environments carrying more influence than ability or competition. Barriers linked to body image, self-presentation, and discomfort around changing facilities were repeatedly identified in girls, alongside concerns related to PE kit policies, privacy, and weather. Compared to girls, the Youth Trust's Boys Report findings suggest that for boys, reported barriers tend to relate to confidence, motivation, weather, and comfort with kit rather than the body image concerns. For both boys and girls, activity outside scheduled PE remains limited within school settings, suggesting that curriculum PE provides most structured opportunities.

Menstruation was reported as the single largest barrier to participation for girls of school age, shaped by issues of comfort, confidence, and mood. The Youth Sport Trust Girls Active 2024 report found that periods remain the biggest barrier to girls' participation" among girls aged 11–13 and 14–15. Many girls expressed a preference for non-competitive, skill-based, or expressive activities and indicated a desire to be more active but felt limited by a lack of flexible options and supportive structures. Despite strong interest, leadership opportunities for both boys and girls were also found to be underdeveloped and opportunities appear limited. Together, these findings illustrate how social, emotional, and environmental factors play a significant role in shaping girls' engagement with physical activity from a young age.

Building on this broader evidence around girls' confidence and belonging, more recent research highlights how these issues can be even more pronounced for some groups of girls. A 2025 Women in Sport study, based on a nationally representative survey of 2,255 young people aged 13–24 found that Black girls often hold positive attitudes towards sport but participate at comparatively low levels. For example, 60% of Black girls reported dreaming of becoming elite athletes, compared with 33% of White British girls, and large majorities saw sport as important for both mental and physical health. Despite this, only 37% met activity guidelines and just 14% were active outside school, pointing to a clear gap between motivation and participation. The research suggests that this gap is shaped less by interest and more by external barriers. Feelings of safety and belonging were influential, with notable proportions of Black girls reporting feeling unsafe in sport settings, lacking representation, or feeling isolated when they were the only Black girl present.

Experiences of racism and sexism were also commonly reported, and girls of Black ethnicity described being stereotyped or treated as more mature or aggressive than their peers, which affected how they were perceived in sport environments. Structural factors further limited access, including financial pressures, caring responsibilities, and strong academic

UNDERSTANDING THE NEXT GENERATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS



expectations within families. Cultural considerations such as haircare and self-presentation also influenced willingness to take part, highlighting barriers that are rarely captured in general participation data. The report concludes that 78% of Black girls want to be more active but many feel that current provision does not meet their needs, often being seen as rigid or judgemental. Taken together, these findings reinforce that disengagement among girls, particularly Black girls, is closely linked to environmental and structural factors rather than a lack of motivation or aspiration.

Taken together, this evidence shows that gender gaps in physical activity are established at an early age, reinforced through adolescence, and shaped by confidence, motivation, social context, and activity preferences. Many young women therefore arrive at university with already uneven experiences of sport, including lower confidence, weaker sport identity, and more variable participation histories than their male peers.

As girls move into higher education, many of the challenges identified earlier continue to shape their participation in sport and physical activity. Research by Brunton and St Quinton (2021), exploring sport participation among female university students in England, found that a range of practical, social and psychological barriers influenced engagement. Time pressures arising from academic commitments were frequently cited as a challenge, alongside the financial cost of participation and difficulties balancing sport with other aspects of university life. The study also identified confidence-related barriers, with some students reporting concerns about their ability, fear of judgement from others, and anxiety about participating in unfamiliar sporting environments. Despite these obstacles, the researchers found that many female students were interested in being active and recognised the physical, mental and social benefits of sport. The findings suggest that lower levels of participation are often driven by barriers to access and engagement rather than a lack of motivation. The authors argue that universities can support greater participation by offering flexible opportunities, creating welcoming and inclusive environments, reducing financial barriers, and providing programmes that build confidence and encourage social connection.

Cross-sectional studies across Europe show clear gender differences in physical activity among university students, with male students reporting significantly higher total activity levels than female students (5994 vs 4303 MET-min/week) (Fagaras, 2015). The difference was driven by vigorous activity, where males recorded almost double the weekly volume of females (3435 vs 1958 MET-min/week), while no significant differences were found for walking or moderate activity. This indicates that intensity, rather than general participation, is where gender gaps are most pronounced. Most students were within a healthy BMI range, with a mean BMI of 22.2 for the full sample (23.1 for males and 20.7 for females), yet substantial differences in activity levels persisted. The authors place these findings within evidence showing that around one-third of students who are active at school become insufficiently active when they enter university, identifying this transition as a key point of decline. Patterns observed among Romanian students mirrored those seen internationally, including low national participation and consistent gender gaps. Notably, these differences were also present among Physical Education and Physical Therapy students, suggesting that knowledge and academic focus alone do not prevent uneven engagement in vigorous physical activity, with potential implications for long-term participation into adulthood.

Comparisons with male students further highlight how confidence and self-perception shape female participation patterns at university. A cross-sectional study by Campos et al.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEXT GENERATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS



(2017), involving 175 university students in Spain, found that male students reported higher physical self-efficacy and felt more physically capable than female students. Males were more likely to perceive themselves as strong, coordinated, and athletically competent, which was associated with greater willingness to try new sports, join competitive teams, and sustain participation. In contrast, female students were more likely to benefit from supportive environments that build confidence and reduce performance pressure. The study suggests that gender differences in participation are not simply about interest but are closely linked to physical self-concept. Importantly, regular participation was shown to reduce many of these gaps, indicating that accessible, low-pressure opportunities can help equalise confidence over time. For universities, this points to the value of beginner-friendly and recreational formats, women-only or confidence-building sessions, and messaging that emphasises enjoyment, community, and self-improvement rather than competition alone.

For universities, this suggests that future student demand is likely to favour flexible, inclusive, and socially supportive forms of physical activity rather than traditional competitive pathways alone. Provision that emphasises enjoyment, wellbeing, choice, and psychologically safe environments, alongside visible female role models and varied activity formats, may better align with the expectations and needs of incoming cohorts. In this sense, university sport has an opportunity not only to respond to demand, but to re-engage students whose earlier experiences have reduced their likelihood of participation.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY LEVELS AND EXPERIENCES: STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL AND PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

Students with intellectual and physical disabilities often face additional barriers to sport and physical activity participation, even where interest and demand are high. The Youth Sport Trust (2024) reports that pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are 23% less likely to take part in extra-curricular sport than their peers, despite many expressing a desire to be more active. This gap points to unmet demand and suggests that participation is frequently constrained by context and provision rather than motivation.

Research indicates that these barriers are commonly structural, social, and informational. Akşit (2023), drawing on parent perspectives, found that participation difficulties for students with intellectual disabilities are often linked to the environment surrounding the child, such as school systems, teacher preparation, and programme design, rather than the child's abilities alone. Parents reported that sports programmes are not always sufficiently adapted, with limited differentiation and individualisation reducing opportunities for meaningful involvement. When activities are not appropriately modified, students may feel excluded or unable to keep up, which can lower enjoyment and willingness to participate.

Teacher knowledge and confidence also shape experiences. Parents perceived that some physical education staff lack specialist training in inclusive or adapted physical activity, leading to uncertainty about how to involve students safely and effectively. Where teachers were well prepared, participation experiences were more positive.

Social climate was another influential factor: supportive peer relationships encouraged involvement, while stigma or teasing discouraged it, showing that inclusion depends not only

on access but also on everyday interactions. Communication between schools and families further influenced outcomes, with strong collaboration helping to create more supportive participation environments. Practical constraints such as limited facilities, equipment, or specialist staff were also noted as limiting inclusive practice.

Disabled young people face a significant participation gap compared with their non-disabled peers. Activity Alliance categorises 'disability' as any long-term health condition, impairment, or illness that substantially affects a person's ability to perform normal daily activities. In *Activity Alliance's Play, Move, Belong* research, 43% of young disabled people were classed as 'less active' (doing ≤ 30 min/day) during a normal school week versus 32% of non-disabled peers, and only 3% of disabled young people met the Chief Medical Officers' recommended 60 minutes of daily activity.¹ The activity gap widened with age and intersected with other inequalities: disabled girls, those aged 14–16, and young people with multiple impairments were least likely to feel sport was “for them” or to participate fully in school sport. At school, just 26% of young disabled people said they could take part in sport and activity all the time, compared with 38% of non-disabled young people. Disabled young people were also far more likely to report barriers such as low confidence (43% vs 18%), discomfort (31% vs 10%), fear of not belonging (24% vs 5%), and impairment-related challenges (22%). Disabled girls were three times more likely than non-disabled girls to lack confidence when being active (24% vs 8%), and only half of disabled young people agreed that sport was easy, compared with three-quarters of non-disabled peers. These patterns reflect broader survey data showing disabled children are significantly more likely to be inactive and less able to join in school sports, with nearly one in three (30.5%) doing less than 30 minutes of physical activity per day.²

Despite these challenges, the *Play, Move, Belong* data published by the Activity Alliance also underlines a strong desire to be active: most young disabled people report liking or loving being active (85%), and over half want to do more activity. Preferences highlight the need for inclusive environments, with almost half of young disabled people expressing a preference for activities that include both disabled and non-disabled peers, while a smaller but important proportion want tailored activities with similar impairment groups. The report stresses that barriers are not fixed by impairment alone but are shaped by confidence, comfort, social belonging, and accessibility - factors that are culturally and structurally determined. To improve participation and retention, provision must focus on inclusive practice, building confidence through supported environments, offering a range of activity options (quiet, fun, and social), enhancing disability awareness among staff, and ensuring accessible facilities and transport for disabled students.³

1

https://www.activityalliance.org.uk/assets/000/005/555/Play_Move_Belong_full_report_Accessible_pdf_original.pdf?1763552894

² [Our response to Active Lives Children and Young People Survey 2024-25](#)

³ [Only one in four disabled children can always join in school sports](#)

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY LEVELS AND EXPERIENCES: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International students represent a distinct group within university populations for whom recreational sport and physical activity can play a vital role in transition and adjustment. Moving to a new country often involves acculturative stress, the psychological impact of adapting to a diverse cultural environment (Berry, 1997). Research shows that international students may face multiple, overlapping challenges, including academic pressure, language barriers, cultural differences, financial strain, accommodation issues, discrimination, and social isolation, all of which can contribute to psychological difficulties and lower academic engagement (da Silva & Ravindran, 2016). Successful adaptation involves both psychological adjustment, which supports wellbeing, and sociocultural adjustment, which enables effective daily functioning and interaction in the host culture (Arthur, 2017). Both dimensions are linked to students' ability to build healthy relationships and succeed in their new environment (Brunsting et al., 2018),

Within this context, physical activity has been identified as a useful tool for adjustment, as it creates social interaction opportunities and can reduce communication barriers (Yan & FitzPatrick, 2016). Campus recreation programmes, widely available in many universities, have been shown to support international student engagement and integration (Guo & Ross, 2014). Participation in recreational sport can enhance social adjustment, while structured educational and recreational programming can strengthen psychological adaptation and coping skills, supporting overall student wellbeing and success (Glass et al., 2014).

Research on international students shows that sport and physical activity play a nuanced role in adjustment, identity, and belonging during transition to a new cultural and academic environment. Allen (2019), in a cross-sectional study of 240 international students across four large US universities, found that recreational sport often supports adaptation by creating opportunities for cross-cultural socialising and trust-building. Many students described sport as a way to "embrace new cultures," meet people with shared interests, and feel accepted, highlighting its value for reducing loneliness and fostering belonging. At the same time, sport also supported cultural maintenance. Students frequently chose familiar activities with peers from similar backgrounds, especially soon after arrival, because these settings felt comfortable and "like home." This shows that sport can simultaneously promote integration and preserve identity, depending on context and personal need.

Allen (2019) also documents that experiences are not uniformly positive. Some students reported feeling unwelcome or excluded in campus recreational sport settings, encountering segregated social environments, or struggling with unfamiliar sport cultures and lack of culturally relevant facilities (for example, limited access to cricket). One South Asian international student noted that "no one is willing to share and play other sports," pointing to perceived cultural and participation barriers in recreational settings.

These barriers sometimes led to marginalisation or reduced participation. For many participants, sport was closely tied to identity expression and belonging and was used to negotiate cultural identity during transition. Playing with domestic students could improve language skills and cultural understanding, but these benefits were not evenly experienced across groups, with European students more likely to report such interactions. Students also

UNDERSTANDING THE NEXT GENERATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS



highlighted the need for culturally relevant programming and structured opportunities for domestic–international mixing. Overall, the study shows that sport can either support adaptation and belonging or reinforce isolation, depending on how inclusive and culturally responsive the environment is.

Intervention evidence points to ways universities can shape more positive outcomes. Curtin (2025) evaluated a Canadian Physical Activity and Wellness Series (PAWS) delivered to 45 international students and found that integrated physical and mental wellness programmes can strengthen social and coping outcomes. Participants showed statistically significant improvements in social self-efficacy and coping confidence, including greater confidence initiating friendships and joining student organisations. Feelings of belonging improved and social isolation reduced, even where physical activity increases were modest. Qualitative feedback emphasised the importance of being part of a consistent cohort, meeting peers with shared experiences, and feeling “less alone.” Students valued the programme primarily as a supportive social space rather than a fitness intervention. Trying new activities built confidence and future participation intentions, while explicit links to stress management and wellbeing increased relevance. International-only spaces often provided psychological safety, though some students also wanted opportunities to mix with domestic peers. Structural barriers - such as cost, time pressures, and uncertainty about how to get involved - remained, but regular social interaction and peer familiarity encouraged continued engagement. The authors argue that low-pressure, socially oriented, and culturally sensitive provision is especially valuable during early transition.

Complementary qualitative evidence from Wood (2025) highlights why interest does not always translate into attendance. Although international students were motivated to register for campus recreation, citing skill development, empowerment, safety, and inclusive environments, many did not follow through. In interviews with eight international students who registered but did not attend, all participants reported strong initial motivations such as skill development, empowerment, safety, and inclusive environments. However, follow-through was disrupted by structural barriers (reported by 6 of 8 students), including scheduling conflicts, location, and lack of reminders; motivational decline as academic pressures grew (5 of 8); and intrapersonal factors such as nervousness or low confidence (5 of 8). This “intention–behaviour gap” shows that recruitment alone is insufficient; sustained engagement requires reminders, simple systems, and social support mechanisms. Buddy systems and group-based formats can help maintain momentum during the adjustment period.

Finally, Li (2018) provides further insight into how physical activity supports social integration. Language barriers and cultural differences often limited deeper interaction with domestic students, leading many internationals to form friendships within their own communities. Informal activities such as weekly badminton offered low-pressure social spaces where communication demands were lower and cultural differences less pronounced. Participation was driven more by friendship and conversation than by fitness goals, and activity settings were often perceived as safer and more inclusive than other social environments, particularly for students facing discrimination. Prior sport experience influenced confidence and persistence, and the study argues that universities frequently overlook the role of physical activity in social integration. Physical activity, therefore, can function as a bridge for multicultural friendship and belonging and should be viewed as part of student support and transition, not solely as a health intervention.

Taken together, these studies show that international students use sport and physical activity in complex, identity-linked ways: to connect, to feel secure, to explore new cultures, and to manage transition. Participation is strongly shaped by cultural relevance, social environment, and perceived safety. Inclusive, low-pressure, socially oriented, and culturally responsive provision is more likely to support engagement and adjustment than traditional performance-focused models. For universities, this underscores that sport provision can contribute to integration and wellbeing when designed with transition, belonging, and cultural diversity in mind.

YOUNG PEOPLE FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS

Young people from low-income backgrounds face persistent inequalities in access to sport and physical activity, with financial and structural constraints shaping participation from an early age. The Youth Sport Trust Annual Report and Sport England's *Active Lives Children and Young People* show a clear socioeconomic gradient in activity levels: only 45% of children and young people from the least affluent families meet Chief Medical Officers' physical activity guidelines, compared with 57% from the more affluent families⁴. Cost remains a major barrier, with systematic reviews of youth sport consistently identifying fees, equipment costs, and travel expenses as leading obstacles to involvement. These pressures are increasingly limiting access to clubs, equipment, and facilities, making regular participation harder to sustain.⁵ In the UK, evidence suggests that around 27% of families struggle with the cost of PE or sports kit, and cost-of-living pressures are cited as a primary factor limiting children's opportunities to be active.⁶ Government data further show that only about 26% of young people aged 16–19 living in deprived areas and eligible for free school meals participate in sport clubs or groups, compared with much higher rates in more affluent contexts.⁷

Sport England's 2024–25 Active Lives report reveals that although overall activity levels have increased since 2017–18, participation among children from the least affluent families has not risen in recent years. This means that inequalities by affluence have grown in the short term.

Recent Youth Sport Trust evidence (2024) indicates that 39% of children from low-affluence families cite affordability as a direct barrier to participation, while 48% of parents report that rising living costs have reduced their children's opportunities to be active. These inequalities are also reflected in health outcomes, with Year 6 obesity rates reaching 30.2% in the most deprived areas compared with 13.1% in the least deprived, pointing to wider disparities in access to active lifestyles.

Research further suggests that these gaps are driven more by lack of opportunity than by lack of interest. Espedalen (2022) found that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds

⁴ Sport England (2024). *Active Lives Children and Young People Survey Academic Year 2023–24*. London: Sport England; Youth Sport Trust (2025). *Annual Report and Accounts 2024–25*. Loughborough: Youth Sport Trust.

⁵ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323091343_Barriers_to_voluntary_participation_in_sport_for_children_A_systematic_review

⁶ <https://www.youthsporttrust.org/media/yd5dtjr2/yst-cost-of-living-research.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/barriers-and-enablers-to-participation-in-youth-activities-research/barriers-and-enablers-to-participation-in-youth-activities-executive-summary>

UNDERSTANDING THE NEXT GENERATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS



face additional structural barriers to remaining in sport, with many dropping out when participation becomes too expensive. Low-SES minority youth reported difficulty finding suitable or accessible club options, reinforcing how financial and cultural accessibility interact. Cost remains a decisive factor for disadvantaged groups, affecting not only initial access but also continuity and feelings of belonging within sport settings. Taken together, this evidence indicates that socioeconomic inequalities in sport participation are shaped less by motivation and more by affordability, availability, and the presence of flexible, inclusive provision that recognises diverse financial circumstances.

Qualitative research in the UK further highlights how cost-of-living pressures and structural barriers shape lived experiences: in a survey of families in Northern Ireland, over half of parents/guardians from low-income households reported that their children missed out on opportunities for sport or physical activity because of the costs involved, and more than a third had reduced spending on sport since the onset of the cost-of-living crisis.⁸ These patterns reflect wider inequalities in access to facilities and community provision, especially in deprived areas where youth services and sports programming are less available, leaving young people from low-income backgrounds with fewer affordable and accessible ways to stay active.⁹ Longer-term changes in local provision may have reinforced these inequalities. Between 2011 and 2021, 95% of local authorities reduced real-terms spending on youth services, while the average number of youth clubs supported by local authorities fell from 14 to 8, reducing access to low-cost recreational opportunities in many communities.¹⁰ Villa (2024), writing for the Institute for Fiscal Studies, found that austerity-related funding cuts led to the closure of around 30% of youth clubs in London between 2010 and 2019. Youth clubs were identified as important spaces for recreation, sport and social engagement, particularly for young people from lower-income backgrounds. Together, these findings suggest that recent cost-of-living pressures have compounded longer-term reductions in community-based opportunities for young people to be active.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectional evidence shows that gender gaps in physical activity are further shaped by ethnicity, disability, religion and socioeconomic context, creating layered barriers to participation from childhood onwards. The Youth Sport Trust (2025) highlights that some girls - particularly Black girls - avoid activity due to concerns about “messaging up hair”, while also facing wider issues such as racism, adultification and safety concerns that can make sport feel less welcoming. Disabled teenage girls experience particularly low engagement: 64% do not regularly take part in sport, yet 67% say they would like to be more active, with low confidence and fear of judgement acting as major barriers. Socioeconomic factors also influence participation patterns. Odds ratios (OR) indicate how much more or less likely a group is to exhibit a particular behaviour or preference compared with a reference group, with values above 1 indicating higher odds and values below 1 indicating lower odds. Gatouillat (2019) found that while participation declined across socioeconomic groups, girls from different

⁸ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12057050/>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2026/feb/12/youth-work-cuts-england-map-study>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-provision-and-life-outcomes-research/youth-provision-and-life-outcomes-a-study-of-the-local-impact-of-youth-clubs-executive-summary>

UNDERSTANDING THE NEXT GENERATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS



backgrounds developed distinct sporting preferences and pathways. Interest in aquatic sports declined markedly among both low- and high-SES girls (OR = 0.15 and OR = 0.42 respectively), while high-SES girls were more likely to express interest in artistic (OR = 2.31) and combat sports (OR = 10.45). Together, these findings suggest that participation is shaped by a combination of cultural, social, economic and environmental factors, and that barriers are not experienced equally across different groups of girls and women.

Importantly, many of these barriers persist into adulthood rather than disappearing with age. For example, 43% of British Muslim women report that available facilities are not appropriate for their needs, demonstrating how cultural and religious considerations can continue to shape opportunities for participation beyond adolescence¹¹. Overall, the evidence suggests that gender inequalities in sport are compounded by other social factors, creating participation pathways that remain unequal from girlhood into adulthood.

¹¹ Women in Sport (2018). *Reaching Out: Muslim Women and Sport*. London: Women in Sport.