



George Mason University

Immigrants, Athletes, and Engagement

What is the background for this study?

Scholars have long recognized the value of sport participation, not only for the physical benefits, but also for the development of social skills, and the ability for sports to unite individuals from different cultures and serve as an intervention strategy for integrating newcomers. Building off of classical contact theory, which examines the impact of personal contact on prejudices, this study uses a survey, an intervention, and a post-test analysis to determine whether “para-social contact” (i.e., indirect contact and engagement via social media, media coverage, TV viewing, or in-person events) between visible foreign-born athletes and members of the broader community contributes to more positive attitudes towards immigrants and reduces anti-immigrant feelings and prejudice toward immigrants in the United States. The study includes a three-year investigation to determine the effects that social media and in-person campaigns designed to highlight the diversity of players on local teams might have on engagement, inclusiveness, and equality to all New Americans.

What are the research questions?

This study aims to examine the degree to which immigrant athletes can use their visibility, acceptance, and influence to extend the spirit of engagement, inclusiveness, and equality to all New Americans. It hypothesizes that contact with celebrities, athletes, or other individuals across social and cultural lines has the potential to reduce prejudice toward immigrants. Accordingly, specific research questions include:

1. How can sports be a bridge between individuals from different places of birth to create a common sense of community?
2. Can increased contact and engagement with foreign-born athletes foster more positive attitudes towards immigrants who are both athletes and non-athletes?

What data and methods are used in this study?

The three-year study includes a web-based survey, intervention implementation, and post-test analysis.

In the first year of the study, a Qualtrics web-based survey is administered to a panel of respondents in seven metro areas (i.e., Boston, Detroit, Miami, Philadelphia, San Jose, Seattle, Washington, D.C./Baltimore). The aim of the survey is to understand individuals’ attitudes about immigrants/immigration in the United States and in their local area, as well as their level of sport engagement and participation (active as well as viewership), social media usage, news media consumption, and political beliefs. The researchers focus on a multivariate analysis of

Study At-A-Glance

Study Title
Immigrants, Athletes, and Engagement

Researchers
James Witte, PhD
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Grant Cohort 2022

Timeline 2022-2025

Study Location Metro areas of Boston, MA; Detroit, MI; Miami, FL; Philadelphia, PA; San Jose, CA; Seattle, WA; and Washington, D.C./Baltimore, MD

Study Topic Area(s)
Arts and Culture
Immigrants, Immigration, and Refugees
Social Equity

the survey data to illuminate answers to the research questions.

To implement the intervention, the researchers work with sports organizations at the professional, semi-professional, amateur, and/or collegiate level to create campaigns (e.g., media reports, events, and targeted contact and engagement via direct and para-social contact) to highlight the diversity of the players. The goal of the second year is to develop and distribute the stories of the experiences of foreign-born athletes in four of the metro areas (Washington, D.C./Baltimore, Detroit, Miami, and Seattle) to test whether successful integration of diverse athletes is associated with a positive impact on individuals' perceptions and attitudes towards all immigrants.

Finally, the study includes a Qualtrics post-test web-based survey of individuals in the same seven metro areas to determine whether the interventions developed in the four metro areas had an impact on their perceptions and attitudes toward immigrants in the United States. The researchers focus on a multivariate analysis of the survey data and use a fixed effects framework.

What are potential opportunities to apply study findings and/or build on this research?

Findings from the study will add to the body of knowledge on the important yet understudied role sports have on the civic infrastructure, including whether "para-social contact" between visible foreign-born athletes and members of the broader community contributes to more positive attitudes toward immigrants. For example, the findings could have implications for AmeriCorps grantee, Up2US Sports, an organization that trains and places youth sports coaches, as well as young people, as capacity-building service members in sport-based development organizations. Insights from the study offer program managers for Up2US Sports research-based guidance as to whether and how to engage diverse representatives from professional and collegiate sports.

For more information on the study:

Study Website	Institute for Immigration Research Immigrants, Athletes, and Inclusion			
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