

Violent, Delinquent, and Aggressive Behaviors of Rural High School Athletes and Non-Athletes

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between sports participation and self-reported violent, delinquent, and aggressive behaviors in rural high school populations. Three-hundred and thirty-eight athletes and non-athletes from four rural high schools completed the YRBSS and the Conflict Behavior Scale (CBS). The results indicated that: (a) males demonstrated similar violent and delinquent behaviors to other urban and suburban populations, (b) male non-athletes reported significantly more assaults, trouble at school, drinking while driving, trouble with the police, and marijuana use than male athletes, and (c) female athletes reported significantly less and male athletes reported significantly more aggressive behaviors than their non-athlete counterparts on the CBS. These data illustrate that violent, delinquent, and aggressive behaviors do exist in rural populations, but that sports participation does not necessarily influence higher rates of these behaviors.

The escalating rate of high school violence is of particular concern in our society today (Page & Hammermeister, 1997; Sondik, 1999). Homicide is currently the second leading cause of death for American adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 (Barrios, 2000; Hoyert, Kochanek, & Murphy, 1999; Marsh, 1993) and the existence of drugs and weapons in our schools is staggering (US Dept. of Education, 1997). Although violent crime in U.S. schools is down, adolescents between the ages of 12 and 19 years remain at highest risk for victimization by violent crime (Ellickson & McGuigan, 2000). In the past three

years alone, high school shootings resulting in deaths (i.e., Columbine H.S., Santana H.S.) have been on the rise and in turn, have increased public attention to school violence. Several factors including community size, gender, and athletic involvement have been examined, but much of the recent school violent and delinquent research (Sondik, 1999; U.S. Dept. of Education, 1997) has focused on non-athletes from urban and suburban populations with little attention having been paid to athletes or to persons from rural settings. A limitation of this research is the generalizability to all types of communities and whether athletes participate in violent and delinquent behavior as often as non-athletes.

About 5.2 million young adults in the United States participate in over 30 sports at the high school level (Sage, 1998). Researchers have argued (Beller & Stoll, 1995; Berlant, 1996) that high school sport participation builds basic values of American life: character, self-esteem, confidence, respect for others, fair play and competition. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that high school athletics can enhance physical, psychological, and social development of adolescent boys and girls (Fejgin, 1994; Larson, 1994; Marsh, 1993). Unfortunately, due to increased pressure on coaches and young adults to win, and the influence of questionable role models, the behaviors learned by young athletes in sports may not always reflect the positive values our society purports to endorse outside of sport (Bredemeier, 1994; Rees, Howell, & Miracle, 1994). These questionable behaviors often center around or are often associated with violence, physical aggression, and delinquency.

Earlier research (Bredemeier & Shields, 1985, 1986; Segrave and Hastad, 1984; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995) has shown contradictory findings related to rates of aggression, delinquency, and violence among high school athletes. Ample support exists identifying an in-sport socialization process that seems to legitimize aggressive acts, and sometimes violence and delinquency, particularly in contact sports (Coakley, 1998; Sage, 1998). More recently, the relationship between delinquency and sports participation was examined in an urban population indicating that highly active athletes (participation in two or more school or community run sports) drank more than their non-athlete counterparts (Faulkner & Slattery, 1990; Rainey, McKeown, Sargent, & Valois, 1996). Further, Levin and associates (1995), also examining an urban population found that the nature of the sport in which a high school student participated may have a stronger impact on violent and delinquent behaviors outside of the sport environment. Specifically, non-contact sport participants showed significantly lower percentages when compared to either non-athletes or contact sport athletes for such behaviors as getting into trouble at school (15.7% vs. 26.3% and 27%), assaulting others (7.3% vs. 20.5% and 16%), and carrying weapons (20.8% vs. 28.7% and 26.6%). Based on these findings and limited research examining the effects of athletic populations, the major concern of this paper was to examine the role athletics played in aggressive, violent, and delinquent behaviors in high school populations.

Further, an important demographic characteristic that has received limited consideration is the environment in which the adolescent is raised. Previous studies have investigated urban populations almost exclusively, while paying little attention to the relationship between sport participation and violent/delinquent behavior in rural areas. The consideration of this geographic variable is warranted on at least two points. First, research indicates that patterns of certain delinquent behaviors may differ between rural and

urban teenage populations. Napier, Carter, and Pratt (1981) found a lower level of alcohol and drug use and abuse in rural populations compared to urban populations. More recently, research contradicted those findings with reports of rural youth generally drinking more and drinking while driving more often than their urban counterparts (Gibbons, Wylie, Echterling, & French, 1986; Sarvela, Pape, Odulana, & Bajracharya, 1990). Although a consistent pattern of delinquent behavior (at least with respect to alcohol and drug use) remains elusive, research does seem to suggest that these types of behaviors may be moderated by the youth's environment. Second, in rural high schools, sports teams often serve as a focal point for the entire community with team members being accorded special status and special emphasis placed on their success. High school sports programs in urban settings must compete with numerous other entertainment options and are often not the focus of the community. While we are not aware of empirical research examining this issue, the influence of sport teams in rural communities has been captured anecdotally through movies such as *Hoosiers* and *Varsity Blues*. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between sports participation and self-reported violent, physically aggressive, and delinquent behaviors in rural high school populations.

Method

Participants

Participants were 234 high school athletes (137 males/97 females) and 104 non-athletes (64 males/40 females) attending four rural high schools in the Midwest. A rural school was defined as a school with no more than 300 total students derived from at least two communities consolidated into one school building. The sample ranged in age from 14-18 years ($M = 15.67$, $SD = 1.26$). Ninety-three percent were non-Hispanic white, 2% were African-American, 1% Hispanic, 1% Asian, and .5% Native American which reflects the ethnic make-up of the area. Due to the

