Journal of Criminal Justice 43 (2015) 397–403

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Criminal Justice

The National Felon League?: A comparison of NFL arrests to general population arrests

Wanda Leal [a], Marc Gertz [a], Alex R. Piquero [b,*]

[a] Florida State University, College of Criminology & Criminal Justice, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1273, United States
[b] University of Texas at Dallas, Program in Criminology, 800 W. Campbell Rd., GR31, Richardson, TX 75080-3021, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 31 July 2015
Received in revised form 5 August 2015
Accepted 6 August 2015
Available online 24 August 2015

ABSTRACT

Purpose: In the past few years, media attention to crime and violence committed by NFL players has increased. This paper compares NFL arrest rates to U.S. general population arrest rates from 2000 to 2013.
Methods: The current study uses online databases that contain information of NFL player arrests and UCR arrest data to calculate rates of arrest for violent crimes, property crimes, and public order crimes, for both the NFL and general population. Two-sample test of proportions are used to assess differences between the arrest rates for NFL players and the general population.
Results: Findings indicate that the general population has higher rates of arrests than the NFL population for property crimes and public order crimes, but NFL arrest rates for violent crimes are higher than for the general population in six of the fourteen yearly comparisons.
Conclusion: This study provides data on crime in the NFL. It offers some but not strong or consistent support to those that are concerned about violence among NFL players, but it does not support the claim that NFL players are more criminal than the general population.

Introduction

Recent incidents of violence at the hands of well-known National Football League (NFL) players have brought about an increased interest in the amount of crime in the NFL (Almasy & Nichols, 2014; Bridges, 2015). While crimes among NFL players are not a new phenomenon, highly popularized events such as Ray Rice's and Adrian Peterson's episodes of domestic violence and child abuse have brought this issue into the media spotlight. In large part as well, these stories and the visual images that have ensued have influenced how the NFL has dealt with violence more generally, including in particular the formation of a new conduct policy committee that is designed "to help lead and shape the NFL's policies and programs relating to domestic violence and sexual assault" (Goodell, 2014). In the past few years, more and more media outlets have been discussing and examining the so-called "National Felon League" (Watkins, 2009). Unfortunately, few of these popular news mediums empirically investigate the claims about the violent nature of the NFL. The majority simply state the number of crimes committed (especially forms of violent crime), give anecdotes of horrendous crimes by NFL players, and/or state that there is a huge problem with violence in the NFL (McCarthy, 2013; Mushnick, 2013; Sports Illustrated, 2014).

With the increased media attention on the violence of NFL players, it is not surprising that recent national surveys have shown that 69% of Americans, 70% of NFL fans, and 73% of female fans believe that the NFL has a widespread epidemic of domestic violence (Vox Populi Polling, 2014). Even though the general public believes that the NFL has a violence problem, solid empirical research does not lend convincing support to this claim. A few news sources have published articles that explore the issue of NFL crime with some scientific rigor, most of which find that the rates of NFL crime and violence (especially domestic violence) are lower than the rates of crime and violence for the general population (Bronars, 2015; Carter, 2013; Irwin, 2014; Morris, 2014; Pomeroy, 2014).

To gain a better understanding of NFL players' criminal activity, empirical research is needed. Unfortunately, there is little empirical data to show that NFL players are more (or less) criminally inclined because there is very little data on the subject (Freeman, 2013). While some news articles use arrest data in an attempt to investigate rates of NFL violence or crime, there has only been one peer-reviewed article published on the topic (Blumstein & Benedict, 1999), and this was published many years before the NFL—and its players in particular—had gained the perception it has with respect to violence and how the League has internally addressed it through fines and suspensions. Similar to the news articles, Blumstein and Benedict found that rates of assault and domestic violence for NFL players were less than half that of the general population. A key question is whether their findings would still be observed today.

Using data on NFL arrests as well as U.S. general population FBI arrests from 2000 to 2013, the current study compares the extent to which there are differences between NFL and general population arrest rates across four of the main crime indices: total arrests, violent crime

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: apiquero@utdallas.edu (A.R. Piquero).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2015.08.001
0047-2352/

arrests, property crime arrests, and public order crime arrests. Although these data are based on official records and there are (and will always be) difficulties with respect to the types of persons who eventually become NFL players (i.e., a selection bias), our preliminary investigation is designed to provide some baseline evidence on the issue and hopefully help to spur additional empirical work extending and building upon the research presented below. Before we present the results of our study, we provide a brief overview of the limited research on crime in the NFL.

What is known about crime in the NFL?

Unlike the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports, a strong empirical research base regarding criminal activity within the NFL is the exception and not the rule. The existing set of studies on this topic emanates largely from a small number of news articles and a handful of peer-reviewed studies. As mentioned above, the majority of higher caliber news articles find that rates of crime and violence are lower for NFL players than those of the general population (Bronars, 2015; Carter, 2013; Irwin, 2014; Morris, 2014; Pomeroy, 2014). Morris (2014), of the popular polling website FiveThirtyEight, produced one of the more methodologically rigorous news articles comparing NFL arrests to general population arrests. Using NFL arrest data starting in 2000 (NFL population of 2560 which includes players in training camp) and the Bureau of Justice Statistics' Arrest Data Analysis Tool to calculate the arrest rates per 100,000 for the male population between the ages of 25 and 29, he found that NFL players had much lower rates of arrest than the general population for all crimes. Specifically, NFL players' arrest rate was about 13% of the national average (Morris, 2014).

Bronars (2015) conducted a similar analysis for Forbes, but used a different NFL population that does not include players in training camp, as many of those invited often do not eventually make the roster. With this different NFL population, he discovered an arrest rate for domestic violence/assault that was more than twice as high as the one obtained by Morris. Even with this higher arrest rate, Bronars still found lower rates of arrest for NFL players than for the general population, with rates of domestic violence/assault and DUI/drug possession for the NFL being about 63% of that for similarly aged men in the general population (Bronars, 2015).

Although Blumstein and Benedict's (1999) study was conducted 16 years ago, it remains the only peer-reviewed examination of arrest rate comparisons between NFL players and the general population. These authors used data collected by Benedict and Yaeger (1999) on 509 NFL players, which produced 264 arrests by 109 players, to calculate their NFL arrest rates. For their general population arrest rates, they used UCR arrest data and Census Bureau population estimates. Their results showed that the NFL rates for assault and domestic violence were less than half the general population rates.[1]

What might explain NFL crime?

With all the media accounts of crime and violence in the NFL, it is not difficult to see how public perceptions of the violence-in-the-NFL problem can be shaped. Those perceptions notwithstanding, and even though the small set of studies point toward lower offending among NFL players, their criminal activity is still worthy of explanation. Fortunately, criminology has a lengthy set of theoretical frameworks that could be useful in this regard, recognizing that some theories enjoy wider support than others (e.g., Weisburd & Piquero, 2008).

Learning theories could be used as an explanation, since NFL players are essentially taught and socialized toward violence and aggression in order to gain position, tackle opponents, and win games. In addition, their exposure to delinquent peers within and/or outside the NFL could also be an influential factor (Akers, 1998; Sutherland, 1947). Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime, with its focus on low self-control, could also be a relevant theoretical mechanism for understanding offending among NFL players. There is much information, albeit in the popular media, regarding many formerly rich NFL players who do not plan ahead for the future and instead focus their spending on lavish goods, lifestyles, and on the here-and-now. Other elements of low self-control, including a preference for physical (over mental) activities, could also be a relevant factor. Ironically however, NFL players have to also exercise some self-control, stopping and starting at the blowing of a whistle. Thus, they go from full-speed-ahead to an abrupt halt in their activities on the field. As well, players exercise self-control in their workout regimens, diets, and so forth.

While a few criminological theories might be able to explain NFL crime, the only theories that have been empirically tested with NFL players are strain theory (Agnew, 1992) and social bond theory (Hirschi, 1969), by suggesting that anomie and social ties may be important ingredients for offending (Carter & Carter, 2007, 2014). By interviewing and surveying 104 NFL players, Carter and Carter (2007) found that a substantial number of players had prior experience with deviant/illegal behaviors and had some level of anomie present in their lives. However, players that had strong ties to various social groups appeared less likely to succumb to anomie and deviance. This suggests that although anomie was a significant predictor of law breaking players, the relationship is buffered by the presence of strong social ties (Carter & Carter, 2007). Carter and Carter (2014) also found that religiosity reduced personal anomie among NFL players in the study group by enhancing positive group integration and support. Their results showed that religiosity had a deterrent effect on deviance/illegal behavior and interacted with anomie to affect deviance (Carter & Carter, 2014).

Another consideration is that the problem behavior of NFL players might be related to contractual incentives created by a new collective bargaining agreement (Weiss, 2008). Prior to 2006, an NFL player's bonus was forfeitable if he committed an act that was illegal or detrimental to the team. In fact, his contract specifically called for a bonus forfeiture under those circumstances. This changed at the beginning of 2006 when a player's bonus was no longer connected to his behavior, even if it was illegal. Prior to 2006, the player's bonus could be seen as some sort of attachment or stake in conformity, which constrained a player's behavior in order to keep his bonus (Hirschi, 1969). Once the loss of this bond was no longer connected to illegal behavior, an increase in player misbehavior could be expected. We will return to this point later in the paper.

Current study

Despite the publicity surrounding the crime and violence problem in the NFL, the perception that NFL players are of a criminal nature and/or offend at higher-than-population-average levels has not been subject to much empirical description and analysis. In fact, the sole peer-reviewed empirical study that we were able to identify was published over fifteen years ago. Accordingly, this paper set out to present some more recent comparisons of arrest rates between NFL players and the U.S. general population for the period 2000–2013.

Data & methods

The current study compares NFL arrest rates to the arrest rates of the U.S. general population in order to determine whether media accounts of crime and violence among NFL players are grounded in an empirical reality. Four types of arrest rates were calculated for both the NFL and general population, including the total arrest rate, violent crime arrest rate, property crime arrest rate, and public order crime arrest rate. In addition, the rates are tested using a two-sample test of proportions to assess potential differences between the arrest rates for NFL players and the general population. We would like to emphasize that these tests should be interpreted cautiously. Our main interests are on the rates themselves as well as the substantive and visual differences in the rates between the NFL and the general population. It is unlikely that