A Better Way to Reduce Domestic Violence in the NFL

Sports leagues can benefit from the experience of the military, which faced a similar problem in the 1990s.

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From a public-relations standpoint, it makes sense for the National Football League to create an advisory committee made up of women who advocate for victims of domestic violence. Partnering with the National Domestic Violence Hotline is an additional high-profile PR gambit. But neither action will effectively address the messy and vexing social problem of intimate partner violence.

The NFL has 2,016 male players roughly between the ages of 21 and 39—the age group most prone to violence. Assuming that 90% of these athletes will be in relationships (married or otherwise) with women over the course of a year, and allowing for age, employment status, income and other relevant demographics, my research over 40 years including national surveys of family violence suggests that 4%—about 80—of them will perpetrate an act of intimate-partner violence each year.

I am not talking about pushing and slapping but punching, kicking, choking and using or threatening to use a weapon. Of that group, my own research, as well as the National Institute of Justice's National Crime Victimization Surveys, would predict that about 20 players would be arrested.
Not all of this domestic violence is initiated by men. Applying the consistent findings of several researchers including Murray A. Straus (University of New Hampshire) and Mary M. Cavanaugh (Hunter College), about half of these 80 episodes would involve mutual violence. And while female violence in a domestic situation might be in self-defense, research suggests that at least half is initiated by the woman. In other words, perhaps 10 to 20 NFL players are themselves not violent but are hit by their female partners. Few of these men would be expected to come forward to teammates, the league or others.

While most cases of domestic violence and child abuse come to public attention after an arrest, the more pressing issue is whether anything practically can be done to prevent them from occurring. Fortunately, for the NFL and all other professional sports leagues, there is precedent and process for effective intervention.
The U.S. military faced a similar public-relations problem 12 years ago when over six weeks at Fort Bragg, four women were killed by their active-duty husbands or partners. The military then, like the NFL today, was roundly criticized for ignoring the problem of intimate-partner violence.

The Defense Department engaged in some public-relations steps: advocates were assembled and put on a task force to examine domestic violence in the military. But the military also commissioned considerable research and examined the effectiveness of a variety of interventions. The research found that domestic violence was indeed more common among military men than comparable civilians; and the U.S. military implemented some violence-prevention training and mandatory counseling, which had some limited success.

But the most important step was the creation of Case Review Committees. The typical CRC consists of social workers, psychologists, victim advocates, substance-abuse counselors, attorneys and military police. These committees do not wait for cases to come to public attention. Victims of domestic violence may approach the CRCs directly as may concerned friends and neighbors who know of or even suspect a problem. The CRCs conduct interviews and full investigations and can initiate action and sanction a member of the armed forces even in advance of civilian criminal-justice procedures. A proprietary study I did for the military showed that the rate of homicide declined by 20% between 1994 and 2002.

Sports CRCs would be a simple and effective initial step and relieve league commissioners from being the judges, juries and executioners. The number of cases these committees would have to review would be relatively manageable, and the committees should be expected to examine and implement evidence-based and not advocacy-based interventions such as anger-management counseling, violence-prevention training and cognitive behavioral therapy.

A second suggestion is that professional sports apply sanctions judiciously. The temptation to throw the book at offenders makes sense only from a PR point of view. Shaming an offender and cutting off his ability to earn a living would likely exacerbate and not remediate the problem. Certain punishment trumps severe punishment if we want to prevent deviant behavior.
Given that professional athletes have a stake in earning a living, a third of a season (five or six games) suspension for an offender like Ray Rice, whose domestic-violence case has been adjudicated, would be appropriate. A shorter suspension for Adrian Peterson until his child-abuse case is tried would be appropriate. One-size-fits-all sanctions are not.

The NFL and other silent leagues have a problem that is not going away. Public-relations efforts are so transparently weak that the leagues would best look for actual solutions. Fortunately, the wheel need not be reinvented. The military has considerable experience and some success in intervening in cases of domestic violence. The parallels between soldiers and athletes is compelling enough that sports commissioners have a ready template should they truly want to address the problem of intimate-partner violence.

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