

# TACKLING CTE AND LONG-TERM BRAIN HEALTH IN ATHLETES THROUGH PROTECTIVE POLICY



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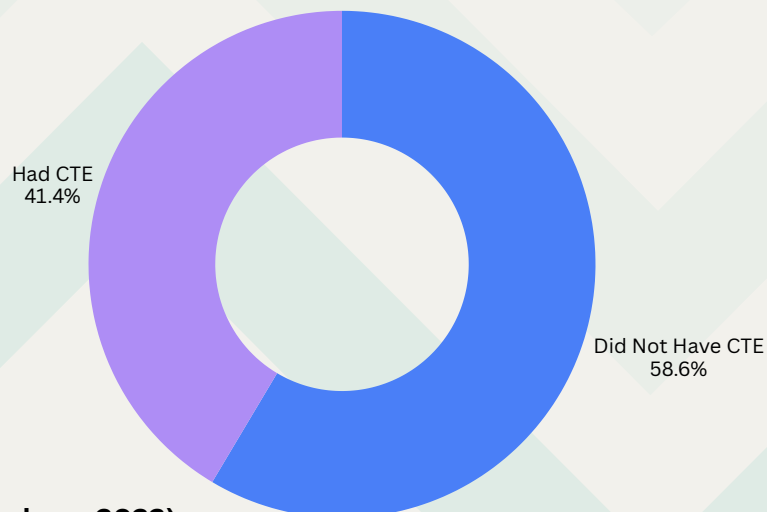
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# ABSTRACT



Youth sports are a major part of childhood in the United States, with about 27 million kids participating each year. While sports provide many benefits, they also come with risks—especially head injuries like concussions. Recently, growing attention has been placed on Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), a serious brain disease linked to repeated head impacts. Although awareness of these risks has increased, there is still a lack of strong policies protecting athletes. This paper looks at the dangers of head injuries in youth sports and why better protections are needed.

## Head Injury in Deceased Young Athletes



(Jama Neurology, 2023)

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# Problem Definition

In the United States, around 27 million kids under 17 play youth sports, which is a little over **55% of all kids** (Project Play). This shows how important sports are in childhood, but it also means a **huge number of kids are at risk for injuries**. One of the most common and serious types is head injuries, especially concussions.

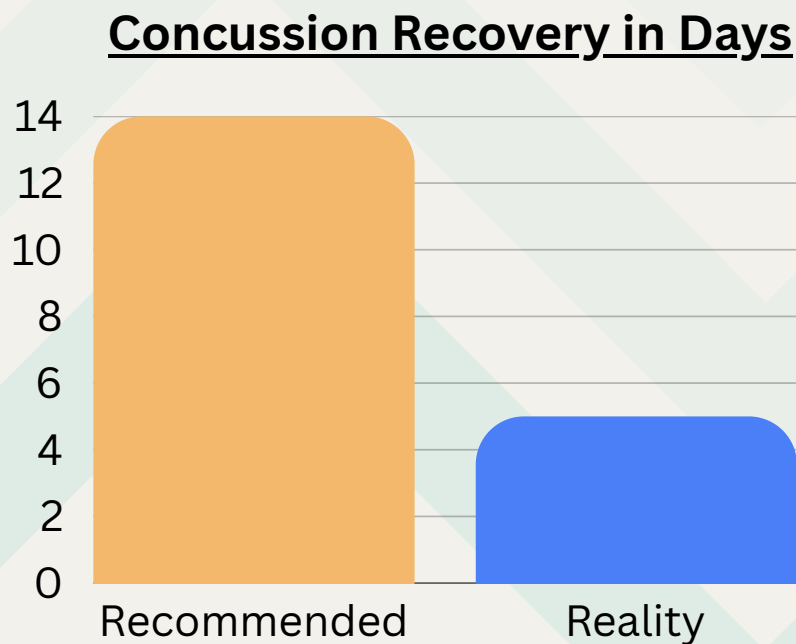
**Concussions** are a form of brain trauma and can cause symptoms like headaches, nausea, vomiting, light sensitivity, and in more serious cases, memory loss or seizures (Mayo Clinic).

Even though people today understand concussions more than before, there is a bigger issue growing—**CTE (Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy)**. CTE is a progressive and incurable brain disease caused by repeated hits to the head, including both concussions and smaller impacts (Mayo Clinic). It is most commonly found in **contact sports** like football, boxing, and lacrosse. The effects of CTE are much more severe, including aggression, mood changes, substance abuse, and even suicidal thoughts or actions.

Because CTE comes directly from **repeated head trauma**, it highlights a major gap in athlete safety. There are not enough strong rules or laws in place to fully protect athletes, especially at younger levels. This lack of protection is a serious problem and needs to be addressed.

# POLICY CONTEXT

At the moment, there is no universal policy that specifically prevents CTE across youth, collegiate, and professional sports. Instead, each individual league retains its own governance over how concussions are treated. Leagues can **independently** form their own concussion protocols, including return-to-play guidelines. The CDC recommends that at least 2 weeks of rest be completed before returning to play to prevent any chance of **further complications** or long-term trauma after an initial concussion. However, these guidelines are only recommendations, not requirements that must be met by independent leagues. Unfortunately, cases in which a star player at the youth level suffers a concussion may be refused the proper necessary screening in favor of their being available to play. These policies primarily focus on **concussion diagnosis and return-to-play guidelines** that benefit the success of the team rather than the long-term prevention of repeated head trauma.



(CDC, 2024)

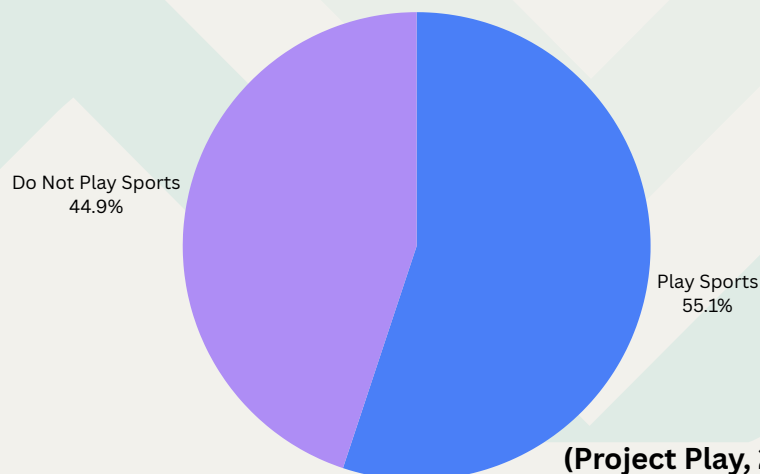
# ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

## PROTECTING OUR ATHLETES

Research shows that repeated hits to the head can cause serious long-term brain problems for athletes. Because of this, many experts now see CTE and concussion injuries as a public health issue, **not just a sports problem**. In the United States, about 27 million children under 17 play organized sports, which means millions of young athletes are exposed to possible head injuries each year (Project Play).

However, safety rules are not the same across all leagues. Youth leagues, high schools, college sports, and professional leagues all create their own concussion policies. This leads to **inconsistent protection** for athletes, especially younger players who often do not have medical staff at practices or games. Because of these risks, the government should play a **larger role** in creating stronger and more consistent safety standards.

### Children Who Participate in Sports



(Project Play, 2025)

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## ***1. ESTABLISH NATIONAL CONCUSSION SAFETY STANDARDS***

The federal government should create consistent, nationwide rules for concussion management. This includes requiring a minimum recovery period before athletes can return to play, based on medical guidelines from organizations like the CDC. Standardizing these rules across youth, high school, college, and professional sports would prevent athletes especially younger ones from returning too early and risking further brain injury.

## ***2. REDUCE HEAD IMPACTS AND IMPROVE PREVENTION***

Policies should focus on limiting repeated head impacts, particularly in youth sports where long-term risk begins. This could include reducing full-contact practices in football and hockey and continuing restrictions like limiting heading in youth soccer. Lowering early exposure to head trauma can significantly reduce the risk of developing CTE later in life.

## ***3. EXPANDED EDUCATION AND RESEARCH FUNDING***

The government should require concussion education programs for coaches, parents, and athletes to improve symptom recognition and reporting. In addition, increased federal funding for research is critical to better understand CTE, develop earlier diagnosis methods, and improve prevention strategies.

Together, education and research will strengthen long-term athlete safety.



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