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Violence in high school sports: A growing threat to our youth's health

“Sports-related violence among youth is largely ignored as ‘just kids being kids,’ says Assistant Professor Sarah Fields, “but illegal activity, by definition, is not supposed to occur. It can be prevented by enforcing rules, penalizing illegal behavior and educating players and coaches about the danger.”

Sports-related violence occurs at all levels of sport, from children's leagues through college and from amateur to professional adult leagues. At the high school level, an estimated 98,000 sports injuries occurred in U.S. high schools in 2005-2007 that related directly to actions ruled illegal by referees, officials or disciplinary committees.

Participating in sports is an excellent way for young people to be physically active, yet the repercussions of sports-related injuries can be potentially severe, both physically and psychologically, for our youth.

To date, sports injury research has focused mainly on describing patterns of injury and studying methods of injury reduction, such as use of protective equipment or coaching techniques. Research on injury due to illegal activity/foul play has focused primarily on adult sports.

Sarah Fields, assistant professor of sport and exercise

management and science in the college's School of Physical Activity and Educational Services, joined colleagues at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, to conduct the first national study of injuries caused by illegal activity in nine high school sports at 100 U.S. high schools. The researchers compared sport and gender differences in injury rates and proportions of injuries related to illegal activity.

Findings and Recommendations

Overall, Fields found that 6.4 percent of high school sports-related injuries were associated with illegal activity. Girls' and boys' soccer had the highest rates of injury due to illegal activity. Girls' volleyball and softball and boys' baseball had the lowest rates.

The highest proportion of injuries occurred in girls' basketball, girls' soccer and boys' soccer. The proportions of

injuries related to illegal activity were as follows:

- Boys' injuries related to illegal activity

baseball	4. %
basketball	10.3%
football	1.6%
soccer	11.4%
wrestling	4.8%

- Girls' injuries related to illegal activity

Basketball	14. %
soccer	11.9%
softball	.7%
volleyball	1.8%

Of the injuries, 32 percent were to the head and/or face and 25 percent were concussions. For 10.5 percent of youth injured due to illegal activity, their injury resulted in medical disqualification for the rest of the season; 5.7 percent of the youth required surgery;

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35.1 percent missed from 7 to more than 21 days of school.

Fields feels that we must act. "Sports-related violence among youth is largely ignored as 'just kids being kids,' she says, "but illegal activity, by definition, is not supposed to occur. It can be prevented by enforcing rules, penalizing illegal behavior and educating players and coaches about the danger."

Fields and her colleagues recommend that school officials discuss prevention of sports-related violence with everyone involved: athletes, coaches, parents and referees. They encourage the creation and enforcement of policies related to such violence. They also recommend nurturing a culture of good sportsmanship, where participation is valued over winning. By working together, Fields believes we can reduce such injuries.

Next Steps

Until now, Fields says most researchers have studied hazing, brawling, and illegal activity – all types of sports violence – separately. "Yet the connection to sport links them," she says. "Sport-related violence is a broad example of interpersonal violence. We need to track incidents and work on prevention."

Methodology

For this study, Fields and her colleagues used a nationally representative sample of U.S. high school athletes from the National High School Sports-Related Injury Surveillance Study for 2005-2007. The schools participate in an internet-based surveillance system. All U.S. high schools with certified athletic trainers are invited to take part.

The study was funded in part by a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For more of the study's results, see the article by Collins, CL; Fields, SK; and Comstock, RD, in Injury Prevention: Journal of the International Society for Child and Adolescent Injury Prevention, February 2008, volume 14, number 1, pp. 34-8. Or visit injuryprevention.bmj.com.



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