

Socio-economic factors influence student-athlete identity, study finds

August 15 2017, by Ben Hinshaw

Think high school sports are played on a level field? Think again. A new study finds that young men's identities as student-athletes are heavily influenced by precisely the socio-economic factors that sports supposedly transcend.

Jeffrey O. Sacha, a postdoctoral fellow in sociology at the University of California, Davis, surveyed 534 male student-athletes from three Los Angeles high schools during the 2014-15 academic year, conducting in-depth interviews with 20 from each school.

The author describes five distinct types of student-athlete identity—ranging from the scholar-athlete to "the benchwarmer" and the "school captain." Sacha found that, just as many other school-based structures do, high school sports function as "an extension of privilege and marginalization for young men."

"Sports are experienced very differently by young men across race, family [socio-economic status](#) and school context," Sacha writes in a paper to be presented Tuesday, Aug. 15, at the American Sociological Association annual meeting in Montreal, Canada. "How male student-athletes view opportunity in their high school shapes their particular student-athlete identity," he said.

One city, three very different schools

The three schools at which Sacha conducted surveys and interviews are similar in size and location, but resources and performance at each school vary widely in terms of both sports and academics. One school is private, while the others are public. All schools were given pseudonymous names for purposes of the study.

College Prep High is a private, majority-white school that sends 96 percent of its all-male student body to four-year colleges. It enjoys state-of-the-art sports facilities and low turnover of coaching staff. Pacific Coast High is a majority-Latino school located in an affluent neighborhood, with an above-average academic performance score. However, it does not historically invest much in sports, and coaches are often "walk-ons" rather than teachers. Finally, Park Heights is majority-black, with an academic performance score in the bottom third of schools nationally, and less than 8 percent of students are proficient in math. The school is experiencing declining enrollment and staff layoffs.

An abundance of academic resources makes the "scholar-athlete" identity widely available to College Prep students. These students, though committed sportsmen, prioritize their intellectual development—because their school enables them to do so, according to Sacha. Park Heights students expressed frustration at the lack of academic opportunities, and were more likely to identify as "D-1 athletes"—that is, young men counting on sports for college scholarships and perhaps even professional careers. They also frequently identified as "school captains" who use sports as a way to mark themselves as leaders and to distinguish themselves from classmates they see as troublemakers or "not about anything."

Pacific Coast High students most commonly identified as either "rowdy jocks" or "benchwarmers." The former, a highly visible and exclusive social group, have a reputation for heavy partying. The latter consider themselves subpar athletes, only playing sports to get out of physical

education classes or for an extra line on their college resume. In each case, the absence of a rich athletic history at the school contributes to the formation of these distinct identities.

Can sports counteract educational inequality?

Sacha makes clear that [young men](#)'s experience in high school sports is certainly not homogenous. Despite an established positive relationship between high school sports and academic performance, he finds that they can be "both a source of empowerment and a mechanism for social control."

A given young man's level of investment in an athletic identity depends heavily on his high school's academic opportunity structure. When that structure is lacking, sports may offer the promise of improved socio-economic status. ("Nobody wants to be a nobody," one Park Heights [student](#) said.) But the ability of sports to deliver that improvement is not guaranteed.

"Privilege and marginalization are more often than not reflected in high [school](#) sports," Sacha concludes, "which raises important doubts about the ability for sports participation to undermine structural educational inequality."

Provided by UC Davis

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