

# Cultural Normalization of Risk?: Exploring Brain Injury in the National Football League using Sociocultural Analysis

Ali V. Willing; Jafrā D. Thomas, PhD, MPH, MA

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Public Health

“Football isn’t just a contact sport - it’s a dangerous game of massive bodies colliding into one another. And while it may seem obvious that this sport can do extraordinary damage to brains and bodies, it’s taken far too long for the NFL, the medical community, and football fans to fully reckon with this”

- [Brian Resnick, Washington University in St. Louis](#)

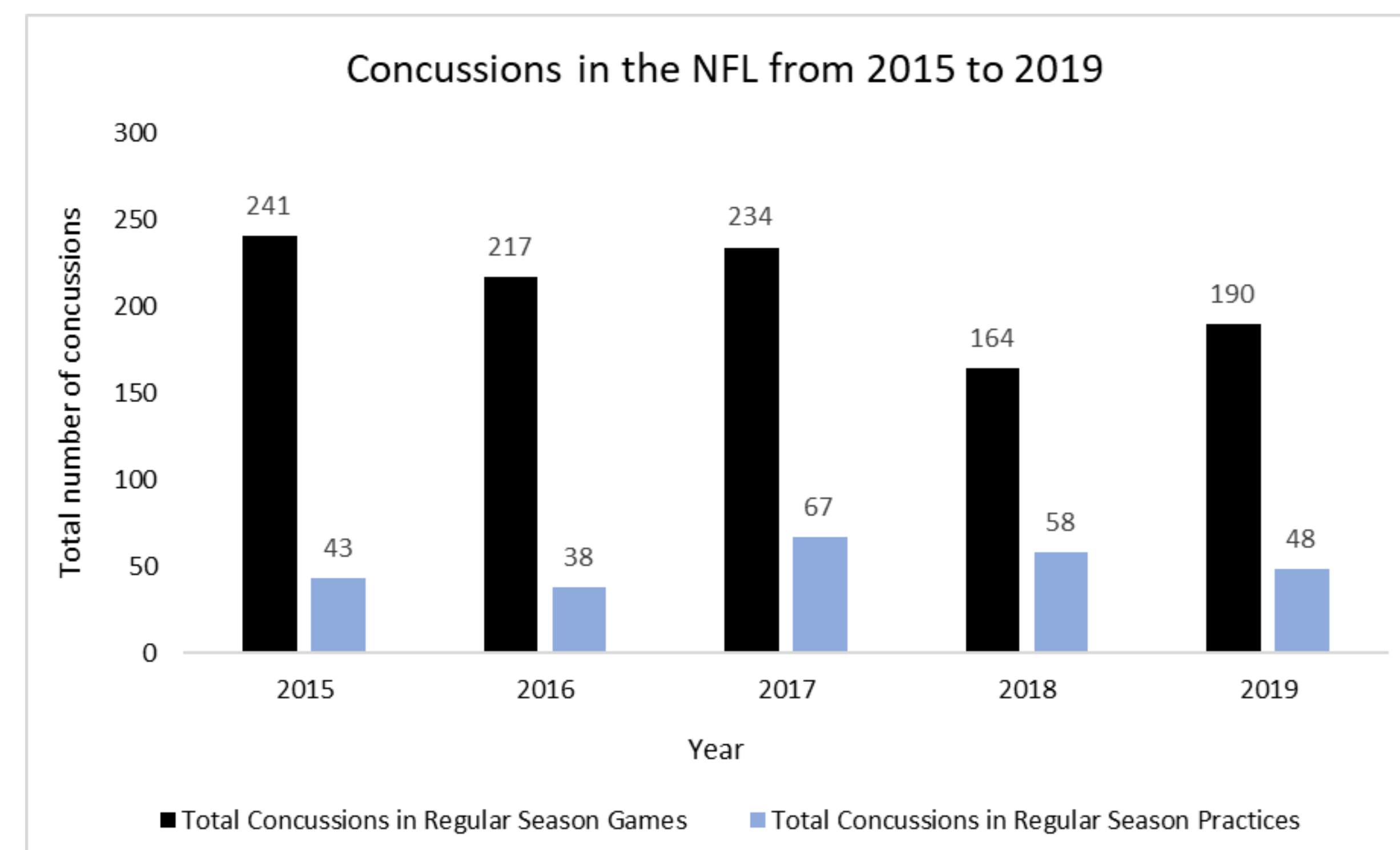


Figure 1. Graph is adapted from [Mack et al. \(2021\)](#). Acquired from an open access article.

## Purpose/Rationale

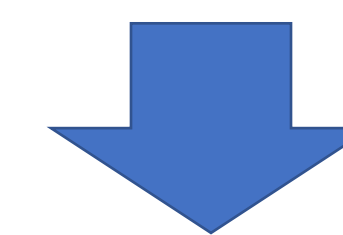
We aimed to understand why, culturally, the NFL has ‘failed’ to avert serious harm alleged by various lawsuits, given the [lawsuits’ magnitude and the known brain-injury risks](#) of playing tackle football.



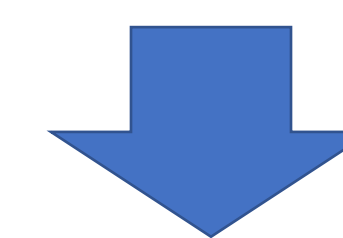
Figure 2. Image is from CNN Health. Reprinted in accordance with Fair Use guidelines.

## Process/Procedures

Collected media and cultural artifacts from the NFL and from investigations of players’ experiences (i.e., **Documentary: [League of Denial](#), [news reports](#), [NFL press conferences](#) and [press release material](#)**)



Conducted a qualitative analysis of league’s organizational and media practices



Results were described and analyzed using sociological theories to study the interrelationships between macro and micro social life (i.e., **[hegemony theory](#), [conflict theory](#)**)

## Results

- NFL personnel promoted misinformation about brain injury risk (eg, pamphlets claiming players are not at serious risk of brain injury).

### Claims by the NFL:

- “Current research with professional athletes has not shown that having more than one or two concussions leads to permanent problems if each injury is managed properly.”
- “The evidence is that our doctors are making excellent decisions. That’s proven by the six-year study that we have and the research that’s been done that looks at that issue intensively.”
- Key Point:** *The study was performed by the NFL itself, which makes it suspect of being biased. A trustworthy study should be from a neutral third party.*

## Results (continued)



Figure 3. Image is from PBS. Acquired from the public domain.

- Recurrent media practices, via glorified rhetoric, normalized over-conformity to a predominant sport ethic (eg, sacrifice physically, always strive to be better or risk being replaced).
- Made it easy for athletes to downplay personal risks to their well-being.
- These trends corresponded with several sociological concepts (eg, false consciousness, hegemonic power).

## Conclusion

- Organizational and media practices by the NFL culturally downplay or obscure the risk of brain deterioration from playing tackle football.
- Organizational and media practices by the NFL and others are a way to monetize conformity to a risky sport ethic.
- Overshadows actual brain injury risk, raising numerous ethical issues that impact the work of sport and exercise science professionals in football

## Relevance to the Discipline

- The NFL’s arbitrary behavior has revealed desperate need for deeper investigations within professional sports
- This study has brought the ethicality of sports medicine into question and the need for third-party researchers to study routine practices of sport science professionals within a capitalistic sport business