

Violence in the NFL

Introduction

For years now, it seems like every time I turn on Sportscenter, the pundits are talking about the increasing amount of violent off-field incidents involving players in the National Football League (NFL). Much of the time, these incidents involve alleged domestic violence perpetrated by NFL athletes. I found myself accepting, without much thought, the proposition that the league is full of criminals, admittedly forming a bias based completely on this media portrayal and without any research of my own. However, as I've delved into my research for this project, my preconceived ideas have been quickly deconstructed. In this article I examine the sports television and mainstream media portrayal of the NFL. Moreover, I analyze crime statistics in the United States in comparison to those of the NFL to determine if the (sports television and mainstream) media is justified in its common accusations. Finally, I look deeper into the root causes of domestic violence in conjunction with the work of Kathleen Hofeller, and investigate if these causes are in fact prevalent in NFL athletes. Through my research I found that many of the off-field allegations against NFL players are exaggerated, mischaracterized, or over-generalized. The evidence I've uncovered demonstrates that NFL players do have a growing problem with domestic abuse, not necessarily a generalized problem with violent behavior. I found that domestic violence is often closely linked to the perpetrator's lack of higher education and/or impoverished upbringing. As I applied this new understanding to my examination of domestic violence in the NFL, I was able to verify that the causes identified in the general population were also at play among NFL players. I use my findings to suggest

specific actions the NFL should take in order combat domestic violence within the league in order to better their image.

Media Portrayal of the NFL

As stated earlier, growing sports and mainstream media coverage of off-field criminal incidents involving NFL athletes increasingly has caused many pundits, commentators, and scholars to claim that the NFL has a pervasive violence issue. For example, in his journal article about violence among athletes, Professor Donald F. Staffo states that “Criminally violent off-the-field behavior by players in the National Football League (NFL) is discussed first because its increasing frequency and severity - and the resulting media attention it generates - make it extremely problematic” (Staffo). While I agree that off-field violence in the NFL has received a great deal of media attention, I disagree that the growing media coverage is due to the increasing frequency or severity of these incidents, and I will explain why.

Professional athletes are much like other celebrities, both enjoying the notoriety and suffering the close scrutiny of others in the public eye. Pro athletes’ lives are followed just as much as that of any movie star or pop singer. In fact, three of the top 10 most-followed people on Instagram are athletes. And, according to *Forbes Magazine*, seven of the top twenty highest-paid celebrities are athletes. Clearly, professional athletes now have become an integral part of pop culture, both in the U.S. and worldwide. While fame and fortune bring a host of benefits to professional sports leagues and their athletes, they also come with challenges. Among these challenges are the microscopic scrutiny and unyielding critical judgment to which professional athletes are subjected. Professional athletes’ personal lives are often fodder for sensationalistic

and exaggerated Internet headlines (Morris). Most, if not all, off-field incidents involving NFL players and other pro athletes are magnified, generalized, and often misunderstood, but the data reveals that much of the public perception and media conclusions are unfairly blown out of proportion.

Identifying the Real Issue in the NFL

An examination of crime statistics within the NFL versus the general population in the United States reveals that the so-called violence issue among NFL players is highly exaggerated. In an article written for *FiveThirtyEight.com*, senior sports writer Benjamin Morris compares crime rates of NFL players to all U.S. males ages 25 to 29. Morris writes that “Overall, NFL players’ arrest rate is just thirteen percent (13%) of the national average. But this isn’t distributed evenly across crimes in the slightest” (Morris). Taking a deeper look, according to the data Morris cites, the highest occurring arrests amongst NFL players involve driving-under-the-influence (DUIs) and non-domestic assaults, and yet the NFL incidence rates are a fraction of the national average. While the national rate of DUI’s is nearly 2%, in the NFL it is merely .5%. Likewise, while the national rate of non-domestic assault is 1.5%, in the NFL it is .25%. Other crimes demonstrate the same pattern - rates among NFL players are much lower than the general population. The one exception is in the domestic violence category, where crimes statistics show a near parity between the NFL rate (.25%) and the general population rate (.35%) (Morris). The proximity of these incidence rates indicates that, more so than other so-called off-field “violence issues”, the NFL does in fact have an ongoing issue with domestic violence carried out by its players.

Domestic Violence and its Causes

Domestic violence (or abuse) is defined as “violent behavior used by a partner in any kind of relationship in order to gain control over another person. This includes, but is not limited to, physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse” (domesticviolence.org). In recent years, domestic violence has become a widely discussed, heatedly debated, and much dissected issue in the United States. One of the people to join the conversation about domestic violence is non-fiction author Kathleen H. Hofeller. Hofeller, who has a Ph.D. in psychology, and an M.A. in counseling. In her book *Social, Psychological, and Situational Factors in Wife Abuse*, Hofeller explores how social, psychological, and situational factors contribute to domestic violence by men against women. A significant portion of Hofeller’s book described a study she conducted with abused women and the men who had abused them. In reviewing the data collected in Hofeller’s study, two underlying causes for domestic violence jump out: lack of higher education, and impoverished childhoods/family circumstances.

One of the more compelling causes brought up in the study of domestic abusers was their level of education. In her study, Hofeller found that 84 out of 100 abusers had dropped out of high school, only completed high school, or attended college for two years or less (83). Only 16% had earned an undergraduate or graduate college degree (84). The other statistic that stands out concerned the occupations of abusers’ fathers. This statistic is relevant because the occupation of a father is usually a good indicator of a family's economic status. The data that Hofeller collected showed only 24% of the abusers had fathers with a professional or managerial background, while 56% of them had fathers who were either craftsmen, unskilled laborers, rarely

employed, or chronically unemployed (69). It is possible to draw the conclusion from Hofeller's study that men with a lower economic background and/or without a college degree are far more likely to become domestic abusers.

Domestic Violence and NFL Players

The patterns demonstrated by Hofeller's research can be found among NFL athletes. The NFL requires that its players be out of high school for at least three years (NFL). However, NFL rules do not state that a player must earn a college degree, much less even attend college. It is true that most NFL players do attend college, but that is because playing college football provides them more exposure to NFL scouts and increases the likelihood of their being drafted by an NFL team, not because it is required by the NFL (Reevy). In 2015, the graduation rate among all NCAA college football athletes was 65%. Last year it had risen to 88%. However, graduation rates for football players who make it to the NFL have fallen. In 2015, 17 of the 32 players drafted in the first round of the draft had earned a college degree. This year that number fell to just 13.

Many athletes in the NFL come from impoverished backgrounds. Often children who grow up in lower class areas take up a sport to either kill time, stay out of a gang, or eventually to escape poverty. For example, recently retired NFL star Patrick Willis grew up in Bruceton, Tennessee where he worked full-time in the cotton fields by age 10 (Branch). Current NFL star Jimmy Graham had a rough upbringing as well. At age 11, Graham was placed in a group home in which he was often beaten by other students (Dubin). These are just two examples, but the list of NFL players, current and retired, who grew up in poverty is extensive.

In the past year, two cases of domestic violence in the NFL garnered a large amount of media attention. These were the cases of Reuben Foster and Kareem Hunt. Kareem Hunt, one of the best running backs in the NFL, attracted the most scrutiny this season because of a number of videos that surfaced online. One of the videos showed Hunt kicking and shoving a woman in a Las Vegas hotel. On the other hand, Reuben Foster was a promising linebacker coming into the league just a few years ago. This past November he was arrested for domestic violence. It is important to note that this was the third time in just a matter of years that Foster has faced the same charges.

Both Foster and Hunt are perfect examples of how an unstable family situation can lead to subsequent bad behavior. In Hunt's case, he grew up seeing many of his family members incarcerated. This includes Hunt's mother, father, brother, and many cousins and uncles who are either currently doing time or have in the past. Foster's upbringing is surprisingly even more disturbing. As Foster's mother carried her 18-month old son, his father shot her in the back. Although Foster's father was indicted by a grand jury, he escaped and managed to evade police for over 16 years, which one can only imagine must have been unnerving to Foster growing up. It is evident that these two men have personal issues stemming back to their childhoods. However, instead of the league trying to correct their behavior or at least educate them better, it is almost like they let them off with a slap on the wrist. Just months after their subsequent arrests and scandals, both players were signed by another NFL team. Though they are not eligible to play, they will be in the coming years without any repercussions.

How The NFL Can Mitigate The Issue

The NFL has tried and is still trying to mitigate the domestic violence issue it has. Team owners and scouts no longer just look at athletes' skills and physical attributes; they now take into consideration athletes' mental makeup, decision making abilities, and other indicators of a "character". Arguably the most important tools for this new way of assessing players are two mandatory tests that must be taken by players coming out of college. However, a lot more needs to be done. Instead of the three year rule, it can be concluded that instituting a rule that made it mandatory to get a college degree would largely help. Yes, players would be older when they make it to the league and not every player that would make it otherwise would. But, it would surely increase the athlete's career and make them more aware of the dangers of off-field issues. At the very least it would give a back up plan in a career which lasts an average of just two years. If that is not a realistic possibility, the least the NFL can do is institute a course every incoming player would have to go through educating them about domestic violence. At the end of the day it is up to every individual to not commit crimes. While the NFL can do all these things to contain the issue, it cannot keep an individual from making decisions that are solely theirs.

Conclusion

The sports television networks and Internet news outlets often paint a picture of a violent culture within the NFL. My research indicates that the picture of a generally violent group of young men is overblown. However, the data does show that domestic violence perpetrated by NFL players occurs at a higher rate than in the general population. Dr. Hofeller has identified

poverty and lack of education as the two most important factors contributing to domestic violence, and these factors are present in many NFL players' backgrounds. Two recent cases involving high profile NFL stars illustrate the common pattern, but are not isolated. The NFL has been taking some steps to lessen and ultimately to prevent off-field violence by its players. But it needs to increase its efforts and to be smarter in addressing the root causes of domestic violence. Otherwise, the multi-billion-dollar business called the National Football League will continue to attract unyielding public scrutiny and scathing criticism, possibly to the point of losing a large chunk of the television advertising income that funds the league, its owners and players.