DO MLB UMPIRES EXPRESS RACIAL DISCRIMINATION WHEN CALLING PITCHES?

Despite past findings of racial discrimination, Dr. Brian Mills and colleagues find mixed evidence

Gainesville, FL – Dr. Brian Mills, Assistant Professor in the Department of Tourism, Recreation & Sport Management, along with Dr. Scott Tainsky (University of Illinois), and Dr. Jason Winfree (University of Michigan) recently published a paper in the *Journal of Sports Economics* entitled "Further Examination of Potential Discrimination Among MLB Umpires," revisiting past findings of racial discrimination in Major League Baseball. While using their own larger dataset, Mills and colleagues directly address the findings of Dr. Christopher Parsons, Dr. Johan Sulaeman, Dr. Michael Yates, and Dr. Daniel Hamermesh in their 2011 *American Economic Review* article “Strike Three: Discrimination, Incentives, and Evaluation.” The Parsons et al. study found that Major League Baseball umpires express their racial and ethnic preferences when they evaluate balls and strikes when they are not being closely monitored, whereas the work of Mills and colleagues found that claims of racial and ethnic discrimination among MLB umpires are not particularly robust. They found little evidence of racial bias in their dataset and note that the findings of Parsons et al. require further scrutiny.

The initial discrimination findings were quick to garner media attention, given the implications of such influential claims. Organizations such as Freakonomics.com, the *New York Times*, *Business Week*, *Time*, *USA Today*, and the Society for American Baseball Research all picked up the major findings in their sports news.

Mills’ study replicated the Parsons study using a number of regression models, alternative datasets, and evaluating particular claims in a number of different ways. The study looked at home and away games as well as both monitored and unmonitored games. The researchers were looking to see if the MLB umpires exhibit bias in favor of their own race or ethnicity when making snap decisions about the location of a pitch.

Prior to 2007, MLB umpires were only monitored about 50 percent of the time. Now, with improvements in technology, games shown on television with slow motion and replay capabilities, and QuesTec and Sportvision’s PITCHf/x, it is hard to find any pitch without such scrutiny. PITCHf/x has been installed in all 30 MLB stadiums and can track the trajectory of pitches. In their study, Mills’ team paid close attention to racial and ethnic classifications. For instance, someone who is Dominican with dark skin could be classified as Black based on visual characterization, but using a Hispanic identifier would be more appropriate. Therefore, any claim of racial discrimination could have detrimental effects to
the reputation of such a public group. At any given moment, there are up to fifteen baseball games being played at a time with the umpires working in four-man teams; the remaining umpires are considered alternates. Currently, there are 70-100 umpires that work in MLB and they generally make six figures (ranging from $120K - $350K), and undergo years of training before reaching that level. Thus, MLB has begun looking for ways to ensure that only the best umpires are making decisions in games with such high status using the technology at hand. Based on the latest findings of Mills and colleagues, they seem to be doing their jobs rather well behind the plate.

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