



Social Work's Role in Athletic Recruitment: New Opportunities for the Profession

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The authors conducted a preliminary study, which asked if social worker support could aid elite level hockey players during the recruitment process to higher levels of play. The intent was to determine the potential need for professional social workers in sports, and particularly in areas where athletes and their families may face critical decisions regarding the future. Respondents answered questions about the recruiting process, what difficulties or successes they met, and if a social worker could have made the process more constructive and positive for the athlete. Twenty-one current and former hockey players participated, and their responses, collected through convenience sampling, regarding their experiences during the recruitment process make up this study. The research population included former collegiate or professional hockey players recruited to play at college, Major Jr. A, or professional leagues. All participants agreed that partnering with a someone in a helping capacity, such as a social worker, would have helped them navigate the various pitfalls and obstacles of the recruitment process, and would have been valuable allies and supports during their decision-making period. Implications for practice as well as suggestions for future study are offered for review.

Keywords: athletic recruitment, hockey, social work

The choice to attend college or to play professionally can be a complicated decision for an adolescent athlete. Recruitment can be emotionally upsetting for the player and their family. There are few studies which address the potential issues that can occur during athletic recruitment. Fewer still address such issues in hockey recruitment. This study examined the

utility of social workers in athletic programs, in order to assist the athlete with decisions such as determining whether to attend college or play professionally.

The authors were interested in the experiences of the respondents during recruitment to a higher level of play in ice hockey. A higher level of play is clearly the “next level” of athletic competition. Edwards (2012) utilized the term “transitioning” to define a player who was seeking to play at a more sophisticated level, or with an “advanced club, team or squad” (p 14). The literature relates how “elite athletes” are often recruited or drafted to play at a higher level than their current program (Lorenz et al., 2013). For the purposes of this study, a higher level of play is a tier, or level to where the player becomes recruited or drafted to participate in a more rigorous, expert, elite, or professional level of play.

Despite the athletic confidence an adolescent hockey player may display, making a choice to play professionally or attend college can be difficult and life changing. One respondent stated “Yes, I was stressed. But I would have been more stressed if I didn’t pursue my goal of playing pro/getting a scholarship”. Athletes who make such life changing decisions could clearly need a support such as a social worker, to help them navigate the potential concerns and questions that may occur during recruitment. If the athlete has few supports, or little family stability, or if socio-economic pressures influence decisions, the support a professional, such as a social worker offers, could be invaluable to the athlete. In light of the potential of emotional concerns that may arise from moving away from home to play a sport at an early age, the awareness of the need to address such issues, especially in the athletic arena, has become more prevalent in the last 10 years (Gill, 2008, 2014; Moore, 2016).

Beyond these examples, there are other areas where social workers could assist young athletes. These areas include career counseling, drug and alcohol issues, homesickness, resource access, psychoeducation regarding mental health, career development and transitions, injuries, and any area where the player needs support (Gill, 2008).

Review of the Literature

Athletic Recruitment

The body of literature which addresses the recruitment process in university athletics, and ice hockey in particular is rather sparse. Much of the literature is focused on issues from the recruiters’ and the university’s perspective, legal issues, how to recruit the student athlete who is a “best fit” to their program, or the recruitment of international student athletes (Abby-Pinegar, 2011; Huffman et al., 2016; McCaw, 2014; Montgomery, 2015; Stephens, 2010).

Since the late 1980s, college hockey in the United States has grown to over 540 club and varsity university and college teams divided between men's and women's programs. Canadian college hockey is split between smaller colleges and larger universities. The Canadian college and university hockey programs are under the auspices of Canadian Inter-University Sport (CIS) which oversees over 100 teams including women and men's programs (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020a; National Collegiate Athletic Association 2020b; Canadian Inter-University Sport, 2020a ; American Collegiate Hockey Association, 2020).

Junior Hockey Recruitment

American and Canadian hockey programs recruit players globally, and college and university programs compete for athletes with elite leagues, such as the National Hockey League, European leagues and other professional entities. The recruitment process from high school to these higher levels of play can be difficult and confusing for players and families alike (Czekanski & Barnhill, 2015). Decision making can be impacted by the NCAA's eligibility rule; once a teen draftee of a Canadian Hockey League Major Junior A team signs a contract, he or she will lose American college eligibility, as the NCAA considers players at the Junior A level to be professionals. (Edwards, 2012).

Hockey players may eschew college in order to participate in higher levels of play (Edwards, 2012; Wright et al., 2019). Players who have an elite skill set can potentially be recruited or noticed as early as the age of 12 in order to be drafted by a midget team at age 14 (Edwards, 2012). To that end, in order to stock elite teams, players, in search of a road or path to the highest levels of play, may leave home in their early teens in order to pursue their hockey dreams. One of the study's respondents noted that he was recruited, from his home in Newfoundland, to play midget hockey in British Columbia, at the age of 14. He moved across the country, to start his journey playing midget, then Junior hockey, to eventually becoming an NHL draftee.

While players may end up far from home, supports for athletes are built into most Junior hockey programs in north America. Hockey players recruited to play at the Major Junior A or B levels in the US, Canada and Europe often are assigned by their teams to live with billet families, who serve as surrogates and are a major support for players (Edwards, 2012; Wright et al., 2019). These families assist in the acclimation process to a new community, support the hockey player as they pursue their secondary or collegiate degrees, and serve as liaisons between the player and the team (Wright et al., 2019).

College/University Recruitment

Schaeperkoetter et al. (2015) wrote that external influences, such as college recruiters, and the resulting anticipated external environment (academic or athletic setting) was more influential in the student-athlete's decision-making process, rather than family influence. Baker and colleagues (2014) addressed the socio-cultural issues within communities that hindered or facilitated hockey recruitment to higher levels and concluded that community size and access to social supports, increased the odds of playing the sport at the highest professional level.

Given the impact recruiters may have on an athlete's decision, the NCAA expressly forbids member universities, colleges and their representatives from recruiting high school sophomores and below. As noted previously, Canadian Major Jr. A clubs' recruit players as young as 12 years of age (Collegehockeyinc.com, 2020; Edwards, 2012).

Pressuring a 12-year-old to choose a sport for life is, in a sense, restricting a young person to an avocation at an inappropriately early age. As Bob Chichester, former athletics director, the University of California, Irvine said, "My concern is we're reaching out to younger and younger kids, and are they in the best position to decide where they want to spend some of the most important years of their life? We should take a closer look at the appropriate time-frame for contacts and decision making" (Terlep, 2014, p. 1). Accordingly, there are those who feel high school age players may be feeling undue pressure to decide what they should do for the rest

of their lives. Chris Petrucelli, former women's soccer coach, at the University of Texas, Austin said, "The big thing I'd love to have is more access--more time with the kids to figure out if it's a good match. Most kids are making up their minds in their junior year, but we're not allowed to call them before July of their senior year. That means students are making decisions without enough information" (Terlep, 2014, p. 1).

For recruited athletes, the added pressure is to not only perform at a higher level, but to represent their institution or team not as a student, but as a commodity or an asset. Highly recruited teenage athletes may come away from the recruitment process feeling entitled or emotionally upset (Yannity & Edmonson, 2011). These experiences indicate a need for support during recruitment.

Social Workers and Athletic Recruitment

Several researchers have promoted the use of social workers in athletic settings by assisting with such topics as decision making processes, mental health, navigating university life, developing social supports, as well as dealing with the pressures of recruiting (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, 2022; Attwood, 2016; Gill, 2014; Moore, 2016; Zillmer, 2016). Research has examined the utility of social workers to assess athletes for mental health or substance abuse issues and to provide education on social issues such as dating violence, sexual assault, or career planning (Dean & Rowan, 2014; Felizzi, 2017; Gill, 2014; Gill, 2008; McCarthy, 2017; Moore, 2016a; Moore, 2016b; Teasley & Gill, 2015). Studies also included investigation into post injury rehabilitation, concussion management and return to competition and the need for coaches, counselors, and social workers to develop awareness of the athletes' emotional needs during the recovery process (Bennett et al., 2016; McGrath, 2010; Neal, 2017; Putukian, 2016).

In 2014, the University of Michigan was awarded a \$50,000 research grant to create Athlete's Connected, a mental health program intended to address the emotional needs of student athletes by utilizing social workers and graduate level social work students (Attwood, 2016). Social workers are involved with Athletes Connected and provide counseling, psychoeducation, mental health support, and assistance to incoming, recruited, student athletes (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, 2020).

Student athletes, in order to make informed decisions about their collegiate and athletic careers, need information, not only about the university, team, coaches, and academics they are about to select, they also need to be aware of life circumstances and the culture that await them. Whether they are an 18-year-old, leaving home for the first time to attend school thousands of miles from home, or are a 14-year-old junior player billeting with a family on another coast, they have to deal with not only the pressure of making a team, but the burden of staying ahead of their studies, navigating new social networks, and building support systems far from home (Barden et al., 2013).

Additionally, the recruiting process can add pressure to the young athlete by having to justify why the university or team spent time and energy recruiting them. There is added pressure to not only perform at an elevated level, but to represent their institution or team not as a student, but as a commodity or an asset. Highly recruited teenage athletes will come away from the process feeling entitled or emotionally upset (Yannity & Edmonson, 2011).

Psychosocial Risk Factors in Recruitment

During the athletic recruitment process, mental health risk factors may be encountered by athletes. Dean and Rowan (2014) noted that athletes may be affected by such concerns or issues as the pressure to perform, the burden to hide or play through physical injuries, undiagnosed mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse and eating disorders, poor support systems, educational or learning disabilities and pressure to keep up grades during the recruitment process. Additionally, athletes who have been recruited to higher levels often feel the pressure of performing well for their family, school, and community (Cutler & Dwyer, 2020; Dean & Rowan, 2014).

For the recruited athlete, anything that would potentially diminish the athlete in the eyes of the coach is to be avoided. Depending upon the perspective of the coach, seeking mental health treatment may lead the coach to think the player is “weak” and unable to cope with the pressures of the sport (Lopez & Levy, 2013). The “suck it up” or “walk it off” mentality can lead athletes to ignore emotional pain, as they might a nagging physical injury, in order to stay in the game. This mentality is often cultivated at the youth levels of athletic competition and carries through the athlete’s career, which may lead to self-denial of emotional pain, and in turn, a reluctance to seek help. (Moore, 2017). Additionally, athletes may internalize the anticipated reactions of others if they seek help and may create lowered self-esteem about their perceived inability to “suck it up” and deal with emotional issues on their own (Chow et al., 2021; Leimer et al., 2014).

Appropriate behavioral development requires adolescents to individuate, and create their own personas, values, and personalities, most often with their biological or adoptive families. For hockey players who live far from their families and communities of origin, this critical stage of human development often occurs in the presence of others, such as Junior players with billet families, with whom the player may not feel comfortable or secure. If an adolescent has access to a strong support system made up of family members, extended family networks, peers, mentors (or social workers), teachers, and others, often times, that young person will continue along their life path with a knowledge of how to ask for help or guidance, and most critically, who they can speak with in difficult times (Christie & Viner, 2005; Reynolds & Crea, 2014).

Without proper supports, the player could easily become overwhelmed, depressed, anxious, homesick, and may have trouble concentrating. They may doubt their choice to move from home and start to question their mental toughness. As a result, their performance in critical areas; athletically, socially, academically, and emotionally, may suffer. College level players often do not have a mentoring adult to discuss their emotional states with, especially someone who is not part of the team. For Junior players, billet families may be supportive and quite involved with the team, this may not replace the emotional stability, and self-confidence the player had while in their home community. One of the study’s respondents stated “They [my family and friends] supported me but it was obviously tough. Moving away at the age of 15 is hard on any parent as well as you are leaving your friends behind”.

Despite the emotional and psychosocial risks recruited athletes face in making their decision to play at a higher level, most athletes choose the program or university based on the relationship they have with the recruiter or the coach who is trying to convince them to join their team (McCaw, 2014). A social worker, collaborating with the athlete and their family, could mitigate the risk of making the wrong decision or career choice by serving as a mentor to the athlete, and as a support to the family.

Schaeperkoetter et al. (2015) promoted the use of family system theory as an intervention to assist families in the recruitment process. Family systems theory advocates for the understanding of family dynamics, roles, familial structures, patterns of communication, boundaries within family members, and boundaries between the family and outside entities. Professional social workers are trained in systems theory and its' application and utilizing these family- based skills and interventions would appear to be a practical application for assisting the athlete during the recruitment process (Freeman, 2018).

Methodology

A preliminary study was conducted to capture the perspectives of current and former hockey players regarding their experience of being recruited or trying out for a higher-level team. Both qualitative and quantitative questions were included in the 27-question device, which is included in Appendix A. Approval to conduct the study received Millersville University Institutional Review Board approval in May 2017.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used to recruit respondents across Canada and the United States. The researchers sent 26 surveys to contacts across the United States and Canada. The first two authors have been involved in coaching and/or playing hockey at various levels in Canada and the United States and ex-teammates or acquaintances from the game were asked to take part in the survey. To expand the sample size, snowball sampling was also utilized. Respondents were asked to refer current or ex-teammates, who in turned referred other potential respondents until saturation in responses was acquired, which resulted in a final sample size of 21. Inclusion criteria for the study was 1) Recruiting experiences, 2) Whether or not the respondent tried out for a team which played at a higher level than his or her current team. For example, the respondent may have not been recruited to play at a college or a junior program however, if they tried out for such a team, they were included in the study.

The researchers attempted to minimize research bias by triangulating or reviewing the questions with each other. Unclear responses on the questionnaire initiated a follow up email by the authors to clarify participants' answers.

Procedure

The survey including 27 open ended and multiple-choice questions was emailed to those recruited to participate between June and August 2017. The questions were used to pilot the preliminary study, and were created to capture recruiting experiences, both positive and negative, demographics, and comments regarding the respondents' experiences. The survey may be found in Appendix A. The surveys were accessed through Qualtrics Survey (Qualtrics, 2017) software, and completed surveys were password protected and could only be accessed by the researchers. Besides asking the respondents' demographic questions such as age, highest level of education, gender, and whether or not they were recruited to play the game at a higher level, qualitative questions asked included "How long have you been playing (or played) hockey?" and "Were you ever recruited to play at a higher level?" Further, open-ended questions were asked about the participants' experience with recruiting, such as "Did you have support from family or friends to

move to the next level? (Please explain),” and “At any time during the recruiting or decision-making process, did you feel under undue stress or emotional strain (please explain)?”

Respondents were asked if they had or could have used support during the recruiting process. This was framed through questions such as “At any time in the process, would it have been beneficial to have a third party, such as a therapist or social worker to help you work through your decision?” Participants were asked open-ended questions regarding their own situations within the recruitment process, and what they liked and/or did not like during the period they were courted by a university or professional league. Respondents were asked to discuss what advice they would give to others who are entering the recruitment process.

Data Analysis

Content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) was completed on the qualitative questions. Using these a priori themes, content analysis was employed as it allowed the uncovering of the most frequently reported responses related to feelings associated with the recruitment process and perceptions of a third party making the decision-making process less stressful. All three researchers individually performed first level coding. The third author identified patterns among the first level codes to define the common themes for each of the two areas of inquiry. By all researchers partaking in the analysis of the data, trustworthiness was ensured (Padgett, 2008) as it allowed for the researchers to consult when any discrepancies occurred, which in this case, did not occur.

Findings

The respondents in this survey were from the United States and Canada. Questionnaires were emailed to 26 participants, and 21 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 81%. The age range for the respondents was 19 years to 41 years with a mean age of 26.41 years ($SD = 6.91$). Of the 21 respondents, 19 (90%) identified as male. Of the 21 respondents, 90% ($n = 19$), were recruited to a higher level of play, and the majority of the respondents ($n = 20$, 95%), started playing organized club or team hockey at an average age of five. Of the 21 respondents, 76% ($n = 16$) are still playing hockey, from senior amateur leagues to university level, to professional hockey. Respondents also were recruited from a number of levels, with nine of the 21 respondents (43%) recruited from high school hockey programs, while 12 (57%) were recruited or selected via draft from Canadian Hockey League Major Junior A, Canadian, or American University programs. Respondents were asked about the highest level of hockey played. A higher level of play is defined as a competition level such as college, elite, or professional programs. Respondents ($n = 5$, 21%) also played at “other” levels, which include semi-professional and US College Club hockey programs. The highest level of play for a majority of respondents ($n = 11$, 54%) was Canadian Major Jr. A, NCAA, or Canadian University programs. Out of the 21 respondents, 2 (10%) played in the highest-level professional leagues, the National and American Hockey Leagues. The demographic findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.
Summary of Demographic Data

Demographic	<i>n</i>	%
Sex		
Male	19	90%
Female	2	10%
Age First Played Hockey		
0-5 years	20	95
Above 5 years	1	5
Still Playing		
Yes	16	76
No	5	24
Level Recruited		
High School	9	43
Jr. A/B/University	12	57
Highest Level of Play		
High School	1	5
Junior A	2	10
Major Junior A	4	20
NCAA	3	14
Canadian University	4	20
Professionally	2	10
Other	5	21
Age	<i>M</i> 26.41	<i>SD</i> 6.91

Four common themes emerged related to the respondents' responses regarding the recruitment process. The themes were Positive Support from Family and Friends, Physical and Emotional Reactions, Influence of Inducements, and Missed Opportunities for Discussion. Each theme will be further explored, below. Respondents also shared their perception of the role of a third party in assisting them with recruitment processes.

Positive Support from Family and Friends

Support systems, such as family and friends, were important, and reported by all participants, in their decisions to play at higher levels. Of the 21 respondents, 19 (90%) reported their family and friends were supportive or encouraging about their decision to play at a higher level. The most common statement reported was that family and friends were excited for the respondents to play at the next level, and happy that the players had an opportunity to continue to

“chase their dream” to play hockey at a higher level. Respondents noted that their family and supports were happy for the players, but sad to see them leave their hometowns. A number reported that they were appreciative of the families’ encouragement, and this supported them in playing well, and helped to increase their excitement over continuing to play the game. For example, one respondent said, “They were very supportive of my dreams. My extended family had some very successful hockey players over the years, which kind of created a norm for playing this level of hockey. My family were my number one fans and were also realistic, so they always encouraged me to give it my all, no matter what I was doing.” Another shared, “Everyone was very proud of me and happy for me because they know it was what I wanted. A couple of my good friends were sad at the same time just because I would be far away from home, and we wouldn’t be able to see each other.”

Physical and Emotional Reactions

Respondents were asked if they felt undue stress or emotional strain, such as excessive worry or anxiety, somatic complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, changes in appetite, changes in sleeping habits, or irritability and excessive anger during the recruiting or decision-making process. Of the 21 respondents, 11 (52%) reported they felt no such strain or worry during the process. Participants reported they knew they were not going to make a career out of hockey and used the game to help them earn a college degree. Ten respondents (48%) did report suffering emotional discomfort, and three respondents (14%) reported anguishing over which school to attend, when recruited by universities. As two respondents shared, “I was very stressed for months, but once I decided on a school, I was officially happy.” “A lot of stress and anxiety. I was recruited to Harvard and Dartmouth and to give up an Ivy League education was tough.” Respondents said they struggled with fitting in with the team or campus, not making the starting lineup, or uncertainty what their future in hockey and university was going to be when their college program folded.

Influence of Inducements

Inducements to play at a higher level, be they in the form of signing bonuses, scholarships, and financial aid for college, played a role in the recruitment process according to eleven of the 21 (52.8%) participants. Academics and what the university could provide regarding courses of study, as well as campus life were the main foci of discussion for the majority of respondents. “General conversation, scholarships, and good things about the school and community,” were important influencing factors shared by one participant. For those recruited to play professionally, an opportunity to make money and join a well-structured program were the topics of the process. “How much money in scholarships I would be receiving,” was a crucial factor as articulated by one of the respondents. When respondents were asked to reflect on what the most important topics of the recruitment process, the most recurring theme was the opportunity to play at an institution of higher education ($n = 10$, 48%), followed by a positive team atmosphere and clear expectations regarding their own performance ($n = 9$, 43%), a chance to make money playing hockey ($n = 6$, 29%), the opportunity to elevate their own level of play ($n = 5$, 24%), and a balance of education and “comfortability” within the team ($n = 3$, 14%).

Missed Opportunities for Discussion

The participants also had the opportunity to reflect on topics that they wished recruiters had asked them during the recruitment process. The most recurring theme, whether by academic or professional teams, was that how playing at the next level could positively affect their life ($n = 3$, 14%). The opportunity to play at the university level was the next most recurring theme ($n = 2$, 10%), along with a promise of increased playing time ($n = 2$, 10%). One respondent answered that their team offered an opportunity to increase their own financial literacy and become more aware of how to “handle money.”

Almost half ($n = 10$, 48%) of the respondents reported a lack of discussion of post-hockey career options and/or assistance with alternative career planning and development. Two examples shared that support this missed opportunity are: “What would help advance me as a person rather as a player,” and “I wish they discussed life after hockey more. And the actual business side of things. Once you are on a team, you are just a number and an asset that they could care less about and will dispose of when they see fit.”

Role of Third Party in Decision-Making Process

Participants in the study were asked if at any time during the recruiting process, it would have been beneficial to have a third party, such as a therapist or a social worker to help them work through their decision. The comments and answers were split among the 21 respondents, with five (24%) respondents agreeing that a third party would have been helpful, and five not agreeing. However, 11 of the 21 (52%) respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, which may have been indicative of an unfamiliarity of the roles of a third party in the recruitment process.

Respondents were asked if they did have a social workers’ support in the recruitment process, would it have been helpful. Of the five respondents who agreed that having a third party, such as a social worker, could have helped during the decision-making process, they believe the individual could’ve helped process the recruitment experience, relate to the experiences they were going through, assist in weighing the pros and cons of the various choice players had, and reduce overall stress and worry. Examples of respondents’ comments included, “To keep my mind on track and to help not to worry so much about everything,” “How to weigh the pros and cons,” and “In these decisions you have a lot of people “helping” but I think they have their own motives. Therefore, a third party to help guide and deal with it is important. What is more important is they completely understand the process. If they do not appreciate how important it is, then they would be no help.”

Discussion

The study’s respondents were not aware that supports, in the form of a social worker, mentor or advisor were available, it would be critical to educate athletes who intend to pursue their dream of playing their sport at a higher level, of the availability of what a third-party support could offer them in during recruitment. Employing the results of this study could add another role for a sport social worker - assisting the client during the often grueling and emotionally wearing recruitment period.

Consider the plight of the respondent who chose Jr. A hockey over scholarships to Ivy League universities. His decision may have been different, had he discussed the options

available, as well as the impact of his decision, with a sport focused social worker. One respondent noted “In these decisions you have a lot of people "helping" but I think they have their own motives. Therefore, a third party to help guide and deal with it is important. What's more important is they completely understand the process [of recruiting]”.

Similarly, a social worker can assist the athlete when they face challenging times in their career, such as the aftermath of an injury. Social workers can aid athletes when time demands affect them, when they are perplexed over coaching moves that impact playing time or concern over their roles on the team, during bouts of homesickness, or when a player has questions or concerns about post-hockey life. Participants in this study reported that emotional concerns, such as irritability and depression, were present during their playing career. One respondent stated “There's stress from demands from the team and school. Mainly a time constraint and trying to balance those”.

Regarding career issues and what to do after their playing career was finished, a participant said “I wish they discussed life after hockey more. And the actual business side of things. Once you are on a team, you are just a number and an asset that they could care less about and will dispose of when they see fit”. Another respondent said “No, there was not [a discussion of post hockey career]. I would have liked to have some direction in what to pursue and what my skills can help with in terms of job searching after. Obviously with playing hockey you have little work experience that's not hockey related”. To cope with the pressures of being recruited, one participant stated that he began to use alcohol as a coping mechanism to deal with the demands of recruitment. In these situations, the presence of a social worker connected to the team or athletic program would have provided an appropriate support or outlet for these players, as well as a safe space to talk through the pressures and demands of recruitment.

While the belief that young, athletic, and active people are often immune to mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety, Attwood (2017) referenced a Drexel University study that noted the rates of depression among college level student-athletes are comparable to rates in the general college population. The researcher went on to state that these rates of depression “highlight the need for increased mental health screening for athletes as part of standard sports medicine care” (p. 10). The study’s respondents noted they suffered with anxiety, sleeplessness, depressive symptoms during the recruitment process, and their playing time. One participant stated they suffered from the following during the recruitment process: “Stress, depression, anxiety, excessive irritability, lack of sleep. Lots really”. The opportunity to access confidential and supportive aid from a social worker could have potentially ameliorated these issues.

While coaches oversee the well-being of their team, one must realize that all coaches are not mental health specialists. To that end, a professional social worker could be the liaison that a team could utilize to educate coaches on mental health awareness, as well as promoting a positive approach to services for athletes. This would be a critical step in creating an awareness of the need for social workers in athletic settings.

One of social work’s underpinnings is collaboration with other professions, such as education, medicine, psychology, and the justice system (Weinstein et al., 2003). Social workers who look to work with athletic programs will need to educate and collaborate with stakeholders and show how they can work in partnership with coaches and teams to assist athletes. Territorial concerns must be addressed, and the social worker will have to work to prove to athletic program administrators that they are there to assist athletes and their teams, not to work against the team, coaches, managers, or directors. Social workers in athletics must build rapport with the athlete and his or her program so they can effectively collaborate and effect change (St. Croix, 2022).

A systemic approach to working with athletic programs appears indicated, as family systems theory is applicable to working with groups and organizations, as these entities are subsystems that are often impacted by society and the larger systems within (Hepworth et al., 2018; Simmons University, 2022). This approach by social workers with athletic programs would involve the worker accessing and collaborating with all systems to ensure the worker would become a trusted member of the program.

Emotional issues were experienced during recruitment by the study's respondent. Approximately half, or 48% of the study participants reported experiencing emotional discomfort over which school or program to select. This could be addressed by a social worker who aids the recruited athlete. Respondents noted they struggled with fitting in with the team or campus, and one noted they suffered from emotional issues when their college program folded, and their future in hockey and university was in jeopardy. One participant said that during the entire recruitment process, he never asked anyone for advice. The respondent said "...I was young and didn't know what questions to ask so I should have been better prepared." Again, the involvement of a social worker in this instance could have offered a source of support throughout the recruitment process, offering options, and talking through the decisions necessary during recruitment.

Implications for Practice

This study reflects the findings of researchers who promote the inclusion of social workers in sport programs (Dean & Rowan, 2014; Gill, 2008; McCarthy, 2016; Moore, 2016; NCAA-c, 2020; Schyett et al., 2016). However, this study takes a further step by specifying where and how social workers can affect athlete's and student-athletes' lives in a supportive manner. A third party, such as a sport focused social worker, could have been helpful during both recruitment and their careers according to the respondents. Participants said that it would have been helpful to talk to someone who "had been" there, or who had playing experience, or who had gone through the recruitment process.

Regarding elite hockey in north America, the inclusion of a social worker in college, professional or junior hockey programs would be beneficial to allow athletes to access resources such as counseling or mentorship, would enable players to discuss sensitive issues with an informed professional who is not a coach, or someone who controls his or her playing time (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2015).

Limitations of Study

The data was gathered from a convenience sample of 21 respondents, from Canada and the United States. A more representative sample could be taken from one team of recruited athletes in a university or professional program. Nevertheless, the respondents shared their own thoughts on being recruited. While not generalizable to the entire population of recruited athletes in the U.S. and Canada, it serves as a template for future studies.

Also, given two of the author's combined 50 years of experiences as players, coaches, referees or administrators at the youth, high school and elite levels of hockey, there were concerns regarding research bias, regarding recruiting practices, players' experiences, and issues with support systems. An awareness of such biases was considered in the planning and commission of the study, and questions were created in an attempt to avoid leading the respondent. Also, all researchers had an awareness of the inherent bias in convenience and

snowball sampling. Additionally, in the future, in order to mitigate the effects of such bias, utilizing different data collection methods (emailed, telephone, virtual and mail methods) may be indicated (Chen et al., 2021).

Future Studies

While this study focused on issues with recruitment, research into this topic may want to explore a greater number of respondents and look to “embed” social work services within an athletic program, or secondary school, ostensibly to assist athletes during the recruitment process. Additionally, besides working in schools, social workers could work with universities or professional teams to support recruited athletes and answer any questions as they make their decisions to take part at higher levels.

The authors would be remiss if they did not mention the COVID-19 pandemic that has affected the world during the preparation of this manuscript. Athletes around the world were impacted as organized sports from youth levels through the professional ranks have been shut down or curtailed as a result of the pandemic. Social Workers in clinical settings have worked through the issues that were worsened by COVID-19, such as extreme anxiety, depression, socio-economic issues, personal and family security and health concerns. Athletes are at risk for the emotional effects of COVID-19, as their ability to perform and practice their sport has been affected. Athletes who hope to be recruited for higher levels of play, who find they are barred from practicing, qualifying, or performing, may face the emotional issues that arise from having their sport impacted as a result of the pandemic (Schinke et al., 2020). Athletes who are unexpectedly inactive, or lacking goals and motivation, are prone to suffer from significant emotional and psychological stress and may be at risk for mental health issues (Schinke et al., 2020). A study of close to 6,000 NCAA student athletes, across various sports, conducted by Petrie et al. (2020) found that student athletes, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, suffered from such emotional concerns as depression, anxiety, insomnia, and changes in appetite. As the largest providers of mental health services in north America (National Association of Social Workers, 2020), social workers in athletic settings can assist athletes in working through these issues and can help the athlete by developing alternative and appropriate positive coping mechanism.

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