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Competitive sport and social capital in rural Australia

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Abstract

Sport is often regarded as an important part of life in rural Australia, contributing to community identity, sense of place, social interaction and good health. The involvement of rural citizens in sport also has the potential to contribute to social capital. Understood in simple terms as norms of reciprocity and associational life, social capital is often regarded as a positive resource in rural areas. Drawing on a case study of the Northern Wheatbelt of Western Australia, this paper examines the links between sport and social capital in a rural region. In particular, it considers the ways in which sport acts as a vehicle for the creation and expression of social capital. The paper also considers the so-called darker side to social capital, and the extent to which this is evident in the Northern Wheatbelt. The paper shows that sport is an important arena for the creation and maintenance of social capital. However, it is also clear that this is being eroded as a result of wider processes of economic and social restructuring in rural Australia. The paper also points out that the social capital generated by sport is often fragile, and can lead to social exclusion and marginality for some residents.



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