

Game On, Washington! Examining American Sport's Response to the Uvalde Massacre

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On May 24, 2022, a gunman killed 19 students and two teachers at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. In the aftermath, stakeholders within and across sports came together to call for political action around gun control. These included individual athletes (e.g., Natasha Cloud of the Washington Mystics and DeMarcus Lawrence of the Dallas Cowboys), as well as coaches (e.g., Gregg Popovich of the San Antonio Spurs and Steve Kerr of the Golden State Warriors). In addition, the Tampa Bay Rays and New York Yankees coordinated their Twitter feeds to focus on gun violence statistics during a game, and the Miami Heat's public address announcer, on behalf of the team, encouraged fans to call their state senators. In this essay, we examine the factors contributing to this coalescence. We build on relevant public administration scholarship that has examined the roles of athletes as social constructors and their impact on the administrative state. We contextualize this scholarship alongside the widespread public support for some measure of gun control. We also discuss future research avenues to examine the ongoing impacts of athlete protests.

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Across the world, sports and the people that participate in sports activities have influenced culture and public identity (Houlihan, 1997; Reid, 2017; Tomlinson & Young, 2006). In this regard, athletes emerge as 'super citizens' (Pope, 1997; Thomas & Levine Daniel, 2022) who command respect from different corners of society as they represent the values of their communities at a particular moment. They capitalize on this respect by using their position as a metaphorical bullhorn that amplifies both their voices and those of their non-athlete contemporaries that would otherwise go unheard.

Cooper et al. (2019) reminds us that "sport serves as a site where societal inequalities such as racism, sexism, economic stratification, and other forms of oppression are reproduced, exacerbated, and/or ignored" (p. 151). At the same time, the language of gun violence is woven into sports. Vibrant voices and notable figures within American sport have taken on names often associated with gun violence. For decades, Major League Baseball's (MLB) New York Yankees have been dubbed as the 'Bronx Bombers,' a metaphor for the Bronx-based team's ability to hit homeruns. Across football and baseball, when an athlete has the ability to throw a ball with superior strength, many will describe their arm as a 'cannon' or 'rocket launcher.' When we think of 'long-range shooters' or 'snipers,' the names of basketball players such as Stephen Curry, Sue Bird, and Kevin Durant come to mind. Catchphrases of sports announcers

are eponymous with related words such as ABC/Madison Square Garden play-by-play announcer Mike Breen (shouting ‘bang’ to describe a three-point shot made in basketball) and CBS/TNT play-by-play announcer Kevin Harlan (‘right between the eyes’ to describe a basketball shot made that has a perceived major impact on a game). It is so pervasive, many of us do not even notice the original reference points. With sport woven deep into the fabric of Americana, its lexicon serves as the threads that tie pockets of our country together by using broadly understood language.

It is against this backdrop that athletes in the United States are using their platforms to speak up against gun violence, headlined by the May 2022 shooting in Uvalde, Texas, that left 21 dead at Robb Elementary School. At a subsequent shooting that led to seven deaths during an Independence Day parade in Highland Park, Illinois, led MLB’s Chicago White Sox pitcher Liam Hendriks, a native Australian to claim:

That’s what America is known for. ...I can walk into a store as a non-American and buy a handgun in certain states. That baffles me. I had to take a driving test when I was over here. I won’t have to take a test if I want to get a gun. That’s stupid. Whoever thought that was a great idea is an idiot (Sullivan, 2022, para. 8).

Statistics illustrate that U.S. denizens should not be surprised by the seemingly daily occurrences of these events as the United States ranks first in gun deaths among high-income nations with a population size that exceeds 10 million people (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, 2022). From 2012 through May 2022, there were 540 school shootings in the United States in which at least one individual was killed or wounded. In 2021, 193 people fell into this category, not including the alleged shooter(s) (Center for Homeland Defense and Security, 2022; Lurye, 2022). In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center from April 25–May 1, 2022, 76% of respondents characterized gun violence as either a very big problem or a moderately big problem (Doherty & Gomez, 2022), ranking fourth among the ‘top problems’ that the United States is facing this year. Gun violence is becoming more personal for many people in this country, and athletes are no exception.

Recent public administration literature has described the recent impacts that athletes from marginalized communities have had on the administrative state, with a particular focus on social justice issues (Thomas & Levine Daniel, 2022; Thomas & Wright, 2021; Wright & Thomas, 2022). In prior years, athletes and sports franchises from the National Basketball Association (NBA) have faced calls to ‘shut up and dribble’ (Niven, 2021). Sentiment appears to have shifted, though. A September 2019 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 62% of individuals surveyed thought that it is ‘somewhat acceptable’ or ‘very acceptable’ for professional athletes to engage and discuss a political issue in a public forum (Gramlich, 2019).

The way that athletes are intentionally drawing attention to gun reform is related to equity. James et al. (2021) found that exposure rates to gun violence were lower for White adolescents than for Black and Hispanic adolescents across multiple income levels, which provides evidence that gun violence can be a social and health equity issue. Scholars have identified that there is a broader relationship between gun violence and equity in other settings as well (Bailey et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2019; Zakrison et al., 2017). For example, equity impacts not only the communities that athletes grow up in, but also the areas that they represent professionally, especially within a team sport context. As a result, when athletes speak, an intersection of populations and areas listen. This essay provides context to the conversations started by athletes and the impact it is having on the policy discussions across the United States.

We start by connecting social equity to the concept of social construction. We then highlight our contribution to public affairs literature in establishing the relationship between social equity, athlete conversation, and how their voices impact policy through the lens of social construction theory. Next, we discuss how gun violence and the response to Uvalde represent a notable shift in response by sport and how calls for policy changes became embedded within new policy proposals put forth by lawmakers. We break down how this has occurred at different levels, including by professional club, franchise ownership, coach input, and player input. Finally, our article concludes with a brief commentary of why we expect athletes to continue impacting policy and provide suggestions about future avenues for scholars and practitioners to examine in this growing field.

Athletes as Social Constructors of Social Equity

Scholars have attempted to properly define what social equity is and how to measure whether it exists. For this article, we use Guy and McCandless (2020) definition of the concept, describing social equity as a reference that “refers to distribution of fairness for all groups and emphasizes the need to design public goods—policies, interventions, programs—to combat historic inequities” and must be “woven throughout public processes and actions” (p. 3). Through this perspective, social equity is acknowledged to be a social concept, as opposed to one at the individual level, that can impact groups differently.

Athletes using their voices to speak up for relevant societal causes pertaining to social equity has recent and cultural precedence. For example, former professional basketball player Earvin ‘Magic’ Johnson directly impacted the social perception of HIV/AIDS.¹ When Johnson announced his retirement from the NBA’s Los Angeles Lakers in November 1991, he cited his newly discovered HIV-positive status as the reason for being forced to walk away from professional sports. Scholars have documented how Johnson’s announcement affected public perception of fear associated with HIV risk within the United States, especially among African American men (Casey et al., 2003; Langer et al., 1992; Pollock, 1994). Johnson’s existence as a HIV-positive Black man representing the Los Angeles Lakers in nationally televised basketball games illustrates that athletes often serve as a cross-section of various populations that represent a variety of communities, depending on the context and the situation in which they are viewed. Kalichman (1994) highlights studies that found that the public interest in HIV/AIDS improved and that information pertaining to the disease increased in reach. Johnson’s continued activism has led to a change in the previous perceptions of the disease.

The somewhat unified scale of athlete activism to address gun violence is what is new, and social construction theory can help us understand what we are seeing today. Social construction theory has roots in political science with application in public administration. Schneider and Ingram (1993) argue that the theory contends that “social constructions influence the policy agenda and the selection of policy tools, as well as the rationales that legitimate policy choices” (p. 334). These ‘constructions’ eventually become rooted within policies related to the subject. Citizens ultimately soak up these messages and their thinking and behaviors are affected as a result. Hafer and Ran (2016) argue that by connecting citizen participation to an approach focusing on social identity, value exists to better understand how public administrators and citizens can work together. Another example of the connection between social construction and public administration actors relates to negative social constructions. These constructions alter how public stakeholders and relevant institutions behave to the degree that both contribute to systemic and institutional injustices as sources and promoters of their behaviors (Gaynor, 2018).

For example, recent legislation passed in June 2022 led to more stringent background checks, funding for mental health services, and preventing gun purchases by convicted domestic abusers for five years among other elements (Knox, 2022). Many citizens feel that the

legislation is not enough, however. According to a Pew Research Center (2022) survey taken shortly before the Highland Park incident, over three-quarters of people surveyed (78%) in the United States believe the new law will have little or no effect. Given the combination of societal acceptance for athletes speaking up on issues and the perception of a lack of progress on social equity issues such as gun violence, it is not a surprise that athletes are more emboldened to speak out against issues that affect their personal and professional communities.

Calls for Post-Uvalde Legislative Action

Discussion of gun violence within professional sports has occurred in recent memory, with professional athletes taking to social media in light of the July 2013 verdict in the George Zimmerman murder trial in which he was found not guilty in the death of teenager Trayvon Martin (Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015). However, the May 2022 shooting in Uvalde, Texas, marks a shift in the relative uniformity of professional sport engagement on a particular issue. Statements on Uvalde came from stakeholders across multiple levels within sport (e.g., franchise level, coaches, and athletes) and were delivered through multiple mechanisms including formal letters, in-arena statements, personal social media handles, and press conferences which emphasized direct calls for political action in various forms on the issue of gun control (see Table 1). It arguably marks the first moment since the beginning of the social media era in which a multi-tiered response from the sports world occurred calling for direct action from lawmakers and/or voting practices.

Franchise

For starters, during the broadcast of MLB's New York Yankees and Tampa Bay Rays, the official social media accounts run by both teams decided to focus on providing gun violence facts and statistics instead of reporting on the events pertaining to the game. Before announcing the starting lineups of a playoff game between the NBA's Miami Heat and Boston Celtics, the Heat public address announcer encouraged action in the following statement to the fans in attendance: "The Heat urges you to contact your state senators by calling 202-224-3121 to leave a message demanding their support for common sense gun laws. You can also make change at the ballot box" (D'Angelo, 2022, para. 3). Furthermore, before their June 5th matchup in the NBA Finals with the Boston Celtics, Golden State Warriors players wore orange t-shirts emblazoned with the phrase 'end gun violence' during their warmup period. Likewise, at a pregame press conference, the head coaches of both teams (i.e., Ime Udoka of Boston and Steve Kerr of Golden State) wore them as well, which arguably are reflective of a team directive. Both teams also featured statements on their Twitter handles containing resources related to ending gun violence in the United States.

Coaches

In the aftermath of Uvalde with seemingly little policy traction taking place, coaches not only wore t-shirts, but also spoke out regarding an appearance of failure of lawmakers to step up in passing laws, which arguably contributed to the Uvalde tragedy. Coach Steve Kerr of the Golden State Warriors called out politicians by name in a pre-game press conference, pleading politicians to do more on Capitol Hill:

I ask you, Mitch McConnell, I ask all of you senators who refuse to do anything about the violence and school shootings and supermarket shootings—I ask you, are you going to put your own desire for power ahead of the lives of our children and our elderly and our churchgoers? he said. Because that's what it looks like (Calia, 2022, para. 3).

Table 1. Sample of Commentary by Sport Stakeholders

Level	Statements / Commentary Examples
Franchise	Miami Heat calls for action at the ballot box before the start of a playoff game with the Boston Celtics; The Golden State Warriors and Boston Celtics released statements on Twitter informing followers of resources to help end gun violence in the United States. Rays/Yankees Twitter account reporting gun violence statistics instead of commentary of a game between both teams. Rays/Yankees Twitter account reporting gun violence statistics instead of commentary of a game between both teams.
Coach	Steve Kerr (press conference) and Gregg Popovich (Uvalde fundraiser) made poignant remarks that directly call out lawmakers for inaction on gun control.
Athlete	DeMarcus Lawrence (via Twitter), Natasha Cloud (via press conference), Briana Turner (Twitter), and Sean Doolittle (interview with local newspaper) among others made statements asking for politicians to step up and work towards solution.

Likewise, in a June 2022 fundraiser held for victims of Uvalde, NBA’s San Antonio Spurs Coach Gregg Popovich echoed a similar sentiment of Kerr when speaking to attendees questioning what politicians will need to act: “How many will it take?” he asked. “A massacre a month? Two massacres a week? Fifteen kids? Twenty-four kids? When we kill 74 sometimes, then maybe you’ll do something. Get off your ass. Do something” (Suggs, 2022, para. 6). In addition to coaches feeling empowered to call out politicians directly, players also pleaded for action in response to Uvalde.

Athletes

In response to Uvalde, the United States Men’s National Team (soccer) released a formal letter addressed specifically to members of Congress on behalf of ‘players and staff’ (USMNT, 2022, para. 6). The letter pleads for lawmakers to work pass any legislation that calls for stricter gun control:

To members of the United States Senate—a small group of your colleagues from both parties are working to craft a legislative proposal that will need the support of 60 out of 100 Senators to pass. Please stand up and say you will vote yes on gun legislation, so that a bill can go to the Senate floor, and the House and Senate can then work together to finalize legislation that does more than the bare minimum and will bring about a meaningful reduction in gun violence.

Twitter emerged as an observed platform for athletes to express their frustration over Uvalde and to directly make pleas to lawmakers for stronger gun laws. In the same state as where the shooting took place, DeMarcus Lawrence of the NFL’s Dallas Cowboys posted a series of tweets on Twitter on the day of the tragedy, with one written directly to Texas Governor Greg Abbott: “@GregAbbott_TX Who is going to stand up and DEMAND we have better security at all these schools that can’t afford it???? How are our tax dollars not going to those who need the most protection??!! OUR CHILDREN! ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!” (Lawrence, 2022).

Athletes within the women's professional sports landscape also expressed pleas for lawmakers to step up as well. For example, Briana Turner of the Women's National Basketball Association's (WNBA) Phoenix Mercury utilized Twitter to call out politicians, specifically members of Congress: "We have a serious issue. There's 535 people in congress. There's 330 million people in the US. It's (sic) shouldn't be left or right. This shouldn't be normalized...WE NEED HELP!" (Turner, 2022). Likewise, Natasha Cloud of the WNBA's Washington Mystics made comments to the press two days after Uvalde: "Being in D.C., we're in the most powerful city in the world," she said. "We're in spitting distance of the Capitol, of all these representatives who need to do their jobs, so a lot falls on our shoulders here to be the voice of the voiceless" (Azzi, 2022, para. 4).

Finally, in an interview with *The Washington Post*, Sean Doolittle of MLB's Washington Nationals supported the sentiments expressed by Cloud and encouraged politicians in their professional hometown to engage in making progress towards solutions:

I think it's important to say that Natasha [Cloud] was right, Doolittle said. I think she is a really important leader in the D.C. community, and whenever she talks, I listen. I think she was right to essentially call for backup, especially here in D.C., where Congress is in our backyard. We might not have representation ourselves as D.C. residents, but maybe we can force some change and at least some conversations (Dougherty, 2022, para. 3).

Across all levels of sport in the United States, there is increasing evidence that stakeholders are willing to speak up without fear of repercussion. Angela Ferrell-Zabala of Everytown for Gun Safety, an organization that advocates for gun control, observes that there was a shift in athlete response in terms of Uvalde. "We see this as a major tipping point," Ferrell-Zabala said. "These athletes and teams, they're meeting the moment" (Sheinin, 2022, para. 10).

Future Research

As the population demographics change within the United States with Whites declining in terms of overall percentage of the country's population in the most recent U.S. Census (Schneider, 2021), is reasonable to expect an increase of non-White athletes to continue to speak up on various equity issues, including gun violence. The changing landscape of media coverage and the ability for athletes to directly communicate the sentiments that they would like to express on various social issues deters misconstrued quotations filtered through a journalist's opinion. The way that franchises are expressing how their athletes should respond to social issues is shifting as well.

There is much to consider moving forward in terms of research. An expectation exists that athletes will continue to speak up and speak out as more leeway and support is provided by professional sports franchises. Athletes and teams are increasingly appearing to share similar sentiments regarding social issues. It is a topic that sports franchises have discussed with players, and there are examples of them offering their support to athletes that want to speak up, as noted in 2022 by Jerry DiPoto, the general manager of MLB's Seattle Mariners:

We've urged all of our players to speak what's in their heart, Dipoto said. They have a unique platform. Believe me, I've been doing this long enough to know that [critics] will say: These are baseball players. These are baseball executives.

Mind your own business. But really, this is our business. We're all just human beings trying to do the right thing (Sheinin, 2022, para. 16).

Athletes can be described in many ways, but to portray them as a monolith is inaccurate. What is worth observing in the coming years as athletes speak out is what occurs when declared differences of opinions exist within a team. Similar to the notion that Americans are not a monolith, athletes are not one either. While the majority of Americans support some measure of gun control, other issues engender less consensus. For example, there are examples of individuals choosing not to engage in team-based initiatives with social causes, such as game nights dedicated to promoting LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Players representing MLB's Tampa Bay Rays and National Women's Soccer League's (NWSL) North Carolina Courage engaged in a form of counter-protests in their own ways with two Rays players choosing not to wear a rainbow-colored patch on their game issued jersey (Kepner, 2022) and one Courage player choosing not to play in the game given the rainbow-colored game issued jersey (ESPN, 2022). This divergence from consensus and dissension among teams/leagues, with potentially differentiated effects on the pursuit of social equity, provide additional avenues for research.

There is also an opportunity to consider the veracity in volume of voices between athletes in team sports compared to athletes playing in an individual sport (such as tennis or golf). For athletes not playing under the banner of a sports franchise, will we see more forceful calls for change? Or less forceful, without the safety net of a federation or team? If so, will the causes be based on social equity? And how will sponsors impact athlete frequency and intensity of such causes? Companies such as Nike are known to support some athlete endeavors, but not others. Can we anticipate what causes will be deemed worth defending and which will be condemned? These are all elements worth considering as athletes continue to speak on social equity causes and seek change within the administrative and policy landscapes.

Notes

1. It is fundamentally inaccurate to say that HIV/AIDS are the same entities; however, the two are associated with each other in nearly every peer-reviewed study associated with Johnson and HIV, so they are described together in this article.

Disclosure Statement

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Jamie Levine Daniel is an associate professor at the Paul H. O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs at IUPUI. Her research focuses on the relationship between nonprofit resource acquisition and program service delivery, with interest on the relationship between earned revenue and mission. She earned her PhD at Ohio State University's John Glenn College of Public Affairs. She has recently published in *Voluntas, Nonprofit Management & Theory, Administrative Theory and Praxis, and the Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research*.