

Bill Would Ban Youth Tackle Football In Massachusetts. Polling Shows Voters May Support It

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Youth football players of the Dorchester Eagles perform drills during practice in August 2016. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

Football is deeply woven into the fabric of American life. From Friday night lights to "Monday Night Football," many of us gather together to watch players at every level of competition. And when the Patriots win the Super Bowl, [we flock to parades](#) by the hundreds of thousands to cheer their success.

But the chorus of concern over head injuries in football has grown louder, with kids' tackle football causing particular alarm.

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A new [proposal](#) on Beacon Hill [would ban](#) organized tackle football in Massachusetts through the seventh grade. Kids would still be allowed play flag or touch football, but youth tackle football would no longer be permitted, and organizers would risk stiff fines.

And though we love our football here in Massachusetts, the idea may have a receptive audience. In [a WBUR poll](#) taken in 2018, 75 percent of the state's registered voters said tackle football is unsafe for children

before high school, and about the same number said they would support government regulation of youth football aimed at reducing head injuries.

Even high school football was viewed with some skepticism in the poll, with 59 percent of voters calling it unsafe and more than 7 in 10 saying they would support for additional safety regulations. (The poll was taken more than a year ago, so opinions may have shifted.)

So far, these concerns have not brought about a negative reaction to the sport as a whole. Despite the concern about youth football, viewership of NFL games has yet to take a hit. In the WBUR poll, 91 percent of Massachusetts voters said news about head injuries had not changed the amount of pro football they'd watched. And support for added safety regulation was about the same between NFL fans and non-fans, meaning even those who love the game the most are OK with more government safety rules.

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The overall picture is a bit of a paradox: Americans love football and want to watch it, but they are increasingly nervous about their kids playing it. The number of kids playing tackle football [has declined](#) in recent years. Football isn't the only youth sport that can cause injuries. Many more young people in the U.S. play basketball or soccer, and have the injuries to prove it.

But football is still perceived as a more dangerous sport. An NBC News/Wall Street Journal [poll](#) last year found that 48 percent of Americans would encourage a child who wanted to play football to play a different sport due to concerns about concussions — an 8-point increase since 2014.

Whether the proposed Massachusetts law will get anywhere remains to be seen. But unless something can be done to assuage concerns about safety, the Friday night lights just may be dimming.