

NASO Survey Indicates Concerns with Sportsmanship, Shortage of Officials

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The average age of sports officials is increasing, sportsmanship has gotten worse and the impacts of the pandemic-exacerbated shortage of sports officials continue to be felt. Those are some of the key findings from the 2023 National Officiating Survey, conducted by the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO).

The anonymous, 162-question survey collected data related to key reasons why individuals officiate, why they stay and why they leave. Importantly, the survey delves deeply into the industry-wide issues of sportsmanship, recruitment, retention, compensation, plus many others. The effort generated responses from 35,813 sports officials from all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Of those survey respondents who answered the question about what levels they worked, 92.78 percent indicated they officiated at the high school varsity level and 86.78 percent officiated at the high school sub-varsity level.

The survey is a direct follow-up to the historic survey NASO conducted in 2017, which had 17,487 responses. The 2023 survey was powered by Referee.com – a proud supporter of sports officials since 1976.

Survey results made it clear the officiating industry is an aging one, supporting the need for recruitment and retention. The average age of those surveyed was 56.68 years, up from 53.29 years in 2017. In every sport represented by survey respondents, the average age climbed over 50 years for the first time in any NASO survey effort.

Sportsmanship continues to worsen. In response to the question, “Is sportsmanship getting better or worse?” respondents answered: 68.81% worse, 21.25% no change, 10.14% better. Among those officials who indicated they worked at the high school level, 69.48% said officiating was getting worse, 20.73% no change, 9.79% better.

In 2017: 57.02% worse, 27.09% no change, 15.89% better.

More than 50 percent of all respondents have feared for their safety at some point in their career because of administrator, coach, player or spectator behavior. Sadly, nearly 12 percent of all officials who responded have been physically assaulted during or after a sporting event.

Officiating shortages continue to be an industry-wide issue. The COVID-19 pandemic led to accelerated retirement from active officiating for some individuals. In response to the question, “Have you taken more officiating assignments due to the shortage of officials?” 79.06% of respondents answered “yes.”

As a large group of officials take on additional assignments amid the shortage, there are some retention risks. While 42 percent answered they were grateful for more opportunities to officiate

because of the shortage, nearly 37 percent indicated they felt pressure to accept more games and 14 percent said they were feeling burned out.

Overall, sports officials believe they are underpaid for the services they provide. In response to the question, “Which phrase best captures how you feel about your pay rate in officiating,” only 0.4% of respondents answered they were overpaid and 18.3% indicated they were paid what they were worth. Roughly 21 percent answered they were underpaid and dissatisfied and 60 percent answered they were underpaid but accepted there were budget constraints at the level they worked.

Nearly 59 percent of survey respondents indicated they believe the officiating adage: “Most new officials quit within the first 1-3 years.”

Data from both the 2023 and 2017 National Officiating Surveys is available free of charge at www.naso.org/survey. It has been shared with various leagues, conferences, national governing bodies, state office administrators, local association leaders and media outlets to inform groups and improve conditions for sports officials. Survey respondents officiate a range of professional, college, high school, youth, amateur and recreational events in more than 20 different sports.

“As we learned in 2017, data drives discussion, which drives decisions,” said Bill Topp, NASO president. “The 2023 survey results will impact the lives of all officials, in every sport and at every level – directly and indirectly. We are grateful to the dozens of organizations that promoted the survey and to the 35,813 officials who want their voices heard. NASO is proud to be the catalyst for change.”

The National Officiating Survey was historic in reach and will provide many organizations and individuals with the necessary information to address issues important to the officiating industry.