

Research on team loyalty yields new insight into 'die-hard' fandom

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There's a reason why some sports fans are referred to as "die-hards" - even after they move away, their loyalty to their hometown team endures, according to research by two University of Illinois professors.

Scott Tainsky and Monika Stodolska, professors of recreation, sport and tourism, say new residents of a community maintain an attachment to their old team or former city as a way of asserting their identity after they move.

"People new to a city don't just adopt their new hometown's team as a way to acclimate themselves in a new community," Tainsky said. "For new residents, sports is not that tool to stand around the water cooler and start the assimilation process - at least not right away, and possibly never for some. They see it more as a way to assert their [loyalty](#) to their old hometown team, or the city they identify with. That leads us to conclude that the team or city someone identifies with is a relationship that endures."

The study, published in [Social Science Quarterly](#), looks at the stability of fan identification among individuals who relocate, and whether that identification represents an actual bond between fan, team or city. The researchers found that new population inflow, regardless of whether it's domestic transplants moving to a new city or international [immigrants](#) moving to the U.S., was not associated with an increase in television ratings for NFL broadcasts in the new city.

"I think we tend to think of groups of fans as static groups," Tainsky said.

"But one thing we know is that the number of times the average U.S. [citizen](#) moves in their lifetime is close to 12 times. Most of the time, those moves are within the same [metropolitan area](#), or within the same state. But between 2.2 and 2.7 percent of the population moved from state-to-state annually. So we have to understand not just the people who've lived somewhere for a while, but also the motivations of this large group of new people."

Tainsky and Stodolska also discovered that individuals who previously resided in a market were more likely to tune into a telecast featuring a team representing their former city, but only when the game was being held in their former city of residence.

Tainsky says this accounts for why some sports teams have large fan diasporas spread across the country - why there are, for example, Pittsburgh Steelers and Chicago Cubs fans nationwide. It's also consistent with existing research that teams that have been in the marketplace longer have an extremely loyal fan base.

"Since it takes a long time to establish a bond between fan and team, a team's stability in the marketplace only adds to its popularity," Tainsky said. "So if you're watching a game in your new city, you have no relationship with your new city, and are going to be less likely to have any interest in the team."

Unless, Tainsky said, the new team is playing an away game against the old beloved home team, and only then when the game is played in the previous hometown. That's something that a network executive would probably like to take into account, knowing that so many people have left a city, and only broadcasting those games if the contest was held in a

certain city.

"Our study shows that the action on the field alone may not be sufficient to get recent migrants to tune in," Tainsky said. "Nostalgia for their old hometown does seem to play a role in people's consumption choices, so those sorts of things do add value to the experience."

For international immigrants, sports may serve as one of the cultural markers linking them to their place of origin. Mexican immigrants in Chicago, for example, would be very keen to watch games of their national team played abroad and when Mexican soccer teams come to the U.S.

"International migrants watch the games broadcast from their home country not only for the experience of watching the game but also because of very strong nostalgic feelings to their home city and country," Stodolska said.

Interest in following the teams of one's home country wanes somewhat among the second-generation immigrants, who are more likely to adopt mainstream American sports teams such as baseball, American football and basketball, Stodolska said.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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