



World First Study Uncovers Widespread Homophobia in Canadian Sport

- 81% of Canadian participants witnessed or experienced homophobia in sports
- 1 in 4 gay men did not play youth team sports, nearly half blamed negative experiences in school physical education classes
- Canadians are the most likely to believe sports is welcoming to gay people; Canadian sports culture scores best overall for 'inclusivity'

Online editors: Infographics and country rankings available

The first international study on homophobia in sports, "Out on the Fields," found widespread homophobia in Canadian sports, particularly in school sports and PE classes. This has prompted calls for a zero tolerance approach towards discrimination and better training for coaches, teachers and officials.

The study is the largest ever conducted on homophobia in sports, with nearly 9500 participants, including 1123 from Canada (225 were straight). It focused on comparing the six, predominantly English speaking countries. The research was conducted by global sports market research firm Repucom, but overseen by a panel of seven international experts from six universities, including the University of Winnipeg and Laval University. It was conducted on behalf of the Bingham Cup (world cup of gay rugby) and a coalition of LGBTI sports groups, including the Federation of Gay Games and You Can Play.

Overall Canadians scored better on many measures than most countries. However, 70% of Canadian participants believed youth team sports is not a safe and supportive environment for LGB people. In Canada, gay and lesbian youth were also more likely than those in other countries to hide their sexuality from some or all of their teammates; however, this improves dramatically as they become adults. Canadian gay men, in particular, are the most likely to be 'out' while playing adult sports while Canada comes in

Chris Voth is one of the world's only openly gay athletes currently playing professional team sports. The 24 year old Winnipeg athlete plays full-team for the Canada's national volleyball team. He came out last year to family, friends and teammates and also through a series of international media stories.

"As I was growing up I hid my sexuality because I feared the worst that I would be rejected by those I loved and from the sport I played. I think a lot of lesbian, gay and bisexual kids live with these fears because there are very few openly gay positive role models and subtle homophobic language is often used, particularly around team sports. Thankfully since coming out I've had nothing but support, it has been amazing to see that all of my fears were completely unfounded and I can now be a role model for young people," says Voth.

Voth's experiences of subtle homophobic behaviour around sports are not unique. In fact, 81% of Canadian participants said they had 'witnessed or experienced' homophobic behaviour around sports, with language such as slurs and jokes or humour the most commonly reported form. However, Canadians also reported experiencing more violent forms of homophobia than those in other countries. Canadian gay men reported the highest rates of physical assaults while lesbians were the second most likely to report being assaulted (after the UK). Homophobic discrimination isn't just affecting LGB people, with Canadian straight men the most likely to report they had personally experienced homophobia.

Olympic luger, John Fennell, 19, also decided to bravely come out of the closet last year in the lead-up to competing in Russia at the Sochi Olympics. Compared to Chris Voth, the Calgary based athlete says he had a much more difficult time with team sports.

"I played a variety of team sports when I was young but never felt welcome or fully accepted. There is always this need to appear super macho and straight, which becomes exhausting. The homophobic language and humour creates this underlying sense that gay people are not welcome. Now that I compete in an individual sport I don't need to worry about trying to fit in, I can focus entirely on having fun and improving my performance," said Fennell.

Fennell believes team sports are the last beacon of homophobia in Canadian society, a view shared by many who took part in the Out on the Fields study. 65% of all participants and 75% of gay men said they thought homophobia is more common in Canadian sports than in the rest of society.

Dr. Sandra Kirby is a former Olympic athlete herself. She now studies homophobia in sports at the University of Winnipeg and was one of seven international academics on the study's 'expert panel' which guided and reviewed the research and final report.

“The findings from this study and other research we have conducted in Canada shows that homophobia continues to be quite common in sports, while the rest of Canadian society has progressed much further around acceptance and inclusion of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people. I think part of the reason sports culture hasn’t progressed as much is because lesbian, gay and bisexual athletes remain largely invisible, particularly in youth sports. Compared to other parts of society, people involved in sports still feel a strong need to hide their sexuality. This unfortunately makes the problem of homophobia in sports easy to ignore because you can’t see how it is affecting the athletes who remain in the closet,” said Kirby.

While the Out on the Fields study found homophobia is widely experienced in all areas of sports culture, it was particularly pronounced among students participating in school PE classes. Canadians were much more likely than those in the other six countries compared to believe school PE classes are the most likely sporting environment for homophobia to occur.

Professor Guylaine Demers was also on the study’s expert panel. The Laval University researcher also studies homophobia in sports and says she is not surprised the study found many gay people stop playing sports because of negative experiences in school sports and PE classes.

“I think many coaches and the teachers supervising sports do not have the confidence or the skills to deal with homophobic behaviour among young people. This means it’s often ignored. Teachers have a lot of anxiety around whether it is appropriate to discuss homosexuality with students, with some fearing complaints from parents,” said Demers.

Both Professor Demers and Dr. Kirby believe teachers and coaches should receive mandatory training on ways to support LGB youth. They say this is something not currently provided in Canada that could have a dramatic impact on ending homophobia in sports. “If young people learn very early that homophobic behaviour in sports is no longer acceptable it will stay with them for the rest of their lives,” says Demers.

About the study

Out on the Fields is the first international study and largest conducted on homophobia in sport. The study focused on issues of sexuality which is why LGB is used rather than LGBTI or LGBTQ. It also focused on team sports and the English speaking countries (USA, UK, Ireland, Canada, New Zealand and Australia). Global sports market research firm Repucom conducted the research (pro bono), while the study was initiated by organisers of Bingham Cup Sydney 2014 (the world cup of gay rugby) in partnership with a coalition of sports organisations, including the Federation of Gay Games, You Can Play, International Gay Rugby and the Australian Sports Commission. The study methodology and results were reviewed by a panel of seven academics from six universities including Victoria University (Australia), Penn State University, University of Massachusetts (USA); Brunel University London (UK); University of Winnipeg and Laval University (Canada). Data was collected through an anonymous 10-15 minute online survey which included multiple choice questions and an option to submit more lengthy details of personal experiences. It was promoted through social and traditional media and by sporting organisations, professional athletes, corporations and government. Around 25% of participants were heterosexual.

Full Report, Info Graphics (including art files), Country Summaries and Country Comparison/Rankings

Before embargo: Please contact

After embargo: www.outonthefields.com

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