



# The Dual Pandemic: COVID-19, Systemic Racism, and College Student-Athlete Mental Health

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## Background

The dual pandemic of 2020—COVID-19 and systemic racism—continue to reshape our society. Unjust factors of COVID-19 has exacerbated racially-insensitive rhetoric. The impact of this dual pandemic are detrimental to the mental health of youth, such as university students, who are still going under biopsychosocial development (Copeland et al., 2021) However, with systems of oppression being a part of institutional racism, COVID-19 has negatively impacted communities of color (Fortuna et al., 2020) Prior to COVID-19, student-athletes have already reported high level of mental health concerns (NCAA, 2020; 2021) Alongside this, there is a long documented history of BIPOC college student-athletes facing even more mental health concerns due to systemic racism (Sadberry & Mobley, 2013).

## Study Aims

**Aim 1:** Examine how COVID-19 and systemic racism impacted the daily lives of student-athletes.

**Aim 2:** Measure the direct effect of COVID-19 and systemic racism on student-athlete psychological distress.

**Aim 3:** Assess if student-athlete race/ethnicity moderated the relationship between COVID-19 and systematic relationship on psychological distress.

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## Participants

Nine schools of 10 universities within the America East Conference, a Division 1 athletic conference, agreed to take part in an online survey. The final sample included 222 NCAA student-athletes, who were on average 21 years of age ( $SD = 1.3$ ), predominantly White (76.6%), and female (73.9%). Within the BIPOC group (23.1%), multiracial (11.3%) was the largest sub-group, followed by Black (5.9%). A total of 17 sports were represented, including track/field (23.9%), swimming/diving (14.4%), and soccer (11.7%). Approximately 36% of the student-athletes were in their first-year.

## Questionnaire

- **Impact of COVID-19 on daily life**
  - The 7-item scale measured impact of COVID-19 on daily life (e.g., mental health, social life, sport).
- **Impact of systemic racism on daily life**
  - The 7-item scale measured the impact of systemic racism on daily life.
- **Perceived ethnic discrimination**
  - The 16-item scale consisted of four subscales; discrimination, stigmatization, exclusion, aggression.
- **The impact of event scale (COVID-19)**
  - The 15-item scale measured the traumatic stress symptoms related to COVID-19.
- **K6 psychological distress scale**
  - 6-item scale used to measure psychological distress.

## Data Analyses

**Aim 1:** To assess the impact of each 'event' on daily life, descriptive statistics for each item was computed. Item-level descriptive statistics were compared to identify the extent to which domains of daily life were impacted.

**Aim 2:** Linear regression was used to examine the direct effect of each of the events on psychological distress.

**Aim 3:** Upon finding significant direct effect at Aim 2, the interaction effect between race and the impact of the event was added to the regression model.

## Results

### Aim 1: Impact of COVID-19

Findings suggest that COVID-19 moderately and negatively impacted student-athlete daily life, with sport ( $M = 2.8$ ;  $md = 2$ ) and social life ( $M = 3.0$ ;  $md = 3$ ) being most impacted; while physical health ( $M = 4.7$ ;  $md = 5$ ) and personal finances ( $M = 4.4$ ;  $md = 5$ ) being the least impacted. COVID-19 also positively and significantly predicted student-athlete psychological distress.

### Aim 2: Impact of Systemic Racism

Findings suggest systemic racism slightly and negatively impacted student-athletes life in general, with mental health ( $M = 4.1$ ;  $md = 5.0$ ) being the most impacted while physical health ( $M = 4.9$ ;  $md = 5$ ) and personal finances ( $M = 4.9$ ;  $md = 5$ ) being the least impacted. Systemic racism did not predict student-athlete psychological distress.

### Aim 3: Moderation Effect on Racial Group

This study examined the interaction effect of race (i.e., White or BIPOC). The direct relationship between COVID-19 and psychological distress remained positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.509$ , 95% CI [0.144, 0.874],  $p < 0.01$ ). However, the relationship between COVID-19 and psychological distress was not moderated by race.

## Implications

This study demonstrates the need for athletic departments to provide regularly scheduled education on the importance of mental health. The athletic department also should ensure that healthcare providers (e.g., social workers, sport psychologist) are easily accessible for student-athletes. Further, athletic department should create an infrastructure to meet the diverse needs of BIPOC student-athletes. Finally, coaches and their staff should be educated on mental health concerns and contemporary social justice issues.

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