

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth recreational hockey in southwestern Manitoba, Canada

By Christopher D. Malcolm, PhD, Doug Ramsey, PhD, & Derrek Eberts, PhD



Why this research is important

This research provides a lens to the impacts of COVID-19 on youth recreation activities in general, but also specifically on the physical and social activity impacts on youth of COVID-19 restrictions on play—a segment of the population frequently identified as having been disproportionately negatively affected by the pandemic.

How the research was conducted

An online survey methodology was employed for this research in the spring of 2021 during the shutdown of youth recreational hockey in Westman.

What you need to know

The health and societal benefits of programmed recreational team sports such as ice hockey are well known. Benefits include physical health, psycho-social development (e.g., cooperation, discipline, leadership, development of social identity, feelings of belonging), motor skills acquisition, and sportsmanship. The restriction of recreational sports activities, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, may have hindered the development of these benefits. For this study, we collected opinions and observations from the parents of youth recreational hockey players registered for league play in southwestern Manitoba in 2020 and 2021 regarding the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on players and their families.

We collected parental opinions on the nature of the restrictions on play, as well as impacts, including how much and what type of play occurred during the pandemic; what players commented on during restrictions on play; if impacts on the players occurred because of the restriction on play and descriptions of the impact(s) observed (e.g., mental, physical); and if changes in family routines/behaviour were noticed due to restrictions on play.

What the researchers found

Most parents disagreed with the restrictions. There was a significant difference between the urban and rural hockey parents. Urban parents displayed stronger opinions of disagreement than rural parents. There was no significant difference between age groups; however, there were significant differences between house league and rep (competitive) league levels. The parents of players at the higher league levels displayed greater levels of disagreement with the restrictions on play. An example of a parent comment was:

There was no need. . . . Precautions were in place and being followed. It was just a heavy-handed decision made by governments and public health who have no clue what such a decision led to anxiety and probable mental health issues.

With respect to impacts on players due to restrictions on play observed by parents, 78.7% indicated that they had observed negative impacts, such as psychological and physical impacts, which were observed in all locations, ages, and levels of play. Mental health deterioration was noted by almost half (47.5%) of parents. A typical parental comment was:

Hockey is a big part of his mental health, and with the loss of the social aspect of the game, spending time with friends, exercise and the positive feelings he had playing with a team, I noticed increased sadness and anger at times.

For questions about changes to family life, a typical answer was:

We enjoyed the additional family time but not at the expense of seeing the emotional toll it took on them [players] from not getting to spend time playing a sport they love and the time with friends.

How this research can be used

The most significant finding in our study was the prevalence of physical and psychological impacts reported in youth hockey players by their parents. Therefore, the benefits of recreational youth sports mentioned above were perceived to be negatively impacted. This information is useful in preparing for possible long-term effects such as reduced participation in youth recreational sports. In addition, the results can also help prepare for more effective management of recreational sports activities in the case of a future pandemic.

About the researchers

Christopher Malcolm is an associate professor in the Department of Geography and Environment at BU.

Malcolmc@brandonu.ca

Doug Ramsey is a professor in the Department of Rural Development at BU. Ramsey@brandonu.ca

Derrek Eberts is an associate professor in the Department of Geography and Environment at BU.

Ebertsd@brandonu.ca

Keywords

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