Ugly side of the beautiful game: the football world cup and domestic violence

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Major sports events unite large international audiences in the excitement and fervour of watching their teams compete. The men’s football World Cup is currently taking place in Qatar. Even people who are not regular football fans are drawn into nationalistic displays of passion while glued to TV screens at home or in bars or fanatically checking the sports news. The 2018 World Cup saw over half the world’s population tuning in.

But there is a dark side to such an event. Research shows that major sporting events are linked to increased reports of domestic violence.1 In the last World Cup, cases of domestic violence involving alcohol saw a 47% rise on days when England won and an 18% increase on days after an England match.2 When these sporting events occur, the police, health services, and specialist services will likely see more calls and hospital admissions related to domestic violence.

Domestic violence, also known as intimate partner violence, refers to physical, sexual, or psychological harm inflicted by a partner or former partner. It is a global epidemic, with almost one third (27%) of women aged over 15 years reporting that they have been subjected to violence by an intimate partner or former partner. It is a pattern of abuse over their lifetime.3 Such violence substantially affects the physical and mental health and wellbeing of women and children throughout their lives.4 Women can experience depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, sexual and reproductive health outcomes, and chronic pain,5 whereas children can experience aggression, mood disorders, and disrupted development.6 7 More than half (56%) of women murdered worldwide last year were killed by intimate partners or other relatives.8 Men can also be affected by domestic violence, but rates are much higher for male perpetration of violence against women,9 particularly during major sporting events.

Why does domestic violence intensify during major sporting events? It’s hard to know exactly. Published studies of the association between major sporting events and domestic violence have predominantly been conducted in the United States or United Kingdom. There seem to be several factors at play, only some of which are replicated across studies.

The use of alcohol during major sporting events is well known across many countries, although not all, and alcohol is a risk factor for domestic violence.9 But conclusive evidence is lacking to support the association between alcohol during major sporting events and increased domestic violence. Gambling is a component of major sporting events worldwide and stress related to loss of income is known to be associated with the escalation of domestic violence.10 These contributing factors are poorly studied in the context of sport and domestic violence and do not tell the whole story. The authors of a global review that looked at the association between major sporting events and domestic violence said that it might be related to “the culture of a particular sport in a particular country, compounded by the potential significant rivalry between teams and how important, or emotionally salient, the game is.”11 Domestic violence reports increased in the UK during previous football World Cups,12 but there was no increase in sexual assault reports after the Formula 1 Grand Prix in the US, for example.12 Certain sports have long been known to exemplify hegemonic “toxic” masculinity and the violence associated with it.13 Research shows a positive connection between major sporting events and violent or criminal behaviour more broadly by fans.14

What does this mean for health services? Studies looking at the connection between a major sporting event and domestic violence rarely look beyond police data. Where health data are used, it is generally ambulance attendance, emergency department presentations, and hospital admissions.15 16 But even these data rarely differentiate between an assault and domestic violence incident, nor follow up beyond the day of the major sporting event. Specialist domestic violence services know that calls to helplines can occur several days after an incident of domestic violence. There are no data looking at primary healthcare presentations of domestic violence after a major sporting event. Of course, domestic violence is rarely, if ever, a one-off. It is a pattern of abuse over long periods of time.17 18

As the health profession watches on during this current football World Cup, we can expect to see more ambulance trips and hospital presentations related to domestic violence, increased calls to specialist domestic violence helplines, and potentially more presentations to primary care services. Health system responses must include raising awareness of common presentations and disclosures of domestic violence and how to recognise the signs of domestic violence and respond appropriately.19 Health systems should collaborate with specialist domestic violence services and police to ensure that holistic prevention and intervention are tailored to their country and take into account how its culture influences behaviour in respect to sport.20 The health system must develop policy that considers resource planning and preparation during and after a major sporting event. Finally, we need better recording of health data and consistency internationally to better understand how to prepare for the next football World Cup.
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11 Kirby S, Francis B, Flaherty R. Can the FIFA World Cup football (soccer) tournament be associated with an increase in domestic abuse? Res Crime Delinq 2014;51:76.


