

Monkey Cage

Racial prejudice is driving opposition to paying college athletes. Here's the evidence.

By Kevin Wallsten, Tatishe M. Nteta and Lauren A. McCarthy December 30 at 8:00 AM

With the money made from college sports increasing every year, the way colleges treat their athletes has become controversial.

That's because college sports is a tremendously lucrative business for everyone but the athletes. The National College Athletic Association (NCAA) will receive [\\$7.3 billion](#) from ESPN for the right to broadcast the seven games of the College Football Playoffs (CFP) between 2014 and 2026, and [\\$11 billion](#) from CBS and Turner Sports to broadcast "March Madness" over the next 14 years.

Individual colleges also make out well: The University of Kentucky's men's basketball team's trip to the Final Four this year, for example, brought [more than \\$8 million in revenue](#) to the universities of the Southeastern Conference (SEC). Each of the "Big 5" conferences will make an [estimated \\$50 million](#) from the college football playoffs this year.

And none of this counts the money made from concessions, merchandise and licensing fees.

Meanwhile, most college athletes are "paid" with scholarships that cover only tuition, room, board, books and fees — although in 2015, the NCAA allowed Division I universities the option of increasing this to pay the [full cost of attendance](#). After adding up the time spent on practice, training and games, college athletes often "work" the equivalent of [full-time hours](#) for the universities they play for.

Many pundits call that exploitation

Many pundits argue that it's exploitation to have players work for such paltry compensation while universities, advertisers and television networks profit from their efforts. As Jay Bilas, an ESPN college basketball analyst and former Duke University basketball star, wrote in the [New York Times](#), "It is not immoral for the NCAA to make money off of athletics. But it is profoundly immoral for the NCAA to restrict athletes from receiving compensation while everyone else profits."

Taylor Branch wrote in the [Atlantic](#) that "the real scandal is not that students (athletes) are getting illegally paid or recruited, it's that two of the noble principles on which the NCAA justifies its existence — 'amateurism' and the 'student-athlete' — are cynical hoaxes, legalistic confections propagated by the universities so they can exploit the skills and fame of young athletes."

Even John Oliver, on HBO's Last Week Tonight, opined that "there is nothing inherently wrong with a sporting tournament

making huge amounts of money — but there is something slightly troubling about a billion-dollar sports enterprise where the athletes are not paid a penny.”

The NCAA has responded that fans don’t want college sports to go pro. As NCAA President Mark Emmert recently put it, “one of the biggest reasons fans like college sports is that they believe the athletes are really students who play for a love of the sport.”

Most blacks want college athletes to be paid. Most whites don’t

There’s evidence that he’s right. In survey after survey, strong national majorities oppose paying college athletes. In March 2015, for example, an [HBO Real Sports/Marist Poll](#) found that 65 percent of Americans do not think college athletes in top men’s football and basketball programs should be paid.

But these attitudes vary significantly by race. In every survey to date, blacks are far more likely to support paying college athletes when compared to whites. For instance, in the 2014 [Cooperative Congressional Election Study](#) (CCES), 53 percent of African Americans backed paying college athletes—more than doubling the support expressed by whites (22 percent).

Racial divisions on controversial issues, of course, are not new. Even on ostensibly race-neutral policies like welfare, health care, and law enforcement, strong differences in opinion exist between blacks and whites. Decades of research have found ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) that some of those gaps in opinion come from racial prejudice against blacks. When whites believe that a policy mainly helps blacks, their opinions on that policy are inevitably colored by their feelings towards blacks as a group.

Could some of that gap grow from racism?

Could racial prejudice also affect attitudes toward paying college athletes? There are good reasons to believe that it could.

According to [NCAA data](#) from 2014, blacks constitute the majority of players in college football and basketball, the two sports that most people think of when they think of college athletics. Given this reality, it would be strange if questions about paying college athletes did not conjure up images of young black men in the minds of survey respondents.

To find out whether racial prejudice influences white opinion on paying college athletes, we conducted a survey of opinions on “pay for play” policies using the 2014 CCES.

In a statistical analysis that controlled for a host of other influences, we found this: Negative racial views about blacks were the single most important predictor of white opposition to paying college athletes.

The more negatively a white respondent felt about blacks, the more they opposed paying college athletes.

To check our findings’ validity, we also conducted an experiment. Before we asked white respondents whether college

athletes should be paid, we showed one group pictures of young black men with stereotypical African American first and last names. We showed another group no pictures at all.

As you can see in the figure below, whites who were primed by seeing pictures of young black men were significantly more likely to say they opposed paying college athletes. Support dropped most dramatically among whites who expressed the most resentment towards blacks as a group.

When we talk about paying college athletes, we're talking about race

In other words, the discussion about paying college athletes is implicitly a discussion about race. As the representative of nearly 1,200 schools, conferences and affiliate organizations, the NCAA should consider how much it wants to base its policies on public opinion that may be tainted by racial prejudice.

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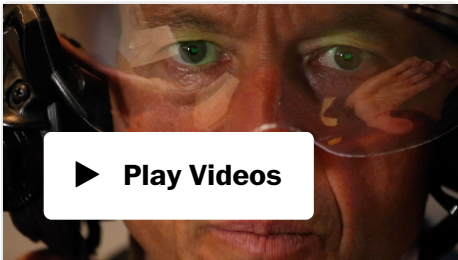
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