

OPINION > COMMENTARY

Mark Mitchell: Here is the common thread among college athletes accused of fixing games



A shot goes in during practice at an NCAA men's basketball tournament game at Gainbridge Fieldhouse on March 21, 2024, in Indianapolis. (Andy Lyons/Getty)



By **MARK MITCHELL**

PUBLISHED: February 5, 2026 at 5:00 AM CST

The [recent federal indictments](#) on Jan. 15 accusing a large number of basketball players of throwing college games have predictably triggered indignation and outrage from fans, sports pundits and national news outlets. The dominant explanations are familiar: sports betting, greed and moral failure. Those narratives are emotionally satisfying — and incomplete. They focus almost entirely on what these athletes did and how it might affect all of college sports while largely ignoring where they came from.

Based on an ongoing research project, I decided to take a closer look at the high schools attended by the indicted players and the counties where they grew up. My examination of the counties where they played high school basketball reveals a significant commonality: Many of these players come from areas with very low rates of economic mobility. These are places where children born into low-income families face some of the weakest prospects in the country for ascending the income ladder. According to county-level mobility estimates developed by economists Raj Chetty at Harvard University and Nathaniel Hendren at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the average mobility ranking for the counties where these players grew up is near the bottom of the nationwide distribution of all counties.

Obviously, that fact does not excuse criminal conduct. Adults are responsible for their actions. But it should force a more complex question — one often avoided by the left and the right alike: Why do high-stakes failures — academic, disciplinary and now criminal — occur so persistently among talented young people from the same kinds of places?

My research co-authors, F. Andrew Hanssen at Clemson University and Maxwell Mitchell at Northwestern University, and I are studying this exact question in another context: elite high school football. Using data on more than 33,000 top-ranked recruits nationwide from 2005 to 2022, we examine which players transitioned smoothly to college football and which did not. All possess what economists would describe as unusually valuable human capital. Indeed, we estimate that elite football players in our dataset are roughly 60 times more likely to reach the NFL than typical high school players.

Nearly 1,000 of these elite players never made it onto a Division I roster due to academic or disciplinary issues. Yet every single one of these derailed players had a football scholarship from a major program. When we traced the origins of their derailment, the pattern was unmistakable. Derailed players disproportionately came from weak schools, poor neighborhoods and families with limited structure. And they also came from low-mobility counties; the aforementioned seminal research by Chetty and Hendren developed causal measures of county mobility across nearly all U.S. counties.

We found that two forces appear to operate simultaneously. First, in low-mobility counties, high school sports are often the only clear path to escape the neighborhood and move up in the world. Young people respond rationally, and these counties produce far more elite talent than their population alone would predict.

Second — and more consequential — the same environments systematically lack the institutional capacity to shepherd that talent into adulthood. Schools are less equipped to prepare students for college-level academics. Guidance is thinner. Eligibility rules are more complex to navigate. Family resources are stretched. The result is that numerous highly talented football players with extraordinary human capital get derailed. Everything they lived for becomes moot. Many of them seem to disappear from society and give up.

Looking at it this way, the recent basketball indictments make sense as part of a larger pattern rather than being isolated events. In environments where young people have few chances to recover from mistakes, those mistakes can be much more damaging, and the temptations can feel more overwhelming.

This is where the public conversation usually falls apart. One side keeps insisting tougher enforcement and punishment will fix everything. The other side counters that the honest answer is more government social programs and more funding. Both are missing the deeper issue: Many on the right treat these young athletes as lessons in failure, while many on the left seem convinced another round of bureaucracy can somehow make up for the family support, solid schools and community structure that were missing long before the trouble started.

I have a lot of compassion for these young men — not because they can't control themselves, but because they often deal with immense pressure and very little support. They're expected to juggle tricky academic requirements, meet eligibility requirements and face public scrutiny, usually without the support that their more fortunate peers receive. This mix of challenges can be really tough for them. It's tough when they're putting their all into becoming elite athletes — while carrying the weight of being their household's best hope for upward mobility.

Coaches and administrators know this. Many work tirelessly to support these players. But individual effort can go only so far. What our research — and the growing body of work it builds on — shows is that these outcomes are not random, and they are not merely moral failures. They are the predictable result of growing up in places that lack the institutions needed to guide these young people's talent into adulthood.

I don't pretend to have a clean policy fix. But if we're serious about preventing the next round of scandals, we might start by admitting that another integrity seminar or another layer of paperwork is not a substitute for the support these young people never had in the first place.

Mark Mitchell is an adjunct professor of finance at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business and founding principal at AQR Arbitrage.

Submit a letter, of no more than 400 words, to the editor [here](#) or email letters@chicagotribune.com.

2026 > February > 5