

Americans like sports, but heterosexual men especially do

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Nearly nine out of 10 Americans say they enjoy sports at least a little, but heterosexual men more commonly identify as passionate sports fans, a new study suggests.

A survey of nearly 4,000 American adults found that only 11% said they did not identify as [sports fans](#) at all. Over 40% were passionate fans, identifying themselves as being "quite a bit" or "very much so" [sports fans](#).

About 60% of heterosexual men in the survey identified as passionate sports fans, compared to about 40% of both heterosexual women and lesbians. About 30% of gay men reported being passionate sports fans.

"We found that U.S. adults respond overwhelmingly that they are sports fans," said Chris Knoester, co-author of the study and associate professor of sociology at The Ohio State University.

"Sports fandom is an ingrained part of our culture and central in the lives of many people."

The study, published this week in the *Sociology of Sport Journal*, was led by Rachel Allison, associate professor of sociology at Mississippi State University.

"One of the advantages of the [survey data](#) in this study is that it has a relatively large sample of individuals who identify as a sexual minority or as nonbinary in terms of their gender identity, which has not been the case in most previous studies," Allison said.

"It allowed us to show that while heterosexual men are particularly likely to identify as strong sports fans, there are substantial numbers of people across gender and sexual identities who are also passionate fans."

Survey data came from the National Sports and Society Survey (NSASS), sponsored by Ohio State's Sports and Society Initiative.

The survey was completed by 3,993 adults who volunteered to

participate through the American Population Panel, run by Ohio State's Center for Human Resource Research. Participants, who came from all 50 states, answered the survey online between the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019.

Because NSASS participants are disproportionately female, white and Midwestern, the researchers also weighted the [survey results](#) to reflect the U.S. population more accurately. This resulted in modest increases of about 5% in the population estimates of the number of passionate sports fans.

While there has been growing attention in the United States to women's sports, and to gay and lesbian participation in sports, there hasn't been good data on how a variety of gender and sexual identities are reflected in the larger sports fan community, Knoester said.

This study gives a preliminary look. About 27% of those surveyed identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or a sexual identity other than heterosexual. About 3% of respondents identified as nonbinary.

Overall, heterosexual men tended to identify as "quite a bit" of a sports fan, the findings suggest. In contrast, heterosexual women, lesbians and gay men were more likely to say they were "somewhat" of a sports fan on average.

But while [heterosexual men](#) are clearly more likely to be big sports fans than gay men, lesbians and [heterosexual women](#) have similar interest in sports, according to the results.

"Identifying as lesbian does not seem to discourage sports fandom like identifying as gay does for men," Allison said.

The researchers also explored whether early childhood experiences

shaped sports fandom in adults. As expected, people who said they thought of themselves as athletes during childhood and who frequently thought about sports were more likely to be fans as adults.

People who said they were mistreated in sports-related interactions during their lifetime—such as being called names or being bullied—were less likely to be sports fans as adults.

But the researchers did not find that childhood sports experiences or mistreatment accounted for gender and sexual identity differences in how much adults identified as sports fans.

Allison said it is clear that the historic masculine, [heterosexual](#) culture of sports is changing. She documented some of those changes in her book *Kicking Center: Gender and the Selling of Women's Professional Soccer*.

But she said the results of this new study suggest it may not have changed enough to make some women and sexual minorities comfortable to identify as sports fans.

"We've clearly moved beyond the era of open hostility to women, lesbians and gay men in sports," Allison said.

"But the extent to which we've moved from tolerant to fully inclusive cultures isn't necessarily clear. We may be in this period of transition."

Knoester and Allison said sports organizations on all levels, from professional to youth, still need to do more to be inclusive to individuals with different gender and sexual identities.

"You aren't born being a sports fan. The differences in fandom we found here in this study are socially and culturally produced to a great extent,

and they can be changed," Knoester said.

More information: Rachel Allison et al, Gender, Sexual, and Sports Fan Identities, *Sociology of Sport Journal* (2021). [DOI: 10.1123/ssj.2020-0036](https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2020-0036)

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