

Title IX's Looong-Term Effects on Women's Health, Education & Weight



Frances Tobin

Contributor

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It's been almost four decades since the passage of the landmark federal education legislation known as Title IX, which created the opportunity for girls and women to break into the male-dominated realm of school athletics.

The law, a component of the Education Amendments of 1972, was originally

sponsored by U.S. Reps. Patsy Mink and Edith Green and stipulates that schools receiving federal money cannot discriminate based upon sex. (In 1974, the federal government developed regulations to implement Title IX and determined that implicit in the law was a mandate that schools give female students equal opportunity to participate in athletics.)

So, what has been the impact of high school and college athletics on female participants? It's profound -- and now quantifiable, thanks to two new studies.

In The New York Times, **Tara Parker-Pope** recently reported on the studies and their significance in terms of female participation in school sports and how "school-based fitness efforts can have lasting effects."

One **study**, titled "Beyond the Classroom: Using Title IX to Measure the Return to High School Sports," is authored by economist Betsey Stevenson of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. Stevenson's study, says Parker-Pope, "untangles the effects of sports participation from other confounding factors -- school size, climate, social and personal differences among athletes -- and comes far closer to determining a cause and effect relationship between high school sports participation and achievement later in life."

Stevenson found that female participation in sports had a "direct effect on women's education and employment," says Parker-Pope. She found that "the changes set in motion by Title IX explained about 20 percent of the increase in women's education and about 40 percent of the rise in employment for 25-to-34-year-old women."

In the other recent **study** that Parker-Pope references, "Title IX, Girls' Sports Participation, and Adult Female Physical Activity and Weight," economist Robert Kaestner of the University of Illinois at Chicago focuses on adult women who were some of the first to be affected by Title IX. (According to Kaestner, Title IX led to a 600 percent increase in female sports participation between 1972 and 1978.) He "studied the effect of this increase in sports participation and athletic opportunities while young on the physical activity and weight of adult women some 20-25 years later."

Kaestner found that "adult women who were affected by Title IX and had greater opportunity to participate in athletics while young had lower body mass index (BMI) and lower rates of obesity and reported being more physically active than women who were not afforded these opportunities."

Kaestner, notes Parker-Pope, says that "no other public health program can claim similar success" and that Title IX is "arguably the most important school-based intervention to increase physical activity."

That a generation of women in the United States has grown up under the

assumption that equal access to athletics is a right and not just a privilege is something to be celebrated. **According** to the **American Association of University Women**, in the 1971-72 school year, 294,015 female high school students played sports (compared with 3,666,917 males); by 2008, more than 3 million female high school students participated in athletics (as did more than 4 million males). Within almost four decades, high school females increased their participation in athletics by 940 percent. Similarly, NCAA figures show female college students increased their participation by 456 percent between 1971 and 2005.

Yes, we've come a long way: In "When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present," Gail Collins chronicles some of the more dire circumstances female student athletes faced before Title IX: "In Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where girls' sports got 9 percent of the athletic budget, the boys' tennis team had courts, and the girls played on the school driveway, stopping the game whenever a motorist needed to get through."

But there's still a long way to go. The AAUW reports: "In the 2007-2008 school year, girls made up 49 percent of the high school population, but females only accounted for 41 percent of the participants in athletics," and the statistics for college sports participation reveal a similar gender gap. Financing disparities still exist. And, according to another recent **study** commissioned by the **Women's Sports Foundation** (founded by Billie Jean King), "females from lower economic backgrounds and females of color engage less in physical activity, have less access to sport and physical fitness programs, and suffer negative health consequences as a result."

Obviously, full **compliance** with Title IX is still a work in progress. It's up to the women whose lives have been so enriched by the program to ensure access is afforded to all women, now and in the future.