

51% of Americans agree paying college athletes should be allowed

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More Americans than not believe that college athletes should be allowed to be paid more than what it costs them to go to school, a new national study of nearly 4,000 people suggests.

Findings from the National Sports and Society Survey (NSASS), led by researchers at The Ohio State University, suggest that 51 percent of adults agree that [college](#) athletes should have the ability to be paid above school costs, 41 percent disagree and 8 percent don't know.

An analysis of the survey results, published this week in the *Sociology of Sport Journal*, found a variety of factors were linked to how Americans thought about the issue.

"We found that it was largely a story of race, ethnicity, views about discrimination in society and traditionalism," said Chris Knoester, lead author of the study and associate professor of sociology at Ohio State.

"A lot of the same issues concerning race that we're dealing with in the larger society seem to have played a role in how people felt about college athletes' economic rights."

Knoester conducted the study with David Ridpath, associate professor of sports management at Ohio University.

The NSASS is sponsored by Ohio State's Sports and Society Initiative. The survey was completed by 3,993 adults who volunteered to participate through the American Population Panel, run by Ohio State's Center for Human Resource Research. Participants, who came from all 50 states, answered the survey online between the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019.

Because NSASS participants are disproportionately female, white and Midwestern, the researchers weighted the [survey results](#) to more accurately reflect the U.S. population. (The unweighted sample found 48 percent agreed college athletes should be allowed to be paid, with 44 percent disagreeing.)

Participants were asked to rate, on a scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," how much they agreed with the statement "College athletes should be allowed to be paid, as athletes, more than it costs to go to school."

"We wanted to make it clear that we were talking about compensation over and above a scholarship and what it costs to go to school," Knoester said.

"Also, we didn't want to get into details about how to organize compensation. We just wanted to know if people thought it should be possible for college students to be paid as athletes."

The survey also asked a variety of questions designed to uncover the factors associated with support for paying athletes.

Results showed that the odds for white adults to strongly agree that college athletes should receive compensation beyond their scholarships were 36 percent lower than the odds for non-white adults.

When these differences were broken down further, Black adults had odds of strongly agreeing that college athletes should be paid more than it costs them to go to school that were 2.5 times those of white adults.

Hispanics were also more likely than whites to support [athlete](#) pay.

But it wasn't just a person's race and ethnicity that was important, Knoester said.

Findings showed that people were more likely to support paying college athletes if they agreed that discrimination was the main reason that non-whites had worse jobs, income and housing than white people in America.

Knoester noted that African American males make up less than 5 percent of the undergraduate population in U.S. colleges and universities, but about 55 percent of the participants in NCAA Division I men's basketball and football.

"We think that people who agree that racial and ethnic discrimination is a problem in our country also see that African American athletes are the ones most affected by the lack of pay in the major college sports," he said.

The research also found that people who might be viewed as "traditionalists" were more likely to oppose athlete pay. This included older adults, those who lived in rural areas and self-identified conservatives.

"Traditionalists are people who generally approve of the status quo, or have a nostalgia for the past, and often don't want to change things," Knoester said.

Some people have worried that paying college athletes would turn off the people most necessary for the success of college athletics: the fans.

But this study found that people who rated themselves as the most passionate sports fans were also more likely than others to support athlete pay.

There haven't been a lot of other national surveys examining views about college athletes' economic rights, Knoester said. But the few that have been conducted, such as the 2019 Seton Hall Sports Poll, also have similar results to this study.

"I think there's no doubt that there is increasing public opinion support for allowing college athletes to be paid," he said.

"Importantly, this trend is occurring when the NCAA is under enormous pressure to allow for greater compensation for [college athletes](#)."

More information: Chris Knoester et al, Should College Athletes Be Allowed to Be Paid? A Public Opinion Analysis, *Sociology of Sport Journal* (2020). [DOI: 10.1123/ssj.2020-0015](https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2020-0015)

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