



Sports Fandom and Social Connection

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HKS: The Fandom and Social Connection Initiative

Introduction

The loneliness epidemic is a public health crisis in modern day America. Studies show that social connection is an essential component of good mental and physical health, yet, in 2025, a **majority** of US adults reported feelings of isolation (American Psychological Association). Sports fandom offers a unique way through which to remedy the connection recession. Fanbases bridge common divides such as partisanship, offering a space of mutual passion centered around favourite teams



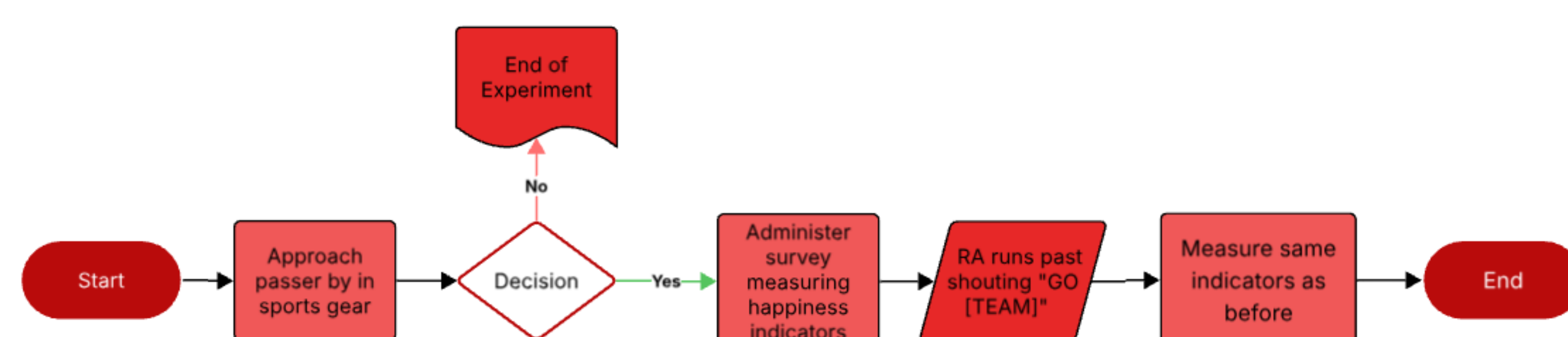
(Fandom and Social Connection Initiative, n.d.)

This summer the Fandom and Social Connection Initiative at Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy, investigated the ways in which we can harness shared sports fandom to help bridge the connection recession.

Methods

1. Sport gear surveying

- This experiment involved going out into Boston and approaching fans wearing sports gear, asking them to take a short survey. A researcher then ran past and shouted support for the team their gear advertised, we then measured changes in happiness, acceptance, etc.



2. Fox sports data analysis

- Our lab is partnered and funded by Fox Sports. We were given tens of thousands of data points to analyze related to sports fandom and relationships, fulfillment, happiness, etc. Analysis was conducted with R.

3. WooSox 'Greet your neighbor' experiment

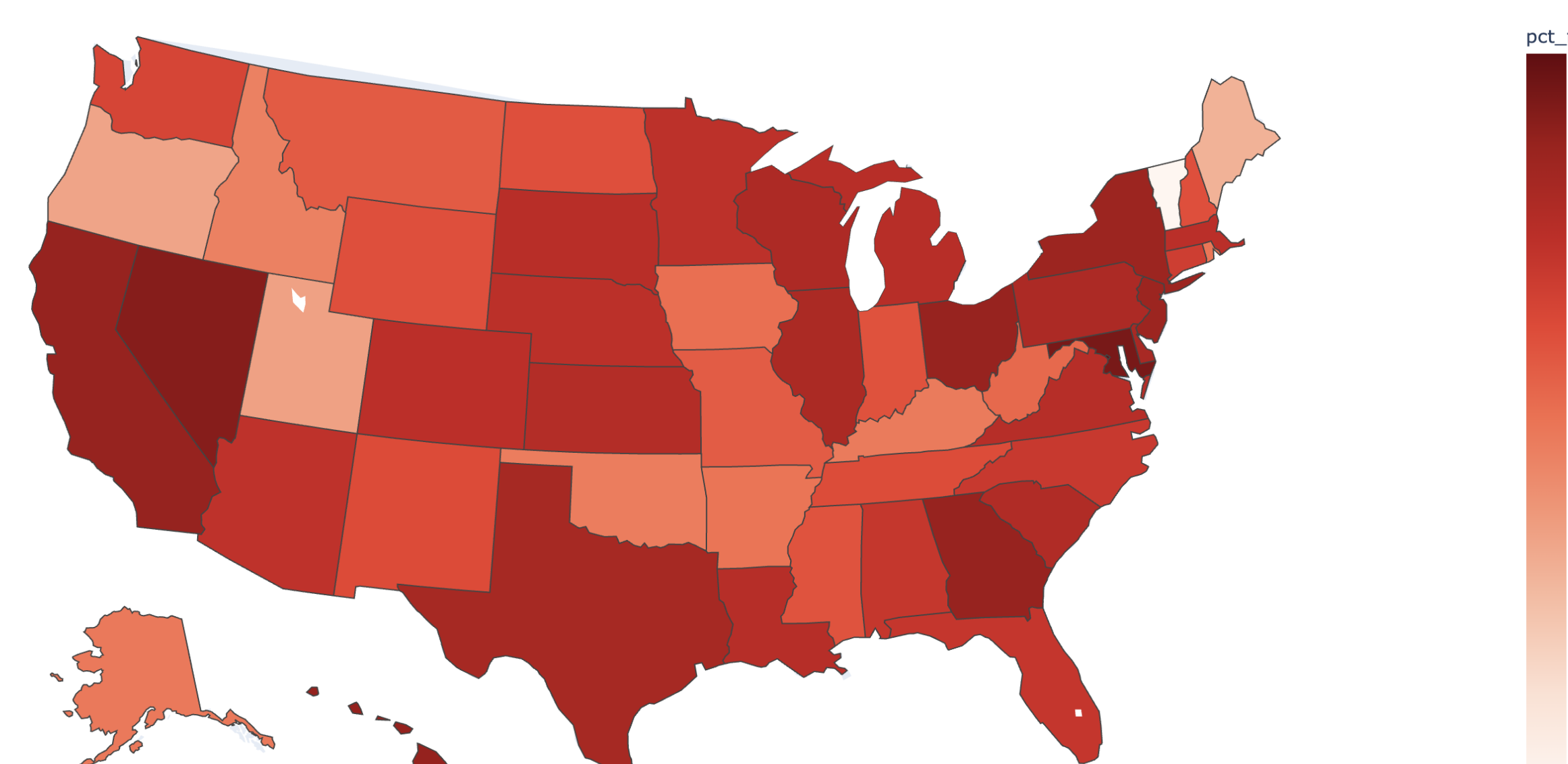
- We partnered with the Worcester WooSox (minor league baseball team) to administer a survey to fans via QR. This survey encouraged the treatment group to socialize then measured dependent variables such as happiness and belonging.

4. Present biased socializing

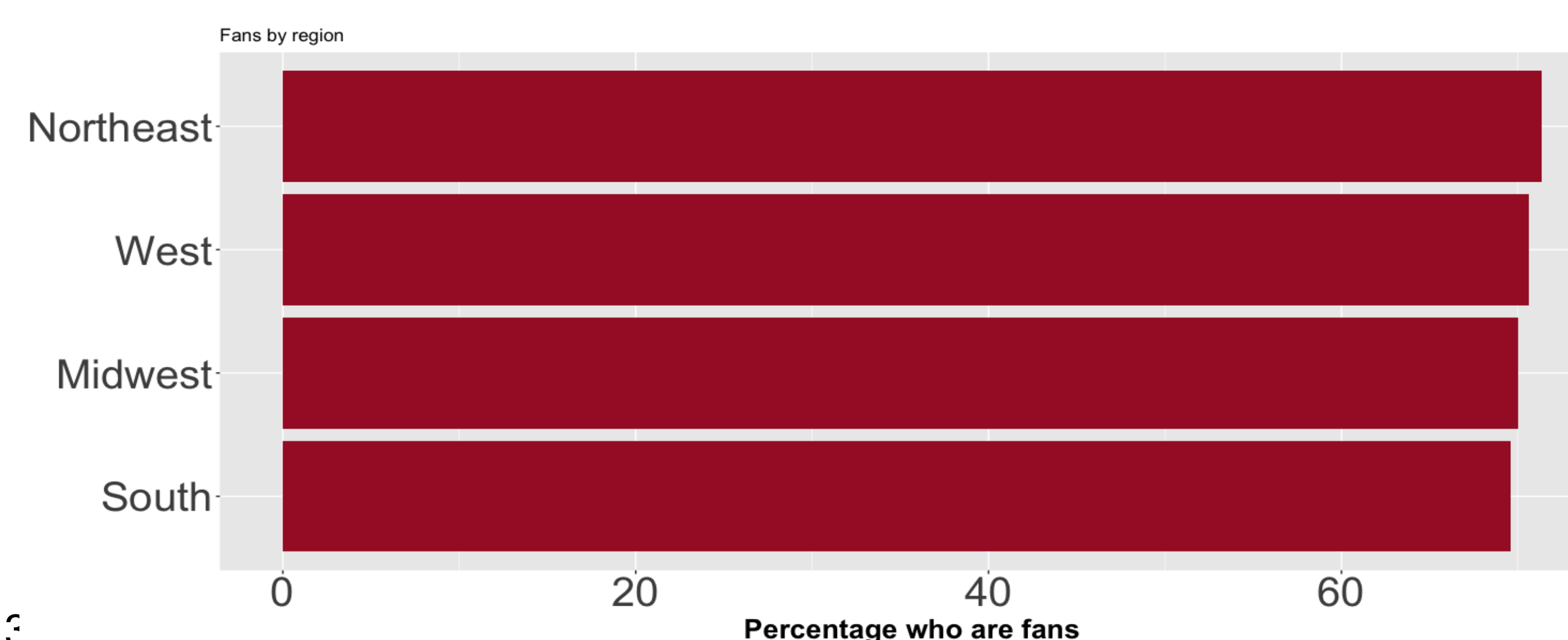
- This experiment was conducted with Harvard Summer School students to measure whether people 'put off' socializing in the present.

Results

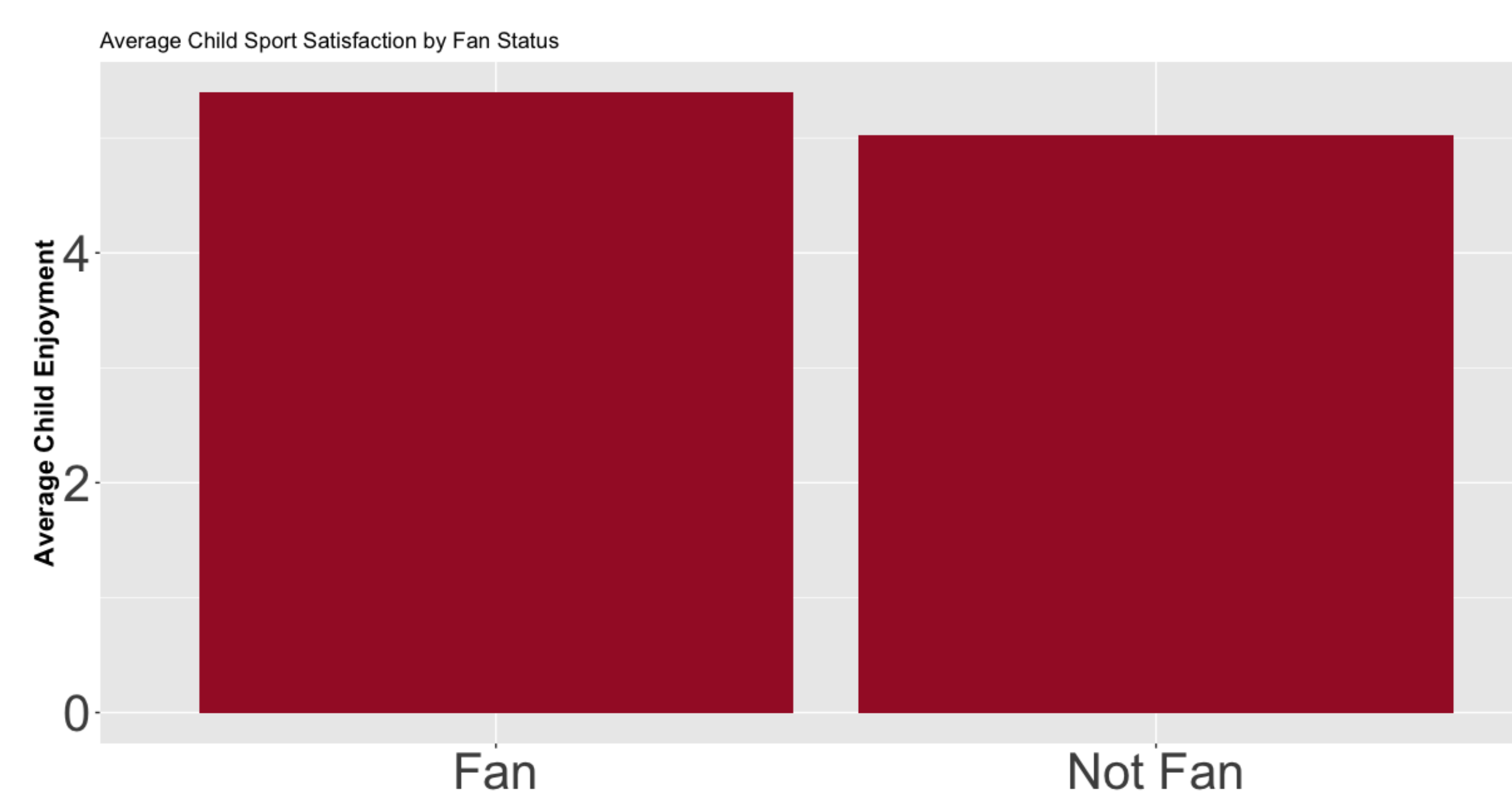
- An analysis of fandom by US state showed the District of Columbia to have the highest concentration of fans, and Vermont to have the lowest



- We found that across all regions in the US (Northeast, West, Midwest, South) fandom concentration was approximately evenly distributed



- that children of fans had a greater overall enjoyment participating in sports as compared to children of non-fans



Conclusions

Much of our analysis this summer helped to support our hypothesis that holding shared sports fandom can strengthen our social connections - thus making fandom a valuable tool for bridging the isolation gap that modern day America faces.

Sports Gear Surveying - after multiple pilot attempts, we found that we could not meet the required number of participants necessary. We iterated the experiment multiple times with different parameters to increase n - this was a valuable experience learning how we can adapt pilots to meet requirements.

All of our other experiments are still running and therefore we cannot draw tangible results from them yet.



Next Steps

For the Lab

The Sports Fandom and Connection Initiative has secured three years of funding. Current experiments such as present biased socializing, WooSox surveying, and data analysis will continue. There are also plans to continue with public engagement activities that bring people together through sports fandom and to study the effects of this on political polarization.

For Me

Next summer I will be taking the skills I learned from this placement and putting them into action as part of my Leadership in Action project for the Laidlaw Scholarship. This involves travelling internationally and partnering with an organization to apply my knowledge for social good. I am remain interested in social connection and hope to continue this theme in my project next summer.



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Acknowledgements

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References

American Psychological Association. "APA Poll Reveals a Nation Suffering from Stress of Societal Division, Loneliness." *American Psychological Association*, 6 Nov. 2025, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2025/11/nation-suffering-division-loneliness>. Accessed 28 July 2026.

Fandom and Social Connection Initiative. (n.d.). Fandom and Social Connection Initiative. <https://shorensteincenter.org/research-initiative/fandom-social-connection/>

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