

Study finds racial bias in promotion among NFL coaches

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GW Professor James Wade, and faculty at three other academic institutions tracked the careers of more than 1,200 NFL coaches between 1985 and 2012 for their study. Credit: Flickr Creative Commons/Brian Neudorff

White position coaches in the National Football League are more than

twice as likely to be promoted to coordinator than their minority peers—regardless of age, experience or career performance—according to a study released this month by faculty at the George Washington University and three other academic institutions.

Though not covered by the NFL's Rooney Rule—which requires teams to interview minority candidates for head coaching and senior football operation jobs—the promotion of position coaches to coordinators can have an affect on the racial makeup of head coaches in the NFL. The offensive and defensive coordinator positions are the highest on a coaching staff, directly beneath the head coach.

The researchers found 70 percent of head coach hirings involve a promotion from a coordinator position.

"It's not necessarily a requirement [to be a coordinator first]," said Chris Rider, assistant professor of strategy at Georgetown, and one of the co-authors of the study. "However, it is the most common stepping stone. If you don't get that coordinator experience your chances of becoming a head coach are drastically reduced."

In "Racial Disparity in Leadership: Performance-Reward Bias in Promotions of National Football League Coaches," Dr. Rider, GW Professor James Wade, and co-authors at Emory University and Iowa State University, tracked the careers of more than 1,200 NFL coaches between 1985 and 2012. The timeframe encompasses the league's 2003 creation of the Rooney Rule.

The researchers identified a promotion advantage among white NFL position coaches, who are 114 percent more likely to be promoted to coordinator positions than their black counterparts. Such promotions do not fall under the purview of the Rooney Rule.

"In terms of understanding racial disparity, a lot of people focus at the top—the movement from the second position to the top position," Dr. Rider said. "What our study shows is that the real racial disadvantage here is at the lower level positions."

Starting at the bottom

Armed with the breadth of data usually only found in industries where a high percentage of employees spend their entire careers, the researchers were able to account for reasons typically used to justify a race gap in the workplace.

"We accounted for experience in the NFL, experience in college, age and performance of the team," said Dr. Wade, the Avram S. Tucker Endowed Professor in Strategy and Leadership at the School of Business. "We also had other models of offensive and defensive performance. We had a lot of controls."

That was a critical part of their analysis, Dr. Wade said, allowing the researchers to cycle through all types of factors. They even found a hierarchy among position coaches—quarterbacks coach is a more favorable position for promotion than running backs coach, for example.

Still, controlling for this factor—as with all the others—revealed the same promotion bias.

"Our analysis allows us to rule out that the disparity is simply attributable to your first position or current position," Dr. Rider said. "Even when we take two guys who are in the same position and performing equally well, we see this racial advantage."

Other programs besides the Rooney Rule

As for the Rooney Rule, Drs. Rider and Wade find no evidence it is changing promotion prospects among NFL head coaches. But that doesn't mean it isn't working. It's a small data set.

"If the NFL really believes the Rooney Rule does address racial disparity, progress is going to be slow, and it's going to be hard to estimate how well it's doing because in any given year racial composition of 32 head coaches is going to come down to a single hire, maybe two," Dr. Rider said.

The researchers are attempting to conduct further studies to see if other programs the league provides are more effective to addressing racial disparity.

One is the Bill Walsh NFL Minority Coaching Fellowship, which provides annual internship opportunities for minority football coaches during training camp and the preseason. There are a number of minority NFL coaches who are graduates of this program, Dr. Rider said. But the researchers can't identify them without help from the NFL.

"We're here to collaborate with them so they can tell us who has graduated from this program," Dr. Rider said. "Then we might be able to tell if this fellowship program is more effective than the Rooney Rule for addressing racial disparity."

More information: "Racial Disparity in Leadership: Performance-Reward Bias in Promotions of National Football League Coaches," papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2710398

Provided by George Washington University

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