**Mental health impacts of interpersonal violence in sports**

Violence presents in many contexts within the world of sports. It is an expected component of combat and collision sports and can occur accidentally in sports that feature high speeds or athletes competing in proximity. Non-accidental violence in sport has been defined by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as maltreatment through harassment and abuse which can include physical, sexual, and psychological harassment and abuse as well as neglect. Many studies refer to this type of violence as “interpersonal violence in sport”. Children can experience violence from coaches, peers, and members of the athlete entourage. Vertommen reported that severe sexual, physical and psychological interpersonal violence experienced in childhood was associated with more psychological distress and reduced quality of life as an adult.

While the true prevalence of maltreatment in sports is unknown and likely underreported, one need not look far to see masses of athletes from all nations and sports emerge as survivors from years of abuse within the sport system.

Another type of violence that can be experienced by athletes and other individuals, which is not often considered in the context of the sports world, is *intimate partner violence*. This concept is considered more *private* and often occurs behind closed doors; however intimate partner violence can invade the sports world when reports are filed alleging abuse, or video emerges of an athlete assaulting their partner. Normalization of violent and aggressive behaviour in sports has been linked to higher rates of violence by male athletes across collegiate and professional sport, including sexual assault. Connections have also been made between aggression when watching sports and violence against women.

Mental health outcomes of intentional violence in sport may include neuropsychiatric sequelae of traumatic brain injuries, substance use disorders and anger management problems. More research is needed to fully elucidate and describe these risks. The mental health impacts of maltreatment in sport have been well documented. These include higher prevalence of depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidality, substance use disorder, eating disorders, self-harm behaviours, and dropping out of sport.

The various types of violence that can occur in sports may be experienced by any athlete at any age in any sport at any level from any nation at any time. As research into the individual, environmental, and organizational risks factors that contribute to violence in sport further informs governments and sports organizations at all levels, education and policies can begin to effect change. While the *culture* of sport is often blamed or used as a justification for abusive or misogynistic behaviour in sport, changing the culture of sport is vitally necessary to make sport a safer place overall: to work, play and watch. Safe sport initiatives must be endorsed by the highest levels of a sport organization to begin to create safer environments for all; but respect, effective communication, safety and healthy relationships at the athlete and team level will impact the greatest number of athletes and have the greater positive impact on mental health outcomes.

# Violence in sports has become too normalized in today’s society

If there was a video of someone getting brutally beaten up, I would hope most people would turn away. Watching that would be disturbing and upsetting. Why is it, then, that when we turn on a boxing match, some can’t look away? Fans get enthralled by the sport, even paying hundreds of dollars to watch and gamble on the outcome.

Violence in sports has become increasingly—and alarmingly—normalized.

A prime example of this is football. In the United States, the most popular sport to watch is football. Proof of this—beyond random statistics—is that we are able to watch it on TV four days a week: Thursday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. Personally, I am not a big fan. I mostly tolerate football watch parties for the snacks and to hang out with friends. However, as stated before, most do not agree with me and find football to be their favourite sport to watch.

To put it bluntly, most find football [entertaining](https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna46653530) because of the brutality. High school football, while different from the professional league, accounts for more than 60% of concussions that occur in all high school sports. Brain injuries account for 65% to 95% of deaths caused by [football](http://www.protectthebrain.org/Brain-Injury-Research/What-is-a-Concussion-.aspx). Facts like these are thrown around all the time, and people ignore them because of how often they are said; so often that it has become less disturbing and more normal. Simply put, football is favoured because of the fans’ morbid fascination with watching men barrel into each other.

During the 2021 season, there were 20 deaths caused by playing football in the United States. Sure, 20 is a relatively low number, at least when considering nickels or pennies, but these are human lives.

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Luckily, there are some rules that have been updated and changed in football, such as you can’t lead with your head into a tackle, the helmet has changed for better protection, and concussion protocols are being taken more seriously.

Hockey, on the other hand, actually allows fights in the NHL. Though the players get a five-minute penalty if they initiate the fight, there are still 0.3 fights every match. Fans even encourage the brawls. It is said that fighting lures the fans in and makes the game more entertaining for those watching. In other words, it is pointlessly risking their lives for someone else’s amusement.

The cons, in my opinion, outweigh the pro: entertainment. Cons of fighting in hockey include mental health problems, concussions, and even potential death. Fortunately, death is not common in the rink; there has only ever been one death that was caused by a direct injury on the ice in the NHL.

Similarly, to football, concussions occur regularly in hockey. There is a 30% chance that a hockey player will attain a concussion while playing. [Long term effects](https://www.cdc.gov/traumaticbraininjury/concussion/repeated-head-impacts.html#:~:text=A%20person%20with%20a%20history,recovery%20or%20more%20severe%20symptoms&text=Have%20long%2Dterm%20problems%2C%20including,such%20as%20keeping%20one's%20balance) of concussions can be extremely serious and lasting. Issues with concentration, memory, severe headaches, and sometimes physical problems such as keeping one’s balance are all very real and very possible outcomes from one too many concussions. Repeated concussions could also lead to conditions like Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s disease, and eventually dementia.

Football and hockey are two examples of the glorification of violence in today’s sports. Boxing, rugby, lacrosse, and soccer are also among the sports that have the possibility of being too brutal.

Rather than participating in the trend of ignoring these real health risks, realize that what you think is entertainment is actually vicious violence.

**Violence in sport**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RCtF7Ap4wc>