

# New research finds crises such as COVID-19 pandemic threaten support for Title IX

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A new study by a pair of researchers including Elizabeth Sharrow, associate professor of public policy and history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, has found that male student-athletes and those

with sexist attitudes exhibit "alarmingly" low levels of support for ensuring the maintenance of equality and sexual harassment policy under Title IX as a result of the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on college athletics.

In the report, published online by the journal *Politics & Gender*, Sharrow and co-author James Druckman of Northwestern University write that the results accentuate the vulnerability of certain populations during crises, and the importance of maintaining strong institutional [policy](#) support during such times.

Sharrow and Druckman conducted a survey with a representative sample of 1,925 student-athletes in May and June. They found middling levels of support for protecting equality and sexual harassment provisions when respondents were asked about each specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, with respective mean scores notably lower than those found when respondents were asked about their general support of the provisions earlier in the survey.

"This COVID-19 study arose from a multi-year research project in which my collaborator and I are studying attitudes toward gender equity policies and pay-for-play policies among stakeholders in American collegiate athletics," Sharrow says. "Our previous scholarship found that Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 enjoys high levels of support among the beneficiaries of policy in college sport, as well as the American public, but we suspected that times of crisis can undermine popular support for protective policies, particularly among those who don't directly benefit from policy protections.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly transformed college athletics since March with many institutions canceling funding for selected teams due to financial strain," she continues. "We wondered whether Title IX's protections continue to receive high-levels of support as the crisis

unfolds, and found that male college athletes and those with high sexist attitudes exhibit decidedly low levels of support for Title IX and sexual harassment protections during the COVID-19 crisis."

The researchers found notable differences by gender—specifically a 20.75% decrease in support from women to men when it comes to protecting equality during COVID-19, and a 14.75% decrease in support from women to men for safeguarding anti-harassment protections.

The findings accentuate the importance of maintaining strong institutional policy support for the enforcement of non-discrimination policies, says Sharrow, an expert on the politics of Title IX and the ways that public policy shapes understandings of sex and gender at the intersections of race, sexuality, ability and class.

"We demonstrate why beneficiaries need strong legal safeguards and enforcement of gender equality policies so that protections are not undermined when systems are under stress and/or lack support from advantaged, majority stakeholders," she says. "Even despite Title IX's implementation, men remain the majority of college athletes. We illustrate that post-crisis recovery efforts will require close oversight on protections for [vulnerable groups](#), irrespective of whether such groups are in a position to advocate on their own behalf. The future for further incorporation of historically-marginalized groups, and the maintenance of hard-won opportunities for women and girls in sport in particular, will depend on it."

**More information:** James N. Druckman et al. Public Opinion, Crisis, and Vulnerable Populations: The Case of Title IX and COVID-19, *Politics & Gender* (2020). [DOI: 10.1017/S1743923X20000446](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000446)

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