



Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on youth sport in Australian and consequences for future participation and retention

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Background: COVID-19 continues to represent the single biggest challenge to contemporary community sport globally. Given the situation in Australia, many children and families are now seeking to re-engage in community sport.

Aims/Methods: The aim of this study was to investigate how the pandemic has impacted youth sport, and understand the short- and long-term consequences, and explore (if any) opportunities can be seized to assist to improve future participation and retention.

A total of 39 youth (ages 15-18), parents, coaches and sports administrators were interviewed. Analysis was conducted and four themes emerged.

Results:

- The four 'R' themes about the understanding about the pandemic's impact on youth sport, were conceptualised as 'recognising struggle', 'reconnection', 're-engaging after restrictions', and 'reimagining sport'.
- The lost sporting season/year provoked a sense of mourning.
- During the pandemic, for many, there was a decline in mental wellbeing and physical activity, and an increase in family connectedness.
- There was/is also a challenge for sports to attract and retain volunteers and players back into sport, as well as an opportunity to reset the core values of community club-based sport.

Recognising Struggle:

- In place of sport, many youth admitted to spending more time on the couch watching TV, eating junk food, and generally experiencing a decline in positive health-related activities.
- High performance athletes on verge of being selected in state and national teams had emotional struggle related to lost opportunities and disappointed about pandemic's impact on potential future pathway into elite sport.

Reconnecting:

- Families reconnecting through physical activity and sport. A time to 'unplug' and reconnect as a family unit.
- Reconnecting the sport community online which helped to combat feelings of loneliness and seclusion.

Re-engaging after restrictions:

- Some lacking the motivation to stay fit during the pandemic and struggled to find the drive to continue practising or training.
- Some expressed a strong desire and a 'hunger' to return to sport, stating that their passion for playing sport they loved had been strengthened through its absence.

Re-imagining sport

- People returning to sport for the right reasons, and playing for the passion for their sport rather than financial incentives, and a focus on fun and enjoyment.
- A focus on social connectedness as well as physical and mental health being more valued.

Conclusion: COVID-19 and the absence of community sport has dramatically highlighted the core values of community sport. That is, social connectedness through fun and engaging play. From this, players, families, volunteers, and communities have many benefits including social, mental and physical health.

We now need community sport to continue with these core values to revive youth sport participation and retention. Communication and connecting with players and volunteers are going to be key for sports success into the future.

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