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Perceptions of Criminal and Gang Involvement Among College Student-Athletes

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Abstract

The involvement of youth and young adults in gangs and other criminal activities continues to be a serious threat and grounds for concern among a variety of stakeholders on college campuses and beyond. The extant literature examining the criminality of intercollegiate student-athletes is limited to media accounts or research focused on few types of offenses or athletics programs. The presence and impact of gangs in institutions such as secondary education and the military has been documented, but the expansion of gangs to college athletics has not been empirically verified despite media portrayals. The current study addresses these gaps in knowledge of criminally and gang-involved college student-athletes with information provided by athletics directors and campus police chiefs. Findings from both groups of key informants show that individuals involved with gangs and other criminal offenses participate in college athletics. However, few athletics directors and campus police chiefs reported the presence of gang-involved athletes on their own campuses.

Keywords: *Student-athletes, athletics directors, police chiefs, crime, criminal, gangs, gang-involved, background checks*

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College coaches and athletics department administrators are confronted with a multitude of concerns regarding the recruitment and management of student-athletes (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2012a). The negative repercussions of student-athletes' involvement with gangs or other forms of criminal behaviors are especially problematic because they result in serious injuries and deaths to other students and community members (e.g., Berkin, 2004; Eskenazi, 1989; Mushnick, 2004). Unfortunately, research regarding the criminal involvement of college student-athletes is limited in terms of the types of offenses (e.g., Crosset, Benedict, & McDonald, 1995) and programs considered (e.g., Dohrmann & Benedict, 2011). The extant literature on gang-involved intercollegiate athletes has been even less conclusive and restricted to media accounts until now (e.g., Davidson, 1986; Grummert, 1993; Hooper, 1997; LiCari & Hall, 1994; Schlabach, 2000).

The purpose of the current study was to examine perceptions of college student-athletes' involvement with gangs and other criminal offenses through surveys of athletics administrators and campus police chiefs. Survey participants, including athletics administrators and campus police chiefs, provided information about their lengths of experience in their respective fields, roles, and institutions. They also reported on the extent and sources of knowledge regarding gangs within their own respective departments. The athletics administrators described their efforts to screen student-athlete recruits. Next, athletics directors and police chiefs responded to a variety of questions about their perceptions of college student-athletes' involvement with crime including gangs in general and their knowledge of criminal and gang-related acts committed by student-athletes on their own campuses. The following sections examine the extant literature regarding the involvement of college student-athletes with crime and gangs before turning to the research methods and findings. The study concludes with policy implications directed toward universities' athletics departments and coaches.

College Student-Athletes and Crime

A review of newspaper articles from the past two decades provides a picture that college athletes are arrested for a wide variety of crimes including aggravated assault, burglary, drug trafficking, rape, and homicide (e.g., Berkin, 2004; Blaudschun, 1992; Bosworth, 1991; Eskenazi, 1989; Kern, 1996; Larimer, 1991; Mushnick, 2004; Wise, 2003). In one of the few empirical studies that explored criminal conduct among college athletes, Crosset et al. (1995) found that male student-athletes were significantly more likely to be reported for sexual assault than male non-student-athletes. However, it remains unclear whether these accounts are merely anecdotal incidents or examples of a more systematic problem in college sports.

Much of what is known about the criminal conduct of collegiate student-athletes in the United States is drawn from a recent investigation by *Sports Illustrated* and *CBS News*. In that study, Dohrmann and Benedict (2011) conducted 7,030

background checks on all 2,837 athletes listed on the rosters of the magazine's pre-season list of the top 25 ranked college football programs as of September 1, 2010. The investigation found that 7.2% of the football players had criminal records before or after entering college (Dohrmann & Benedict, 2011). Other researchers found that 5.8% of the 1,920 undergraduate students, who were arrested while attending one state's flagship university, also had juvenile arrest records (Jennings, Khey, Mahoney, & Reingle, 2010). The 204 student-athletes with law enforcement records in the *Sports Illustrated-CBS News* study were suspected of committing 277 crimes, 58 of which occurred when they were juveniles (Dohrmann & Benedict, 2011). The most commonly found offenses were for drugs and alcohol (105), but these football players were also arrested for 56 violent crimes (Dohrmann & Benedict, 2011). The *Sports Illustrated-CBS News* investigation also found that individual schools and coaches had varied policies concerning the recruitment of criminally involved athletes, only two of the 25 schools regularly performed criminal background checks on recruits, and none searched juvenile records (Dohrmann & Benedict, 2011).

The lack of screening conducted before an athlete is offered a scholarship was presented as a hypothesis for criminal involvement among college student-athletes (Larimer, 1991). Expanding upon this possibility, the recent article in *Sports Illustrated* identified three reasons that universities are hesitant to conduct criminal background checks of potential student-athletes (Dohrmann & Benedict, 2011). First, school officials in the admissions and athletics departments may prevent certain recruits from attending college and becoming athletes based on the results of the background checks. Second, identifying a criminal background means that others would view future misbehavior in a more punitive manner and coaches would likewise have a harder time justifying additional opportunities for the offenders to play (Dohrmann & Benedict, 2011). The third reason that colleges are reluctant to conduct background checks is that other schools without the checks could use that policy against them when recruiting student-athletes (Dohrmann & Benedict, 2011). These possible explanations suggest that ignorance of problematic recruits may indeed be a logical tactic that athletics department officials, including coaches, take to establish and maintain the eligibility of players including those posing issues off the field. That position possibly represents a "don't ask, don't tell" policy that allows programs to recruit and play athletes with past involvement in crime that may extend to their university lives.

Even knowledge of at-risk recruits' troublesome backgrounds may not prevent their admission to universities or their participation in collegiate athletics. A *Sports Illustrated* article declared that "many [coaches] feel they must take talented, at-risk players because taking less talented players could cost them their jobs" (Staples, 2011, p. 35). Cullen, Latessa, and Byrne (1990) also found that coaches are willing to accept potentially problematic football recruits due to intense pressures for their programs to succeed, regardless of academic or behavioral issues.

Armstrong and Perry's (2010) book, *Scoreboard, Baby: A Story of Football, Crime, and Complicity*, is based on an answer given by a coach who won a national championship at a Division I school when asked about the illegality of players' tactics at his previous university. Armstrong and Perry concluded that the football program and other parts of the university combined with local law enforcement, government, and media to ensure on-the-field success at any cost. Armstrong and Perry cautioned readers that "Washington isn't an aberration. It is an example" (p. 93). Another coach described his dilemma when asked why he recruited an athlete who had shot his roommate: "Well, if I hadn't, he would have been playing at Notre Dame, Texas, or Texas A&M" (Le Batard, 2011, p. 2).

It is vital for all coaches and administrators of athletics departments to have a better understanding of this issue to reduce negative public perceptions as well as to protect their student-athletes and other members of their universities and broader communities. As noted above, the literature regarding criminal involvement among college student-athletes is limited to media accounts (e.g., Berkin, 2004; Blaudschun, 1992; Bosworth, 1991; Eskenazi, 1989; Kern, 1996; Larimer, 1991; Mushnick, 2004; Wise, 2003), research exclusively on sexual offenses (Crosset et al., 1995), or investigations of high-profile football programs only (Dohrmann & Benedict, 2011). The current study helps to fill this gap by expanding the institutions, athletics programs, and types of criminal offenses examined.

College Student-Athletes and Gangs

Although student-athletes may be criminally active, they are not necessarily involved with gangs. At first glance, gang-involved individuals participating in college athletics appears illogical. Traditionally, as individuals become increasingly committed to gang life they withdraw from school life, leading to low attendance rates, high rates of discipline, poor academic performance, and even dropping out (Klein, 1995; Spergel, 1995). Indeed, several studies have shown gang membership to be correlated with low academic achievement (e.g., Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998; Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003). This pattern of low academic achievement and dropping out creates obvious challenges for gang-involved athletes attempting to meet the academic standards to enter college. A recent report by the Associated Press, however, found that many universities admit athletes at much lower academic thresholds than their average student populations (Zagier, 2009). Many of these young adults enter college with challenges that need to be addressed if they are to succeed.

The concept of gang-involved athletes also contradicts the conventional wisdom that sports provide a protective shield to gang membership (Cole, 1996). It was argued that sports provide a way out of delinquent and criminal lifestyles (Benedict & Keteyian, 2011). However, anecdotal evidence suggests that participation in sports is not mutually exclusive with gang membership (e.g., Davidson,

1986; Grummert, 1993; Hooper, 1997; LiCari & Hall, 1994; Schlabach, 2000). An important study by Atencio and Wright (2008) shed light on the relationship between gangs and athletes. Their ethnographic study of high school-aged basketball players from disadvantaged communities found that highly talented athletes often have to negotiate the realities of living in neighborhoods with gangs. Atencio and Wright noted, "The more talented players were not concerned about personal safety because the gangsters supported them, and, indeed, took on a mentoring and protective role" (p. 272). The gang members reportedly admired the talented players and subsequently provided them protection to play at the various parks. In return, these athletes needed to maintain positive relations with these gang members to preserve their protections. Although Atencio and Wright's research focused on a limited group of athletes in one community, their observations likely reflect a common experience for many talented high school athletes.

The presence of gang members in college athletics may be best understood by considering two sociodemographic realities of college student-athletes. First, a number of college athletes, particularly basketball and football players, come from economically disadvantaged communities (Davis, 1996; Sack & Theil, 1979), the primary locales for the presence of gangs and related criminal activities (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Curry & Spergel, 1988; Hagedorn, 1991; Pyrooz, Fox, & Decker, 2010; Rosenfeld, Bray, & Egley, 1999). Benedict and Keteyian (2011), for example, noted that Compton, California, is simultaneously the birthplace of two national gangs, the Bloods and the Crips, as well as a "recruiting hot spot" for football and basketball players (p. 2). Street gangs are a part of the social structure in most large American cities and have spread into suburbs and smaller cities. Recent estimates from the 2008 National Youth Gang Survey showed the existence of approximately 27,900 gangs with 774,000 members in the United States (Egley, Howell, & Moore, 2010). A recent study of gangs in schools across the United States found that when multiple indicators of gang presence were used, more than one third of students (37%) reported the existence of gangs at their schools (Howell & Lynch, 2000). It is reasonable to assume these athletes negotiated the presence of gangs in their schools and neighborhoods similar to the athletes Atencio and Wright (2008) observed. Athletes themselves supported this assumption (Kahn, 1995). Thus, gang members may be recruited not only from poor, inner-city areas but also from less traditional gang locales.

A second noteworthy reality is that college student-athletes are at the age most susceptible to gang involvement and membership (Egley et al., 2010). Research findings demonstrated that the presence of gangs impacts a variety of public institutions serving similarly aged populations, including secondary schools (Curry, Decker, & Egley, 2002; Howell & Lynch, 2000) and the military (National Gang Intelligence Center, 2007; U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command, 2006). It may appear counterintuitive that gangs infiltrate the military based on their screening process and the controlled environment that exists for those who are ac-

cepted. However, gangs have existed for some time in the U.S. military and procedures have been implemented that help to identify and manage them (U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command, 2006). This combination of sociodemographic factors makes gang membership in intercollegiate athletics a distinct probability and a reasonable assumption worthy of empirical examination.

Empirical evidence exists neither on the prevalence of such experiences among highly talented and potentially college-bound athletes nor on the nature of the relationship between these athletes and gangs. In particular, questions remain whether such athletes are loosely affiliated for the purpose of protection as Atenzio and Wright (2008) observed or whether these athletes eventually will become members of the gangs that offer them protection. The most notable of the journalistic accounts was ESPN's *Outside the Lines*, a sports journalism show that aired a 1997 episode titled *Turf Wars: Gangs and Sports*. One of the show's segments focused on the recruitment of athletes with gang ties in the Los Angeles area by the University of Colorado football team in the mid-1980s. The recruiting coach stated that the football program was looking to recruit inner-city athletes under the belief they would improve the team's performance (Schlabach, 2000). Three top players on the football team during this period were specifically identified in the report as being gang members, and the assistant coach admitted he was aware of their gang membership during the recruiting process (Hooper, 1997).

Media reports have indicated that athletes with a history of gang involvement participate in college sports (e.g., Davidson, 1986; Grummert, 1993; Hooper, 1997; LiCari & Hall, 1994; Schlabach, 2000), but this fact alone does not necessarily mean these student-athletes create problems once they arrive on campus. Similar to the argument at times offered by the military for recruiting enlisted-level soldiers with less than ideal pasts (Eyler, 2009), the opportunity to participate in college athletics is a second chance that offers a way out for many high school athletes with gang histories (Benedict & Keteyian, 2011). At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge the empirical literature that has shown gang members' disproportionate involvement with delinquent and criminal activities as both offenders (Thornberry, 1998) and victims (Curry et al., 2002; Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2004). Most notable is their representation in violent crimes including homicides (Curry, Egley, & Howell, 2004; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Miller, 1982; Tita & Abrahamse, 2004). Another outcome of gang involvement is the impact of gang membership on communities where gang-related acts of violence and other criminal activities disrupt the socialization patterns and create disorganized communities (Block & Block, 1993; Howell, 2006). The detrimental impact of gangs on society has been established and serves as a foundation for the present research.

In sum, empirical evidence and media attention highlighting student athletes' involvement in criminal activity is limited. Research previously conducted is constrained by a focus on sexual assault (Crosset et al., 1995) or few athletics

programs (Dohrmann & Benedict, 2011). Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests that participation in gangs and college sports is not mutually exclusive (Davidson, 1986; Grummert, 1993; Hooper, 1997; LiCari & Hall, 1994; Schlabach, 2000). This limited evidence suggests that some highly talented gang-involved athletes have met the academic eligibility criteria to enter colleges and universities. Unfortunately, this indication is based solely on journalistic accounts and there are no systematic empirical research efforts to address these issues. This raises an important question as to whether the evidence of gang-involved college athletes is merely anecdotal or has a stronger foundation. The present study explored this question with survey data from universities' athletics and law enforcement officials.

Method

Examining criminal and gang involvement among college student-athletes is a sensitive issue. The acknowledged presence of criminal offenders and gang members in a university's athletics program has the potential to create a negative public image. It raises a possible accusation that through its athletics department a university is recruiting skilled athletes without consideration of their character, particularly in circumstances where these student-athletes have histories of criminal conduct and violence and may pose a threat to other students, faculty, staff, and community members. Data on the perceptions of and experiences with crime- and gang-involved athletes were gathered through surveys of universities' athletics directors and campus police chiefs. These sources provided the opportunity to compare results across two groups on this sensitive topic.

Survey Sample

Athletics directors were surveyed because of their oversight responsibility for all athletics programs at their universities. Although athletics directors do not have the same level of contact with athletes as do coaches, they are the group most likely to be knowledgeable of discipline and other issues involving student-athletes for all their universities' athletics teams. On the other hand, campus police departments are a primary source of knowledge about the criminal and disruptive activities that occur on and around university campuses, including the behaviors of student-athletes. In addition, campus chiefs, through networking with peers at other universities, likely have some knowledge of trends regarding patterns of crime and disorder on campuses across the nation.

Although the evidence to date suggests this question could be posed to community colleges, small 4-year colleges, and major universities, we narrowed our focus to the latter group because of their high-profile status in collegiate athletics. Surveys were sent to athletics directors and campus police chiefs from universities with major athletics programs, which were defined by membership in the NCAA's Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). The athletics programs selected were based on 2008 conference affiliations and included the Atlantic Coast Conference,

Big East Conference, Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, Conference USA, Mid-American Conference, Mountain West Conference, Pac-10 Conference, Southeastern Conference, Sun Belt Conference, and the Western Athletic Conference. The nonaffiliated schools were the University of Notre Dame, the U.S. Military Academy (Army), and the U.S. Naval Academy (Navy). As the present study focused on the presence of gangs in college athletics in high-profile programs, not only football, the surveys were administered to all 120 institutions with FBS football programs as well as to 10 additional colleges with Division I men's basketball programs, but not football, in one of those 11 conferences. This sample of 130 high-profile athletics programs was viewed as a reasonable starting point given it represented an exploratory effort on this issue.

Survey Design and Procedure

No prior studies were located that examined these topics, which necessitated the creation of new survey instruments. Several members of the Division 1A Athletic Directors' Association assisted with the survey design, and a different group of athletics directors pretested the survey before distribution. A similar procedure was used to design and pretest the campus police chief survey. Pretesting the surveys with experts in their respective fields was an additional step taken to partially address concerns regarding the face and content validity of the surveys. The surveys were primarily composed of closed-ended questions that were tabulated and are reported in the following section. Additionally, open-ended questions were asked that permitted alternative responses not found among the closed-ended options or allowed for brief elaboration on responses.

The surveys included questions on the perception of criminal- and gang-involved athletes (presence, problems, and associated sports) in college sports in general and the respondents' specific experiences on campuses. The surveys also examined the extent of knowledge among campus officials and their staff members regarding indicators of gang membership using a Likert scale from *no knowledge* (1) to *a lot of knowledge* (9). Next, respondents indicated whether their staff members had received training on gangs and provided the primary means that they had personally learned about gangs. The campus leaders also noted whether their staff members had attended training on gangs. Only the athletics administrators were asked about screening of student-athletes. Responses were requested without reference to a given time period regarding the activity or issue in question. This lack of time reference was intended to allow for the broadest possible reporting given the exploratory nature of the research. Responses from 71 athletics directors and 87 campus police chiefs were received, resulting in 55% and 67% response rates, respectively. These response rates were considered reasonable given the controversial nature of the research questions, but a suitable comparison from analogous research was unavailable.

An additional step employed to increase the participation rate was to gain support for the research from representatives of both data sources. The athlet-

ics director survey was initially distributed by the Division 1A Athletic Directors' Association, the organization for directors of major college athletics conferences. Letters of support for the research from two campus police chiefs encouraged fellow law enforcement executives to complete the survey and were mailed with the campus chiefs' surveys. This study followed standard Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol and offered all respondents confidentiality. This article contains no mention of specific universities or individuals in relation to the survey or interview findings.

Results

The following sections provide a comparison of the responses of the athletics directors and campus chiefs to the same survey. First is a description of the respondents' lengths of experience in their respective fields, roles, and universities. Next, both groups describe the extent of knowledge and training about gangs and gang prevention in their departments. Finally, findings regarding criminal involvement among college student-athletes are provided and followed by those specifically related to gangs.

Officials' Lengths of Experience

Findings regarding respondents' lengths of experience are provided in Table 1. The responding police chiefs had an average of 26.1 years of experience as law enforcement officers, including 13.7 years working at their current institutions and 6.9 years in their current leadership positions. The athletics directors had slightly less experience with an average of 20.9 years in college athletics as athletes, coaches, staff, or athletics directors. These individuals had directed athletics departments for an average of 9.5 years, including 7 years at their current institutions. The following sections provide these respondents' perceptions of student-athletes' involvement with crime and gangs in their schools as well as in college athletic programs generally, but first the extent and sources of knowledge regarding gangs among respondents and their staff members are examined.

Officials' Knowledge of Gangs

The law enforcement agency and athletics department executives were asked to indicate the extent of their own knowledge as well as their staff members' knowledge regarding gang signs and other indicators that an individual is a gang member or an activity is gang-related on a Likert scale from *no knowledge* (1) to *a lot of knowledge* (9). As shown in Table 2, the campus police chiefs reported a mean of 5.6 on their own knowledge of indicators of gang membership or activities and 5.8 for their officers. The athletics administrators reported a lower level of knowledge about indicators and signs of gang membership and gang-related activities than leaders from campus law enforcement communities, with averages of 3.5 and 3.3, respectively. The athletics administrators reported that the staff members of the most problematic sports on their campuses had more relevant

Table 1

Respondents' Lengths of Experience in Respective Fields, Roles, and Institutions

	μ	<i>SD</i>	Min.	Max.
Athletics directors' lengths of experience in college athletics as athletes, coaches, staff members, or athletics directors	20.9	11.0	2.0	48.0
Athletics directors' lengths of experience at any universities as athletics directors	9.5	7.5	1.0	35.0
Athletics directors' lengths of experience at current universities as athletics directors	7.0	6.5	1.0	35.0
Police chiefs' lengths of experience in law enforcement as officers	26.1	9.1	1.0	46.0
Police chiefs' lengths of experience at current universities as officers	13.7	9.7	0.4	37.0
Police chiefs' lengths of experience at current universities as chiefs/directors	6.9	6.0	0.0	28.0

Note. Table contains responses in years.

knowledge than they did, with a mean of 4.6. Thus, athletics departments had less knowledge of gangs than campus law enforcement and greater variation in their knowledge between institutions¹. The extent of knowledge regarding gangs among members of the law enforcement and athletics departments may be partially related to the training provided to these individuals, or lack thereof. The vast majority of campus chiefs (84.9%) indicated that their officers had received training on gang activities, but few athletics directors (5.6%) responded that their coaches and staff had undergone such training. Similarly, law enforcement executives' primary means of learning about gangs had been training courses (89.7%), but athletics department officials reported that their knowledge about gangs came from television, radio, or newspapers (87.3%).

Student-Athletes and Crime

Comparable percentages of athletics directors (88.5%) and campus police chiefs (84.5%) or their surrogates reported that student-athletes enrolled at their universities were arrested for or involved in some criminal activities. It is important to note that these figures do not reflect the percentage of student-athletes

¹Bivariate relationships between respondents' lengths of experience and knowledge of gangs were examined using Pearson's correlation coefficients, and no statistically significant results were found.

Table 2*Knowledge of Indicators of Gang Membership and/or Gang-Related Activity*

	μ	<i>SD</i>	Min.	Max.
Knowledge of indicators that an individual is a gang member among athletics directors	3.5	2.0	1.0	9.0
Knowledge of indicators that an activity is gang-related among athletics directors	3.3	2.1	1.0	9.0
Knowledge of indicators that an individual is a gang member or an activity is gang-related among members of athletics departments	4.6	2.0	1.0	8.0
Knowledge of indicators that an individual is a gang member among police chiefs	5.6	1.8	1.0	9.0
Knowledge of indicators that an activity is gang-related among police chiefs	5.6	1.7	1.0	9.0
Knowledge of indicators that an individual is a gang member or an activity is gang-related among members of law enforcement departments	5.8	1.7	2.0	9.0

Note. Table contains responses to a Likert scale from *no knowledge* (1) to *a lot of knowledge* (9).

who are involved in these acts. The answers reflect only the proportion of school officials who reported that student-athletes at their schools had been involved in or arrested for certain criminal activities. As shown in Table 3, the law enforcement personnel and athletics administrators considerably agreed with respect to their student-athletes' involvement with certain crimes but disagreed regarding other offenses. Overall, a larger proportion of the campus chiefs reported the involvement of student-athletes at their schools for 10 out of the 12 crime categories surveyed, as compared to the athletics directors. The sole exceptions to this trend were slight differences between the two groups of respondents for the crimes of burglary (0.2%) and drug sales (0.9%).

The university officials who reported that student-athletes at their institutions had been criminally active also identified the specific sports programs with which the athletes were involved. Table 4 illustrates that the law enforcement and athletics department executives indicated that football programs were most common among the men's sports programs at their schools to have had criminally involved team members (87.0% and 70.0%), followed by basketball (85.7% and 51.7%). Regarding female student-athletes, Table 5 demonstrates that campus law enforcement executives and athletics administrators identified the basketball (31.2% and 30.0%) and track and field (6.5% and 13.3%) programs as having at least one player arrested or involved with crimes during their tenure.

Table 3

Percentages of Athletics Directors and Police Chiefs Who Reported Crimes Committed by Their Student-Athletes by Type

Crime Type	% Athletics Directors (N = 71)	% Police Chiefs (N = 87)
Assault	57.7%	79.3%
Burglary	32.4%	32.2%
Car Theft	8.5%	9.2%
Drug Sales	23.9%	23.0%
Drug Use	59.2%	60.9%
Property Theft	35.2%	55.2%
Possession of Firearm	29.6%	33.3%
Retail Theft	29.6%	32.2%
Graffiti	0.0%	3.4%
Vandalism	16.9%	27.6%
Gambling	8.5%	16.1%
Other	1.4%	13.8% ^a

^a10 out of 12 of these “other” responses included some form of sex crime.

Screening Student-Athletes

The athletics directors were also asked about methods they used to screen student-athlete recruits for criminal or other problematic behaviors. The responses presented in Table 6 show that the majority of college athletics department executives reported they routinely screened recruits before making scholarship offers. Most common were background checks for recruits’ previous criminal histories (69.0%) and for being on probation or some other form of court supervision (50.7%). Only a small percentage (22.5%) of the athletics administrators reported screening for gang involvement.

Student-Athletes and Gangs

Almost identical proportions of campus law enforcement (67.8%) and athletics department administrators (69.0%) believed that gang members participate in collegiate sports at either their university or another institution. A higher proportion of law enforcement executives (86.4%) than athletics administrators (77.6%) reported that these gang-involved students pose potential problems for colleges and universities. Those school officials who believed that gang-involved athletes could create issues for schools were asked to identify the specific criminal activities about which they were concerned. Table 7 illustrates that law enforcement executives indicated more problems posed by gang members, relative to the re-

Table 4

Percentages of Athletics Directors and Police Chiefs Who Reported Crimes Committed by Their Male Student-Athletes by Sport

Sport	% Athletics Directors (N = 60)	% Police Chiefs (N = 77)
Baseball	28.3%	28.9%
Basketball	51.7%	85.7%
Field Hockey	0.0%	2.6%
Football	70.0%	87.0%
Golf	8.3%	3.9%
Gymnastics	1.7%	0.0%
Ice Hockey	5.0%	9.1%
Lacrosse	0.0%	5.2%
Rowing/Crew	1.7%	3.9%
Soccer	10.0%	13.0%
Swimming/Diving	3.3%	5.2%
Tennis	6.7%	2.6%
Track and Field	20.0%	18.2%
Volleyball	0.0%	2.6%
Wrestling	18.3%	16.9%
Other: Rugby	0.0%	1.3%

Note. Table contains only sports where either an athletics director or a police chief identified student-athlete involvement.

sponses of athletics administrators, for 15 out of the 16 types of criminal or otherwise problematic behaviors included on the survey.

Tables 8 and 9 present the sports in which respondents believed gang-involved college student-athletes were involved. Table 8 demonstrates that gang-involved male student-athletes were thought by campus chiefs and athletics directors to have participated in football (94.9% and 85.7%), basketball (81.4% and 81.6%), and track and field (23.7% and 32.7%) programs. As shown in Table 9, gang-involved female student-athletes were identified by law enforcement and athletics officials most often for basketball (25.4% and 40.8%) and track and field (16.9% and 24.5%) programs. Thus, our sample of college officials believed that football and men's basketball were the most criminally involved programs on their campuses specifically and were the programs most heavily impacted by the presence of gang members in college athletics overall.

The university officials also reported their own direct experiences with gang-involved student-athletes at their institutions. A much larger proportion of campus chiefs (19.5%) indicated direct knowledge of a student-athlete who retained gang membership while at their university compared with athletics directors (4.2%). It should be noted that almost one tenth (9.9%) of the athletics directors reported

Table 5

Percentages of Athletics Directors and Police Chiefs Who Reported Crimes Committed by Their Female Student-Athletes by Sport

Sport	% Athletics Directors (N = 60)	% Police Chiefs (N = 77)
Basketball	30.0%	31.2%
Fencing	1.7%	0.0%
Field Hockey	3.3%	2.6%
Golf	3.3%	0.0%
Gymnastics	1.7%	5.2%
Lacrosse	3.3%	1.3%
Rifle	0.0%	1.3%
Rowing/Crew	3.3%	0.0%
Soccer	6.7%	5.2%
Softball	8.3%	3.9%
Swimming/Diving	6.7%	2.6%
Tennis	6.7%	0.0%
Track and Field	13.3%	6.5%
Volleyball	8.3%	2.6%
Other: Equestrian	0.0%	1.3%

Note. Table contains only sports where either an athletics director or a police chief identified student-athlete involvement.

Table 6

Percentages of Athletics Directors Who Reported Their Screening Efforts by Type

Screening Method	% Total (N = 71)
Examined whether a recruit had a history of school suspensions	46.5%
Examined whether a recruit had difficulties getting along with adults at school	35.2%
Examined whether a recruit had a criminal history	69.0%
Examined whether a recruit was on probation or some other form of court supervision	50.7%
Examined whether a recruit had any history of gang involvement	22.5%

Table 7

Percentages of Athletics Directors and Police Chiefs Who Reported Problems Committed by Collegiate Gang-Involved Student-Athletes by Type

Problem Type	% Athletics Directors (N = 38)	% Police Chiefs (N = 51)
Engaged in violent crimes	71.1%	88.2%
Engaged in property crimes	60.5%	94.1%
Possessed firearms	65.8%	82.4%
Engaged in drug activity	71.1%	94.1%
Gambling	42.1%	47.1%
Fighting on campus	73.7%	84.3%
Fighting off campus	81.6%	92.2%
Intimidation of other students	57.9%	74.5%
Intimidation of others off campus	60.5%	74.5%
Recruitment of individuals into gangs	47.4%	60.8%
School disruption	57.9%	52.9%
Disrupting team unity	65.8%	66.7%
Creating negative learning environment	68.4%	64.7%
Being a negative influence by creating an association between team members and gang members	76.3%	76.5%
Creating a negative image for the university or sport	78.9%	82.4%
Other	5.3%	14.3%

Table 8

Percentages of Athletics Directors and Police Chiefs Who Reported Crimes Committed by Collegiate Gang-Involved Male Student-Athletes by Sport

Sport	% Athletics Directors (N = 49)	% Police Chiefs (N = 59)
Baseball	12.2%	11.9%
Basketball	81.6%	81.4%
Football	85.7%	94.9%
Golf	2.0%	1.7%
Ice Hockey	0.0%	1.7%
Lacrosse	0.0%	3.4%
Rifle	0.0%	1.7%
Soccer	4.1%	5.1%
Track and Field	32.7%	23.7%
Wrestling	2.0%	10.2%
Other	4.1%	0.0%

Note. Table contains only sports where either an athletics director or a police chief identified student-athlete involvement.

Table 9

Percentages of Athletics Directors and Police Chiefs who Reported Crimes Committed by Collegiate Gang-Involved Female Student-Athletes by Sport

Sport	% Athletics Directors (<i>N</i> = 49)	% Police Chiefs (<i>N</i> = 59)
Basketball	40.8%	25.4%
Soccer	2.0%	3.4%
Softball	4.1%	1.7%
Track and Field	24.5%	16.9%
Volleyball	4.1%	1.7%
Other	4.1%	0.0%

Note. Table contains only sports where either an athletics director or a police chief identified student-athlete involvement.

that there were student-athletes at their university who were gang members prior to attending the university. This finding suggests that most athletics directors believed that gang-involved high school student-athletes ceased membership before arrival at their institutions.

Among the sample of university officials who reported that gang-involved student-athletes participated in athletics programs at their universities, many remarked that these individuals often created issues resulting in disciplinary actions or arrests. Criminal offenses by college athletes who were involved with gangs during college or had been previously involved with gangs prior to attending college were reported by a minority of athletics directors (44.5%) and a majority of campus chiefs (76.5%). All four athletics directors who stated that gang-involved student-athletes had caused problems indicated that these athletes had been involved in assaults. Assaults were also the most frequently mentioned criminal behaviors identified by the campus law enforcement executives (76.9%). Other specific crimes committed by these gang-involved student-athletes are listed in Table 10.

Discussion

The current study was among the first empirical explorations of the criminal and gang involvement of college student-athletes. This research helped fill important gaps in the understanding of college student-athletes' involvement with crime by expanding sample size and offenses considered, including gang-related acts. This final section of this study begins with a summary of our findings regarding student-athletes' involvement with crime. Next, those results specifically related to gang involvement among student-athletes are discussed. Limitations of the current study are noted along with the implications for practitioners and researchers and suggestions for future research. Last, policy implications and a suggested course of action are provided to practitioners tasked to recruit and manage college student-athletes or enact relevant policies.

Table 10

Percentages of Athletics Directors and Police Chiefs Who Reported Crimes Committed by Their Gang-Involved Student-Athletes by Type

Crime Type	% Athletics Directors (<i>N</i> = 4)	% Police Chiefs (<i>N</i> = 13)
Assault	100.0%	76.9%
Burglary	0.0%	38.5%
Drug Sales	50.0%	38.5%
Drug Use	25.0%	30.8%
Property Theft	25.0%	30.8%
Possession of Firearm	50.0%	46.2%
Retail Theft	25.0%	7.7%
Graffiti	0.0%	7.7%
Vandalism	25.0%	30.8%
Other: Robbery, Sexual Assault	0.0%	15.4%

Note. Table contains only sports where either an athletics director or a police chief identified student-athlete involvement.

Discussion of Findings

The majority of athletics directors and campus police chiefs reported that student-athletes at their respective institutions had been arrested or involved in various criminal offenses. They also reported the most common offenses were assault and drug use. These findings support those recently published by *Sports Illustrated* and *CBS News* that, when viewed together, suggest that recent media accounts uncovered examples of a real-world problem on some college campuses. As the present study raises more questions than answers, the issue of criminally involved collegiate student-athletes deserves further and systematic attention.

The anecdotal evidence regarding gang members in college athletics received overwhelming support from the athletics directors and campus police chiefs. Slightly fewer than 7 out of 10 athletics directors and campus chiefs believed that gang members participate in collegiate athletics programs, and most also believed that these individuals create criminal and/or disruptive problems for their schools. More campus chiefs (19.5%) reported direct knowledge of a gang-involved student-athlete at their school compared to athletics directors (4.2%). In sum, the current study included data from two sources, and both reported direct knowledge of at least one gang member participating in the athletics programs at their schools. These findings demonstrate there is a gang presence in major college athletics programs, but it is not widespread.

This study found evidence that many law enforcement and athletics department executives are proactive with respect to crime- and gang-involved student-athletes. For example, the majority of athletics directors (69.0%) reported they

routinely conduct background checks to determine whether recruits have criminal histories or are under some form of court supervision. This is in stark contrast to the recent *Sports Illustrated*–*CBS News* investigation that found only 8% of schools in their sample of top football programs had conducted criminal background checks of their players (Dohrmann & Benedict, 2011). The differences could reflect different methodologies or the different definitions of “background checks” by universities, but certainly merit more detailed research. However, athletics directors in this study devote much less attention to identifying recruits with histories of gang involvement as less than one quarter of respondents reported such efforts.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

At first glance, our findings appear consistent with the “moral panic” perspective on gang response efforts, which occurs when communities and organizations exaggerate the presence of a gang problem and subsequently overreact in response (McCorkle & Miethe, 1998). There are also concerns about net widening making more youth subject to involvement in the criminal and juvenile justice systems that come with deleterious effects (Decker, 1985). However, little evidence suggests universities are overreacting to this perceived presence. Fewer than 25% of the athletics directors who responded to the survey reported that they inquire about an athlete’s gang history during the recruiting process.

Huff (1990) observed that many public officials deny the existence of gangs in their jurisdiction “to protect their city’s image and keep it competitive with respect to economic development” (p. 311). Similarly, athletics directors may not want the negative publicity they may receive if they recruit individuals with questionable histories, including gang activity. Such publicity could create problems for the university and adjoining community, which could also impact their fund-raising capacity. Thus, it may be the case that the athletics directors did not report their knowledge of gang-involved athletes at their campus, even with the promise of confidentiality. Unfortunately, the data collected in the present study do not provide the opportunity to explore definitively these issues of moral panic and denial.

Caution must be exercised in drawing conclusions from the athletics director and campus police chief surveys given the response rates. The study was limited in that the athletics directors and police chiefs were asked neither to distinguish between current and past situations in identifying the presence of criminally and gang-involved athletes on their campus nor to identify the number of such athletes or the frequency of criminal or disruptive problems they created. The present study was intended to be exploratory and uncovered the presence of gang members in higher education, which prior empirical literature ignored. The study also contributed to the small body of research that examined criminally involved college student-athletes and institutional screening of recruits. These are important topics, and the findings demonstrate that college administrators should consider

and discuss the potential impact of student-athletes who have criminal histories or gang ties and determine the best courses of action.

Future research would benefit from the use of surveys administered to a large number of athletes across multiple universities, which would provide considerable insight into the nature and scope of criminal offenses and gangs in college athletics. These efforts should also explore the difference in levels of criminal and disruptive activity between gang-involved and non-gang athletes to determine whether gang-involved athletes present unique problems for university athletics programs or merely reflect the campus demographic. Future empirical research, causal in nature, could identify factors related to gang and criminal involvement among college student-athletes. For example, longitudinal research may consider the importance of screening mechanisms, school size, school location, and other variables discussed in the review of relevant literature. Such empirical research may illuminate causal factors and thus provide useful policy implications for practitioners and other stakeholders.

Applications for Practitioners

Proactive stakeholders may wish to view this study as a reason to initiate a discussion about the potential issues surrounding student-athletes and gang membership. The stakeholders should focus on strategies of intervention aimed at reducing and preventing the gang involvement of athletes. Within the context of intervention efforts, the opportunity to participate in college athletics represents a turning point similar to getting a job or joining the military that other researchers have observed as placing an individual on a pathway away from gang and criminal activity (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Thornberry et al., 2003). Participation in college sports places crime- or gang-involved athletes in contact with a mainstream institution that demands a considerable amount of time and psychological commitment, thus reducing time spent with antisocial peers. Moreover, although universities do not represent the type of total institution found in the military (Goffman, 1961), in most cases, athletes leave the communities where their gangs exist to attend college. Whereas some high school athletes have to continue their associations with gangs while still in their communities, as Atencio and Wright (2008) suggested, the remote college environment can remove these pressures. This can contribute to longer periods of desistance from gang activities and the reduction in emotional and social ties to their gangs, which are important to the overall process of leaving gangs (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2010). However, if student-athletes continue their gang or criminal involvement while participating in college sports, it would suggest simply participating in college sports is not enough and that universities' athletics departments may have an important role in aiding the desistance process.

Another potential response preventing the entrance of problematic student-athletes onto university campuses can be addressed by systematic reviews of potential recruits' backgrounds. Most important, gang members may be recognized

by citizens who are familiar with their personal lives. Asking high school employees and community members about student-athletes may provide recruiters with critical information. For example, a recruiter requesting information on the character of a high school student-athlete from his or her coach, guidance counselor, or principal may be told one account of the individual's character. If recruiters were to take the time to ask high school staff, including school resource officers, cafeteria workers, or custodians who view these recruits in different situations, they may get another account of the student-athlete's character. Similarly, taking the time to talk with other students and community members who live and work close to the athlete may be worth the effort to determine the person's background. This study found that some schools conduct criminal background checks and speak with people close to the athlete, but these efforts are not conducted in a systematic manner.

The current study provides further support for revisiting recruitment policies at the institutional or departmental levels because they are currently delegated to the individual schools by the NCAA. Policy changes likely will occur at the university or athletics department level due to the incentives for individual coaches to overlook student-athletes' potential off-field problems in exchange for a higher percentage of wins. In response to the Sports Illustrated–CBS News study, one athletics director released the following statement:

Recruiting quality student-athletes in all sports is of the utmost importance to me and our coaches. I am anxious and open to discussions with my peers in the state and in the Big Ten Conference and beyond on whether criminal background checks need to become a regular piece of our recruiting process. (State of Iowa Board of Regents, 2010)

Additionally, the NCAA held a summit on the prevention and intervention of interpersonal violence in March 2011 that included a discussion of background checks for student-athlete recruits (NCAA, 2012b).

Questions remain regarding the proper way to address potential recruits who have been identified as criminally involved or members of gangs but would otherwise pass admissions criteria. Certain findings of background checks should be of heightened concern to athletics department officials including previous domestic violence, weapons possession, serious drug problems, and gang membership. A university may want to create behavioral standards for their recruits that mirror those for academic admissions. In other words, some behaviors should preclude a scholarship offer just as some low levels of academic performance or proficiency preclude admission to the university. Those student-athletes with problematic backgrounds who have been awarded scholarships or are allowed the opportunity to participate in collegiate athletics should be provided support to reduce the likelihood of future incidents by severing ties to negative influences from their pasts.

Just as the athletics departments provide academic assistance, perhaps they should provide “character assistance” or “social support” (see Thompson’s 2010 work for a specific model that the universities could explore).

Additionally, programs should be developed at the national and local level that educate athletics administrators, coaches, and student-athletes to the potential problems this study raises. An important part of this education includes information on the culture of communities where student-athletes grow up. Universities are important bridges between post-adolescent and adult life for students, whether or not they are gang involved. Finally, ways to acclimate new student-athletes into the university community are critical, particularly for those athletes with prior problematic behavior. Colleges and universities should address the presence and impact of criminally and gang-involved student-athletes to improve the safety of their campuses and communities or risk negative consequences from stakeholders including faculty, students, community members, and the national media.

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Management Whitepaper

Perceptions of Criminal and Gang Involvement Among College Student-Athletes

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I. Research Problem

The purpose of the current study was to examine perceptions of college student-athletes' involvement with gangs and other criminal offenses through surveys of athletics directors and campus police chiefs. This research was important because the extant literature examining the criminality of intercollegiate student-athletes is limited to media accounts or research focused on few types of offenses or athletics programs. The presence and impact of gangs in institutions such as secondary education and the military has been documented, but their expansion to college athletics has not been empirically verified despite media portrayals. Findings from both groups of key informants show that individuals involved with gangs and other criminal offenses participate in college athletics. However, few athletics directors and campus police chiefs reported the presence of gang-involved athletes on their own campuses. This article would be useful to coaches, athletics directors, and other members of athletics departments, as well as higher education administrators involved with managing student-athletes and athletic departments.

II. Issues

Much of what is known about the criminal conduct of college student-athletes in the United States is drawn from a recent investigation by *Sports Illustrated* and *CBS News* that conducted 7,030 background checks on all 2,837 athletes listed on the rosters of the magazine's preseason list of the top 25 ranked college football programs as of September 1, 2010. The investigation found that 7.2% of the football players had criminal records before or after entering college. The 204 student-athletes with law enforcement records in the *Sports Illustrated*–*CBS News* study were suspected of committing a total of 277 crimes, 58 of which occurred when they were juveniles. The most commonly found offenses were for drugs and alcohol (105), but these football players were also arrested for 56 violent crimes. The *Sports Illustrated*–*CBS News* investigation also found that individual schools and coaches had varied policies concerning the recruitment of criminally involved athletes, only two of the 25 schools regularly performed any criminal background checks on recruits, and none searched juvenile records. A review of newspaper

articles from the past two decades provides a picture that college athletes are arrested for a wide variety of crimes including aggravated assault, burglary, drug trafficking, rape, and homicide.

The lack of screening conducted before an athlete is offered a scholarship was presented as a hypothesis for criminal involvement among college student-athletes, and the recent article in *Sports Illustrated* identified several reasons that universities are hesitant to conduct criminal background checks of potential student-athletes. Even knowledge of at-risk recruits' troublesome backgrounds may not prevent their admission to universities or their participation in collegiate athletics as researchers found some coaches are willing to accept potentially problematic football recruits due to intense pressures for their programs to succeed, regardless of academic or behavioral issues. However, it remains unclear whether these accounts are merely anecdotal incidents or examples of a more systematic problem in college sports.

The presence of gang members in college athletics may be best understood by considering two sociodemographic realities of college student-athletes. First, a number of college athletes, particularly basketball and football players, come from economically disadvantaged communities that represent the primary locales for the presence of gangs and related criminal activities. Street gangs are a part of the social structure in most large American cities and have spread into suburbs and smaller cities. Second, college student-athletes are at the age most susceptible to gang involvement and membership. Research findings demonstrated that the presence of gangs impacts a variety of public institutions serving similarly aged populations, including secondary schools and the military. There is no empirical evidence on the prevalence of such experiences among highly talented and potentially college-bound athletes. Media reports have indicated that athletes with a history of gang involvement participate in college sports, but this fact alone does not necessarily mean these student-athletes create problems once they arrive on campus. At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge the empirical literature that has shown gang members' disproportionate involvement with delinquent and criminal activities as both offenders and victims. Most notable is their representation in violent crimes including homicides. Another outcome of gang involvement is the impact of gang membership on communities where gang-related acts of violence and other criminal activities disrupt the socialization patterns and create disorganized communities. The detrimental impact of gangs on society has been established in the empirical literature and provides a compelling justification for the present research.

III. Summary

Surveys were sent to campus law enforcement and athletics department executives at universities with major athletics programs in the United States; 71 athletics directors and 87 campus police chiefs responded. The responding police chiefs had an average of 26.1 years experience as law enforcement officers, including 13.7

years working at their current institutions and 6.9 years in their current leadership positions. The athletics directors had slightly less experience with an average of 20.9 years in college athletics as athletes, coaches, staff, or athletics directors. These individuals had directed athletics departments for an average of 9.5 years, including 7 years at their current institutions.

The law enforcement agency and athletics department executives were asked to indicate the extent of their own knowledge as well as their staff members' knowledge regarding gang signs and other indicators that an individual is a gang member or an activity is gang-related on a Likert scale from no knowledge (1) to a lot of knowledge (9). The campus police chiefs reported a mean of 5.6 on their own knowledge of indicators of gang membership or activities and 5.8 for their officers. The athletics administrators reported a lower level of knowledge about indicators and signs of gang membership and gang-related activities than leaders from campus law enforcement communities, with averages of 3.5 and 3.3, respectively. The athletics administrators reported that the staff members of the most problematic sports on their campuses had more relevant knowledge than they did, with a mean of 4.6. The vast majority of campus chiefs (84.9%) indicated that their officers had received training on gang activities, but few athletics directors (5.6%) responded that their coaches and staff had undergone such training. Similarly, law enforcement executives' primary means of learning about gangs had been training courses (89.7%), but athletics department officials reported that their knowledge about gangs came from television, radio, or newspapers (87.3%). The majority of athletics directors (69.0%) reported they routinely conduct background checks to determine whether recruits have criminal histories or are under some form of court supervision. Only a small percentage (22.5%) of the athletics administrators reported screening for gang involvement.

The vast majority of athletics directors (88.5%) and campus police chiefs (84.5%) reported that student-athletes at their respective institutions had been arrested or involved in various criminal offenses and that the most common offenses were assault and drug use. The law enforcement and athletics department executives indicated that football programs were most common among the men's sports programs at their schools to have had criminally involved team members (87.0% and 70.0%), followed by basketball (85.7% and 51.7%). Regarding female student-athletes, campus law enforcement and athletics administrators identified the basketball (31.2% and 30.0%) and track and field (6.5% and 13.3%) programs as having at least one player arrested or involved with crimes during their tenure.

Slightly fewer than 7 out of 10 athletics directors and campus chiefs believed that gang members participate in collegiate athletics programs overall and most also thought that these individuals create criminal and/or disruptive problems for their schools. More campus chiefs (19.5%) reported direct knowledge of gang-involved student-athletes at their school compared to athletics directors (4.2%). Gang-involved male student-athletes were reported by campus chiefs and athlet-

ics directors to have participated in their football (94.9% and 85.7%), basketball (81.4% and 81.6%), and track and field (23.7% and 32.7%) programs. Gang-involved female student-athletes were indicated by law enforcement and athletics officials most often for their women's basketball (25.4% and 40.8%) and women's track and field (16.9% and 24.5%) programs.

IV. Analysis

The present study was intended to be exploratory and uncovered the presence of gang members in higher education, which prior empirical literature ignored. The study also contributed to the small body of research that examined criminally involved college student-athletes and institutional screening of recruits. These are important topics, and the findings demonstrate that college administrators should consider and discuss the potential impact of student-athletes who have criminal histories or gang ties and determine the best courses of action. Caution must be exercised in drawing conclusions from the athletics director and campus police chief surveys given the response rates, 55% and 67%, respectively. The study also was limited in that the athletics directors and police chiefs were asked neither to distinguish between current and past situations in identifying the presence of criminally and gang-involved athletes on their campus nor to identify the number of such athletes or the frequency of criminal or disruptive problems they created. This study was also limited by the lack of prior research in this area to guide the design.

Proactive stakeholders may wish to view this study as a reason to initiate a discussion about the potential issues surrounding student-athletes and gang membership. The stakeholders should focus on strategies of intervention aimed at reducing and preventing the gang involvement of athletes. Within the context of intervention efforts, the opportunity to participate in college athletics represents a turning point similar to getting a job or joining the military that other researchers have observed as placing an individual on a pathway away from gang and criminal activity. Participation in college sports places criminally or gang-involved athletes in contact with a mainstream institution that demands a considerable amount of time and psychological commitment, thus reducing time spent with antisocial peers. Moreover, although universities do not represent the type of total institution found in the military, in most cases, athletes leave the communities where their gangs exist to attend college. Whereas some high school athletes have to continue their associations with gangs while still in their communities, the remote college environment can remove these pressures. This can contribute to longer periods of desistance from gang activities and the reduction in emotional and social ties to their gangs, which are important to the overall process of leaving gangs. However, if athletes continue their gang or criminal involvement while participating in college sports, it would suggest simply that participating in college sports is not enough and that universities' athletics departments may have an important role in aiding the desistance process.

Another potential response preventing the entrance of problematic student-athletes onto university campuses can be addressed by systematic reviews of potential recruits' backgrounds. Most important, gang members may be recognized by citizens with direct knowledge of the individuals in question. Asking high school employees and community members about student-athletes may provide the recruiters with critical information. For example, recruiters requesting information on the character of a high school student-athlete from his or her coach, guidance counselor, or principal may be told one account of the individual's character. If recruiters were to take the time to ask high school staff, including school resource officers, cafeteria workers, or custodians who view these recruits in different situations, they may get another account of their character. Similarly, taking the time to talk with other students and community members who live and work close to the athlete may be worth the effort to determine the person's background. This study found that some schools conduct criminal background checks and speak with people close to the athlete, but these efforts are not conducted in a systematic manner.

V. Discussion/Implications

The current study provides further support for revisiting recruitment policies at the institutional or departmental levels because they are currently delegated to the individual schools by the NCAA. It is also likely that policy changes will occur at the university or athletics department level due to the incentives for individual coaches to overlook student-athletes potential off-field problems in exchange for a higher percentage of wins. In response to the *Sports Illustrated*–*CBS News* study, one athletics director released the following statement:

Recruiting quality student-athletes in all sports is of the utmost importance to me and our coaches. I am anxious and open to discussions with my peers in the state and in the Big Ten Conference and beyond on whether criminal background checks need to become a regular piece of our recruiting process.

Additionally, the NCAA held a summit on the prevention and intervention of interpersonal violence in March 2011 that included a discussion of background checks for student-athlete recruits. Such considerations may prevent needless costs—personal and otherwise. For instance, at least five colleges have been sued by victims of crimes committed by scholarship student-athletes. The damage to those schools' reputations has not been quantified but remains noteworthy.

Questions remain regarding the proper way to address potential recruits who have been identified as criminally involved or as gang members but would otherwise pass admissions criteria. Certain findings of background checks should be of heightened concern to athletics department officials including previous domestic

violence, weapons possession, serious drug problems, and gang membership. A university may want to create behavioral standards for their recruits that mirror those for academic admissions. In other words, some behaviors should preclude a scholarship offer just as some low levels of academic performance or proficiency preclude admission to the university. Those student-athletes with problematic backgrounds who have been awarded scholarships or allowed the opportunity to participate in collegiate athletics should be provided support to reduce the likelihood of future incidents by severing ties to negative influences from their pasts. Just as the athletics departments provide academic assistance, perhaps they should provide “character assistance” or “social support.” Some interviewees stated that gangs have allowed student-athlete members to cease activities while at school, and these individuals therefore need to have opportunities to remain on campus during summers and holidays. Many of these athletes may require counseling and other mental health services to lessen the effects of previous offenses and victimizations.

Additionally, programs should be developed at the national and local level that educate athletics administrators, coaches, and student-athletes to the potential problems this study raises. An important part of this education includes information on the culture of communities where student-athletes grow up. Universities are important bridges between post-adolescent and adult life for students and student-athletes, whether or not they are gang involved. Finally, ways to acclimate new student-athletes into the university community are critical, particularly for those athletes with prior problematic behavior. Colleges and universities should address the presence and impact of criminally and gang-involved student-athletes to improve the safety of their campuses and communities or risk negative consequences from stakeholders including faculty, students, community members, and the national media.