

The Ignored 20%: a Queer State of the Running Industry

May 17, 2023

The running industry continues to grapple with an exclusionary history and struggle with recruitment and retention, particularly of younger generations. This grim reality is the antithesis of the booming queer (LGBTQIA+) running community in the United States. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, queer running communities have grown exponentially. If the running industry is to survive for generations to come, it must take action to incorporate the increasing 7.2% of American adults and \$1 trillion in purchasing power of the queer demographic. To facilitate this movement, we are ecstatic to announce the launch of the [Queer Running Society](#) (QRS).

Queer Landscape of the United States

According to a [Gallup poll](#) released in 2022, 1 in 5, or 20%, of Gen Z adults identify as queer (LGBTQIA+). This isn't because more individuals are "becoming queer;" instead, younger generations feel safer and more comfortable existing as their authentic selves. Queer people have always existed, they've just been forced to exist within an environment overflowing with homophobic and transphobic beliefs, systems, and practices. As other areas of society evolve to be more inclusive of the queer community, the running industry must do the same or risk losing the ever-expanding percentage of queer people to other activities.

GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION BY GENERATION (GLOBAL COUNTRY AVERAGE)



© Ipsos | LGBT+ Pride 2021 Global Survey

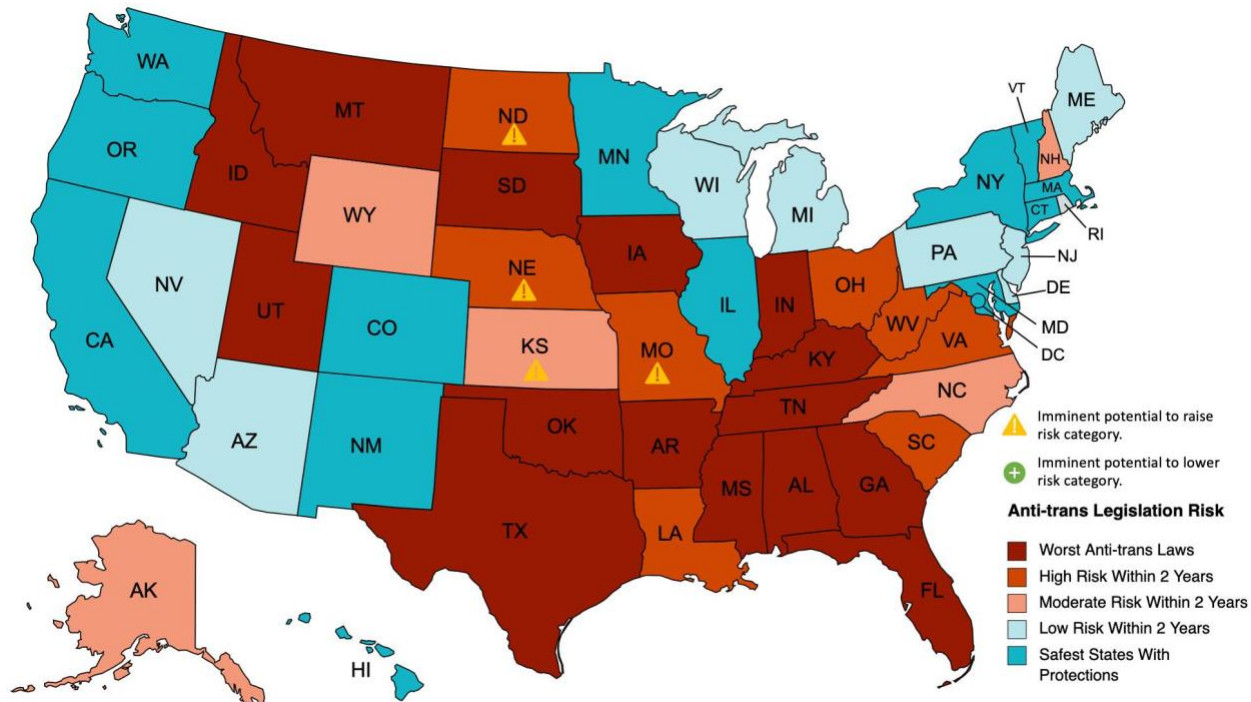


<https://www.ipsos.com/en/lgbt-pride-2021-global-survey-points-generation-gap-around-gender-identity-and-sexual-attraction>

When looking at large gaps in previous generations, it's important to note that the queer population of Gen X was heavily impacted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which has caused more than 700,000 deaths in the United States since 1981.

The queer community in the United States is currently up against a wall of legislation that ultimately wishes to exterminate it. In 2022, the [ACLU](#) tracked a record-breaking 278 anti-LGBTQ bills. Twenty of those bills became law, of which seventeen specifically target transgender student athletes. In the first quarter of 2023 alone, the ACLU tracked over 430 bills directly aimed at the queer community, many of which seek to remove transgender youth from sport. If we don't advocate for inclusion of trans (and queer) athletes within the running industry, how can we expect those outside the industry to?

April Anti-Trans Legislative Risk Map



<https://www.erininthemorning.com/p/april-anti-trans-legislative-risk>

Queer Running Boom

Queer individuals have been building community and moving together for decades. International Front Runners, an affiliation of clubs that promotes the sports of running, walking, and related activities for gender and sexually diverse people, originated from a jogging class at Lavender U in 1974. Today, the organization is made up of 100+ clubs all over the world, with over 50 clubs in the United States alone. Many memberships have seen exponential growth over the last few years, including Seattle Fronrunners which almost doubled in size since before the COVID-19 pandemic and Front Runners New York which saw a membership total exceed 1,100 in 2022¹.

¹ "International Front Runners" (P. 33-50). https://fronrunners.org/newsletters/ifr_newsletter_jan_2023.pdf.

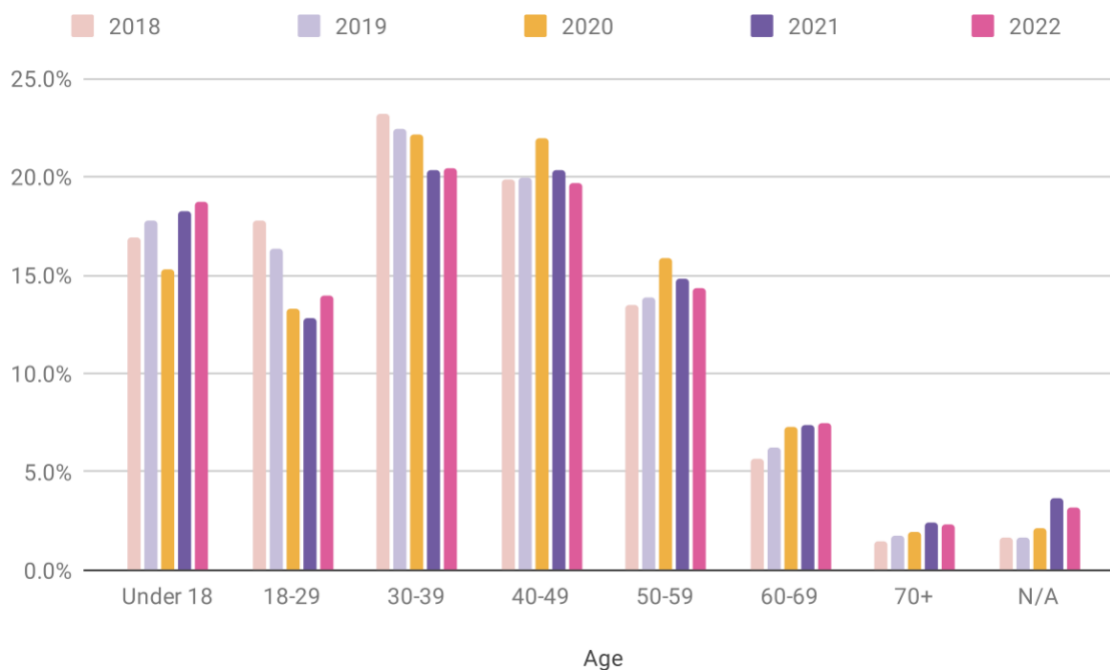
In recent years, more queer running clubs and organizations have established themselves, including OUTrun, Queer Run, Out Trails, Non-Binary+ Run Club (nbro), and Run Beyond (RUNN+). Each group works to expand access and increase opportunities in the sport for the entire queer community, many of whom were pushed out of sporting culture at a young age and are now looking to reclaim it.

Not only are we witnessing a growth in clubs and membership, but their events are also bringing in more participants and raising more money (largely for local queer organizations). The 2019 Front Runners New York LGBT Pride Run set a Guinness World Record with over 10,000 finishers and in 2022, the Atlanta Pride Run & Walk 5K raised \$93,000 for local charities². The queer running community is very much alive and is waiting to be incorporated into the larger industry.

Gen Z Decline

The running industry has seen a significant decrease in participation from individuals under 30 over the last five years. According to RunSignup’s 2022 Annual Industry Report, [RaceTrends](#), participation from the 18-29 age group dropped by 27.7% between 2018 and 2021. After a slight increase in participation in 2022, the report acknowledges “the percentage of participants under 30 continues to lag significantly behind the endurance event industry’s peak rates of participation in the mid-2010’s.”

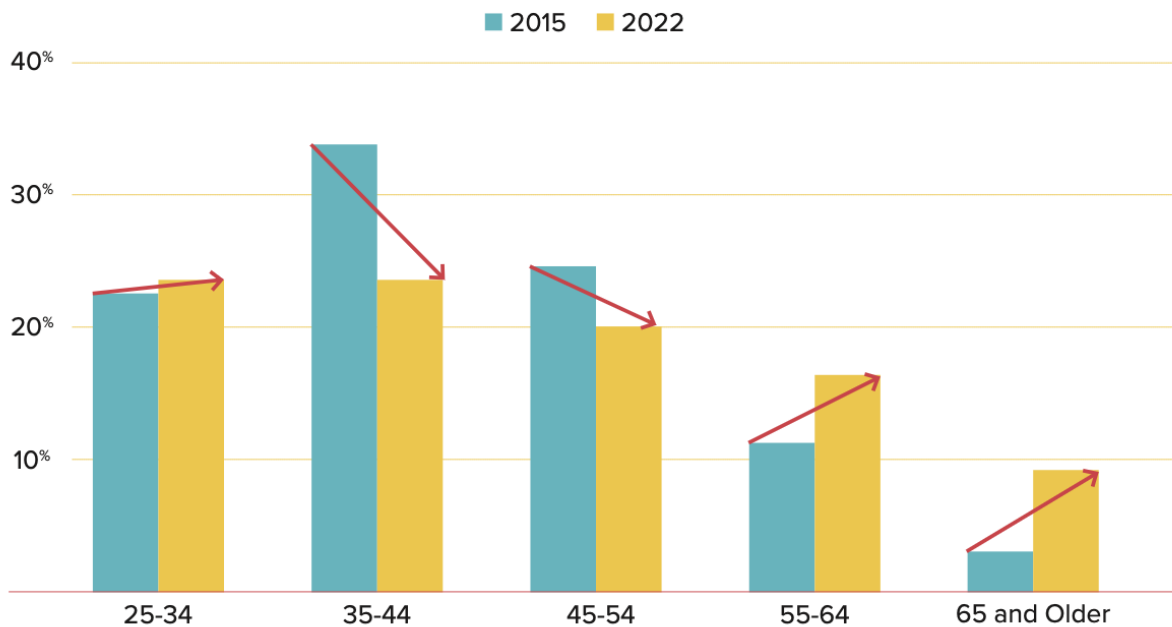
Overall Participation by Age



²⁰²² RaceTrends, RunSignup

² “International Front Runners” (P. 33-37). https://fronrunners.org/newsletters/ifr_newsletter_jan_2023.pdf.

RUNNING USA NATIONAL RUNNER SURVEYS: % OF PARTICIPANTS BY AGE GROUP



[Gen Z and Young Millennial Attitudes Toward Running](#), Running USA 2023

Why is this data alarming? “More participants are aging out than are coming in. If the running industry ignores this trend, it is at the risk of its future growth,” according to a [report](#) published by [Running USA](#), [USA Track & Field](#), and [World Athletics](#). The report outlines a study conducted “to better understand the attitudes and perceptions of these age cohorts [Gen Z (ages 18-24) and Young Millennials (ages 25-30)] and help the industry develop strategies to bring new, younger participants into the sport of road racing.” It’s important to note the study didn’t cover the other disciplines of the running industry (trail, ultra, track & field). While the study collected useful demographics and key interests of the younger generations, it seemed to shy away from the exclusionary culture that still exists. It did, however, address the community-centric environment younger participants seek, which gets at the more complex issue the industry is facing: it’s primarily built for white, cisgender, heterosexual, affluent, competitive, able-bodied people.

There are many important initiatives and organizations working toward a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive industry, including the [Running Industry Diversity Coalition](#). Unfortunately, the queer community is often left out of the conversation. In an industry where gender is used as one of the main barriers to entry (gendered divisions), the inclusion of trans and non-binary individuals must be prioritized, especially for those who exist at the intersection of other marginalized identities. Beyond inclusion in events, queer representation must also be paramount when recruiting for speakers, panelists, and leadership positions. As LGBTQ rights activist Marsha P. Johnson so perfectly stated, there’s “no pride for some of us, without liberation for all of us.”

Introducing QRS

The ultimate goal is a running industry that affirms all gender and sexually diverse individuals. That is where the Queer Running Society (QRS) comes in. This newly formed organization will elevate the queer experience in the running industry by connecting queer running communities, campaigning for queer representation (in leadership positions, on boards, at conferences and trade shows), compiling queer content and resources (speakers, guides, policies, tools, podcasts), creating safe spaces for the queer community (event certifications), and conducting surveys and research. With a focus on all running disciplines (road, trail, ultra, track & field) and the intersectionality of marginalized identities, QRS will advocate on behalf of queer runners and adaptive athletes and engage with brands, companies, and organizations who are committed to a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive industry.

The state of the queer running community is strong, but its place within the larger running industry has yet to be established. Let's discover it together.

To learn more about the Queer Running Society, sign up for our mailing list, meet the team leading the organization, and discover queer running communities and resources, please visit our website at www.queerrunningsociety.com and follow us on Instagram ([@queerrunningsociety](https://www.instagram.com/queerrunningsociety)).