

SME RESEARCH BRIEF

Research Review: Sporting Events and Domestic Violence

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Is intimate partner violence fueled by televised sporting events?

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a serious, widespread problem.¹ Some IPV incidents are believed to be precipitated by visceral violent or aggressive impulses (Finkel et al. 2009). Plausible triggers for these impulses may include televised sporting events.² What does the evidence tell us about the potential linkage between televised sporting events and domestic violence?

Scope of the Review

Dozens of peer-reviewed studies conducted by researchers in many different countries were reviewed. The focus was on research that looked at the spillover effects of televised sporting events on IPV. Studies concerned with player violence, unruly crowd behavior, or local crime hot spots around sporting venues were considered out of scope. Each relevant study was assessed to confirm it was methodologically sound and had sufficient data to support its key conclusions.³

What does the evidence say?

The strength and direction of the empirical relationship between televised sporting events and IPV depends on the sport and the country. There is some evidence that the size of the effect also depends critically on the specific context and outcome of each individual contest.

Intense rivalries, pivotal games, and otherwise emotionally salient games appear to have consistently worse effects on IPV. Losses generally, and upset losses in particular (Card and Dahl, 2011), also appear to have larger detrimental effects. Routine contests which are less likely to provoke the same amount of exhilaration or disappointment, such as draws or predictable outcomes, appear to have much smaller (or perhaps zero) effects on IPV rates.

¹ In Canada, IPV accounts for roughly 57% of all violent crime cases prosecuted in adult criminal courts (Beaupré, 2015) and approximately 85 homicides per year on average (Burczycka et al. 2018).

² Experimental studies conducted by psychology researchers have repeatedly shown that momentary failures in self-regulation and self-control become more likely when the perpetrator's ego strength has been depleted, after a negative emotional shock or frustrating experience for example (Baumeister et al. 2007; Hagger et al. 2010). The reverse phenomenon might explain, for example, why people tend to tip cab drivers better (Ge, 2018) and are more likely to vote for incumbent politicians (Healy et al. 2010; Miller, 2013) after their local sports team wins.

³ One important methodological consideration, for example, is that televised sporting events and police-reported domestic violence are both naturally more likely to coincide with weekends (Gantz et al. 2006; Williams and Neville, 2014). Seasonality also matters because there is suggestive evidence, for example, that women with school-aged children who are in abusive relationships may time their exit strategy to coincide with breaks in the academic schedule (Oths and Robertson, 2007). The best studies therefore adjust comparison baselines to control for the day of the week and time of the year.

High-profile televised soccer matches, including the FIFA World Cup in particular, have been linked to a significant increase in police-reported IPV in England (Brimicombe and Cafe, 2012; Kirby et al. 2014) and Scotland (e.g. Williams et al. 2013; Dickson et al. 2016). Similar effects have been found around popular rugby league matches in Australia (Livingston, 2018).

In the United States, certain National Football League (NFL) games have been linked to measurable spikes in IPV. Importantly, most of the spike in IPV attributable to NFL games appears to be concentrated in a relatively narrow time window of no more than 2-3 hours towards the end of particularly intense, emotionally salient, or otherwise important games (Card and Dahl, 2011).⁴

While few peer-reviewed articles have focused on the Canadian experience, Boutilier et al. (2017) did report that Canadian Football League (CFL) games featuring the Calgary Stampeders and the Edmonton Eskimos appear to coincide with a 15% increase in police-reported IPV incidents in Calgary. No such increase was attributable to other Calgary Stampeders games or National Hockey League (NHL) regular-season games featuring the Calgary Flames.

Additional factors

It is well-known that many IPV incidents are unreported and therefore are not captured in police data. White et al. (1992) partially circumvented this methodological complication by analyzing hospital admission data and found that more women visited local hospital emergency rooms when the NFL's Washington Redskins won. Cheng et al. (2005) also reported an increase in female emergency room patients during the 2000 World Series between the New York Yankees and the New York Mets. Besides the fact that such hospital-based studies are unable to separate IPV-related injuries from other medical cases, it is important to note that several other studies produced mixed findings.⁵ Of course, not all IPV incidents require medical attention or result in a hospital visit in the first place.

Implications for practice

Recognizing IPV risk factors associated with certain televised sporting events can inform a tailored police response which is proactive, coordinated, and vigorous. If a perpetrator is known to be a fervent sports fan, and police or community partners can recognize that a particular televised sporting event is more likely to act as a trigger, there may be opportunities to create customized safety plans or intervene to actively prevent violent situations.

Since any effect on IPV is likely to be concentrated around the end of certain specific games, police researchers and analysts should note that simple comparisons based on average daily rates of IPV incidents may conceal the true effect of certain games on IPV. Hourly data and careful analysis of the context around each particular game are therefore crucial.

Key references

- BRIMICOMBE, A. AND CAFE, R. (2012). Beware, win or lose: Domestic violence and the World Cup. *Significance*, 9(5):32–35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1740-9713.2012.00606.x>
- CARD, D. AND DAHL, G. B. (2011). Family Violence and Football: The Effect of Unexpected Emotional Cues on Violent Behavior. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 126(1):103–143. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjr001>
- GANTZ, W., BRADLEY, S. D. AND WANG, Z. (2006). "Televised NFL Games, the Family, and Domestic Violence", pp. 396–414 (Chapter 22) in *Handbook of Sports and Media*, ed. Arthur A. Raney and Jennings Bryant, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203873670_chapter_22

⁴ Aduabato (2015) offered preliminary evidence that not only NFL games but also NHL playoff games may be associated with an increase in IPV incidents. Unfortunately, the study relied on a relatively small sample of days collected from a single American city (Philadelphia).

⁵ Sivarajasingam et al. (2005), Miller et al. (2013), Quigg et al. (2013) and Hughes et al. (2018) analyzed hospital emergency room data and detected increased admission rates in the context of Welsh international rugby and soccer matches, certain Australian Football League (AFL) matches, the FIFA World Cup and the UEFA European Football Championship, respectively. Reich et al. (1994), Reis et al. (2005), Redelmeier and Vermeulen (2011), Furyk et al. (2012), Correia et al. (2018) found opposite trends in the context of the Super Bowl, Major League Baseball (MLB) playoffs, the 2010 Olympic gold medal game in men's hockey, Australian rugby league series and tennis matches, respectively.