

COVID-19 Pandemic Impact: Comparing Undergraduate Athletes Mental Wellness to Non-Athlete Peers

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Background

- The pandemic had profound effects on mental health:
 - 34% of Gen Z adults (18-23) reported a decline in mental health during first year of pandemic
 - Gen Z adults also expressed feelings of uncertainty, loneliness, elevated levels of stress, and symptoms of depression (APA, 2020)
- Higher education institutions and scholars have growing interest in students' mental health and well-being (Copeland et al., 2021)
- In April 2020, the NCAA explored the pandemic's impact on student-athlete mental health:
 - Survey of 37,658 student-athletes from each athletic conference and sport
 - Majority of student-athletes reported high rates of constant or near-daily mental distress
- Other research (Graupensperger et al., 2020) on smaller sample (n=234) of student-athletes pre and post the pandemic social distancing mandates found feelings of connectedness and support from teammates although being physically distant, suggesting importance of intercollegiate athletics in providing social connectedness for improvement of mental health and well-being
- The current study focuses on whether athlete status predicts levels of mental health issues for first-year students and seniors, even after controlling for other student identities and institutional characteristics

Method

- Data from the 2021 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which assesses students' exposure to and participation in effective educational practices
- Institutions can also add topical modules to the end of their core survey. In 2021, one module option was "Coping with COVID"
- Sample was limited to full-time enrolled, traditional age (<21 for first year, <25 for senior) students from NCAA-member institutions, leaving responses from 7,274 first-year students and 5,414 seniors attending 34 institutions
- Measures: Mental Health Issue Increases Scale, derived from module items
 - Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis used to determine scale
 - Seven items asking about the extent of increase in various mental health symptoms as a result of the pandemic
 - Uses 5-point Likert-type scale from "Not at all" to "Very much"
- Analysis: Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analyses

- Student identities, institutional characteristics, and athlete status as predictors; increased mental health issues as outcome
- Variables entered into the model in two blocks, with student identities and institutional characteristics as first block and athlete status added in the second
- Separate models were conducted for first-years and seniors
- Effect coding was used for non-dichotomous categorical variables

Results & Discussion

- Second block of OLS models (athlete status) explained a statistically significant but relatively low amount of variance (.3% FY and .4% SR)
 - In comparison, the first block (demographic and institutional characteristics) explained much larger relative amount (16.1% FY and 14.7% SR)
- The standardized regression coefficients indicated athlete status was a significant negative predictor of mental health increases, meaning those who self-reported as student-athletes were *less* likely to experience increases in mental health symptoms
- Participation in athletics during such a stressful and uncertain time may have provided social protection and support through team dynamics (Graupensperger et al., 2020), as well as consistent routine, structure, and physical activity - all of which can enhance wellness and mental health
- Continued research is needed to explore impact of pandemic over time, as well as potential differences for subgroups such as gender, type of sport, or other institutional athletic policies

Limitations

- Sample may not be representative of all students in the United States
- Data set relied on self-reported information
- Study did not test for causal relationships between athlete status and mental health, only confirms that they are associated

References available in full paper

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For more information about NSSE: <http://www.nsse.indiana.edu/>

For more information about NCAA: <https://www.ncaa.com/>

