

Three-quarters of Americans see head injuries in football as major problem

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Credit: University of Massachusetts Lowell

Three-quarters of fans say head injuries in football are a major problem and another six in 10 are worried about off-field violence involving players. Despite that, football remains America's favorite professional

sport, according to results of a UMass Lowell-Washington Post poll released today.

The survey of 1,000 Americans finds 77 percent of those who consider themselves professional football fans said that [head injuries](#) causing long-term health issues for players are a major problem, compared with only 15 percent who said it is a minor problem and 6 percent who do not consider it a problem.

The long-term effects of head injuries among football players has been the topic of much debate in recent years, including whether Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) - a neurological condition that can mimic Alzheimer's disease - occurs more often among NFL players. In July, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that a recent study of brains donated for research diagnosed CTE in 99 percent of those of 111 former NFL players.

An overwhelming majority of Americans polled believe that there is settled science that playing football causes brain injuries, with a total of 83 percent who say that is either certainly (45 percent) or probably (37 percent true). Only one in 10 say that is probably false (7 percent) or certainly false (3 percent). A majority also said that it is certainly true (52 percent) that CTE is a serious public health issue and another 28 percent said it is probably true. Only one in 10 said it is probably (7 percent) or certainly (3 percent) false.

The poll also found that sports fans see other issues with football, including domestic violence (61 percent) and violence in general (60 percent) committed by players as major problems.

Despite this, 60 percent of Americans say they are fans of professional football, with 31 percent identifying themselves as "big fans," the poll found. Major League Baseball and the National Basketball Association

were the second-most popular among professional sports at 45 percent and 39 percent, respectively, followed by boxing (28 percent); mixed martial arts (25 percent); auto racing and soccer (both at 24 percent); ice hockey (22 percent); and WWE wrestling (14 percent).

The controversies facing pro football in the last few years seem to have had little impact on its popularity, as just as many Americans are fans today as in 2012, according to this poll and data previously collected by The Washington Post.

The UMass Lowell-Washington Post poll found that interest in the sport increased over the last few years among 23 percent of football fans and decreased among 19 percent. Twenty-five percent of female fans said their interest has increased, compared to 12 percent who reported a decrease. Among male fans, 25 percent reported a decrease in interest and 21 percent said it increased. Interest grew 34 percent among fans who are ages 18 to 39 while interest showed a small net decrease among fans age 40 and older.

The most common reason that fans reported for a decrease in interest in the NFL in recent years was not concussions or violence, but political issues. Of those who identified that reason, 17 percent pointed to protests during the national anthem by players such as Colin Kaepernick. Ten percent cited too many penalties and game delays or a decline in their interest in sports in general and 8 percent said they are too busy. Only 7 percent cited too many injuries or too much violence in the game.

"There is a growing ambivalence among pro football fans that puts their love of the game in conflict with their views on concussions and head injuries. The survey indicates that football fans are very concerned about the problems related to concussions and half think the league has not done enough to address the issue. However, there is no evidence in this

survey that NFL fans have started voting with their feet and remote controls by turning away and tuning out," said Prof. Joshua Dyck, co-director of UMass Lowell's Center for Public Opinion.

Forty-five percent of Americans polled said the NFL has done too little and 40 percent said the league has adequately addressed the issue. Five percent said the NFL has done too much and 11 percent of those polled were uncertain.

The major reasons fans say they watch pro football point to the geographic, social and familial ties that bond them: 71 percent cited rooting for a favorite team and 53 percent cited enjoying time with friends and family. The game's action also scored high among [football fans](#), with 68 percent saying it is a major reason they watch, but the hard-hitting nature of the game was a major reason to watch among only 26 percent.

"One of the more interesting findings in the survey is that many of the reasons Americans are drawn to football are not because of hard hits, but rather for social reasons - rooting for a specific team, and spending time with friends and family. The experience of watching football transcends the game itself and is deeply ingrained as a part of American culture," said Dyck.

Other findings from the poll include:

- The NFL's biggest fans are between age 40 to 49 and the sport saw its greatest increase in interest among fans age 18 to 39.
- College [football](#) is as popular among Americans as Major League Baseball and is more popular than every professional sport except the NFL.
- College basketball is more popular among poll respondents (35 percent) than the National Hockey League and Major League

Soccer, along with professional auto racing, boxing and mixed martial arts.

Results of the UMass Lowell-Washington Post poll, conducted through a new partnership looking at Americans' opinions on a variety of sports and related issues, are based on live interviews with a random sample of 1,000 American adults conducted in English and Spanish via cellular telephones and landlines Aug. 14 through Aug. 21. The margin of error is plus or minus 3.7 percent for all respondents. Details on methodology and additional poll data and analysis are available at <http://www.uml.edu/polls>.

Provided by University of Massachusetts Lowell

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