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# SAFEGUARDING AMATEUR ATHLETES AN EXAMINATION OF PLAYER WELFARE AMONG SENIOR INTER-COUNTY GAELIC PLAYERS

ELISH KELLY, CONOR KEEGAN AND BRENDAN WALSH



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## **GAA FOREWORD**

I want to thank the ESRI for the work that has been undertaken in the compilation of this report.

There is a significant amount of time invested and commitment made by our inter-county players. Previous feedback from the playing population was extremely useful and, likewise, this report will assist our approach to player welfare on and off the field.

The work that the GAA has embarked upon around altering the Fixtures Calendar and also the launch of the Talent Academy and Player Development Report can have far-reaching positive implications for the Association and for players at every level of the GAA – both club and county.

The amateur status of the GAA is sacrosanct but, within that, supporting the talented young people who play our games at the highest level is a worthwhile investment.

Seán Ó hÓráin  
Uachtarán  
Cumann Lúthchleas Gael

## GPA FOREWORD

The Gaelic Players Association is the officially recognised representative body for inter-county players, with a membership of 2,300 current players and an ever-growing number of past players. Our purpose is three-fold; to **represent** our members' interests, to protect their **welfare** and to support their **development**. We operate a comprehensive Player Development Programme, supporting players with their education, careers, health, life skills and welfare.

As such we were happy to jointly commission the ESRI Report *Playing Senior Inter-County Gaelic Games: Experiences, Realities and Consequences* with the GAA, which was published last year. The report validated much of what we see on an ongoing basis through our interaction with our members and its impact reinforced the need for a strong and independent voice for inter-county players as they strive to achieve a balance between their playing careers and their personal and work/study lives.

As a result of the 2018 report, a joint GAA/GPA committee was formed and an action plan is already being implemented. Actions already taken include the inaugural GPA Balance 2020 conference focusing on coach education; the establishment of the Fixtures Review Taskforce which has recently published its recommendations; and ongoing work to bring concrete proposals to ensure minimum standards of medical care are provided to inter-county squads.

We welcome the decision by the ESRI to revisit the data they collected in 2017 from 2016 inter-county squads in this report. It again underlines the need for a robust range of player development supports from the GPA. It shows us there is a growing need for more education and information for players about their roles and responsibilities as inter-county players, particularly around supplement usage, alcohol consumption and gambling.

Encouragingly, our own research tells us that players who are actively engaged in their own personal development through GPA programmes are less likely to engage in risky behaviours in these areas, and benefit from a better-balanced lifestyle.

The findings under the key themes of Educational Experience and Educational Choices will prove to be a valuable resource. We can now look at the numbers behind the impact of the choices players make when it comes to education on future career earnings.

For example, players spoke about career progression being 'limited/stalled/put on hold' because of their inter-county commitments. As we strive for a modern form of sustainable amateurism where players understand the importance of their career outside of the game, this information is hugely beneficial.

We look forward to engaging with the GAA constructively to ensure we continue to deliver for GPA members based on the facts as set out in this report and those from the report published last year, and again, we thank the players for engaging with the ESRI as they carried out the research.

Paul Flynn  
CEO  
Gaelic Players Association

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AFL	Australian Football League
AUDIT-C	Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test – Consumption
ASADA	Australian Sports Anti-Doping Agency
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCU	Dublin City University
EHECS	Earnings, Hours and Employment Costs Survey
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
GPA	Gaelic Players Association
HIS	Healthy Ireland Survey
IHS	Irish Health Survey
LSI	Leaving School in Ireland
NUIG	National University of Ireland Galway
NUIM	National University of Ireland Maynooth
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
SI	Sport Ireland
SILC	Survey on Income and Living Conditions
SSICP	Survey of Senior Inter-County Players
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
UCC	University College Cork
UCD	University College Dublin

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### RESEARCH CONTEXT AND APPROACH

Following the publication of research into the commitments required of male Gaelic players to play senior inter-county, and knock-on effects of inter-county commitment (Kelly et al., 2018), the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and Gaelic Players Association (GPA) established a working group to make an in-depth analysis of the report's findings. One of the decisions taken by the working group was that further research was required to examine a range of issues that emerged from the original study. These included in particular: (i) the education and (ii) the professional career experiences of senior inter-county players, (iii) their engagement in risky behaviours (e.g. alcohol consumption), (iv) supplement usage, (v) players' views on both provided and required supports, and (vi) what they would change about their experience of playing inter-county and the inter-county set-up.

The GAA and GPA jointly commissioned the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) to conduct an independent examination of these issues. The purpose of the research is to assist the two associations to understand players' commitments and what players need and expect regarding player welfare services. Specifically, what supports, structures and systems are required to assist players to manage their professional and personal lives while playing senior inter-county sports?

The research was primarily conducted using data from the Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016). Some of the examinations undertaken in the current report were supplemented with analysis of other data sources that allowed for comparison of senior inter-county player characteristics (e.g. educational attainment, occupation), decisions around education/professional careers and behaviours (e.g. alcohol consumption) with the general population of similar age.

### MAIN FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

#### Education experiences

Inter-county players are highly educated: 61 per cent have at least a degree compared to 35 per cent of the general male population of the same age.

'Education' and 'arts and humanities' are the main third-level courses pursued by inter-county players.

The impact that playing inter-county is having on players' education experiences needs attention. Over 80 per cent of players said that they had difficulty balancing

the demands of studying and playing during their education course; 16 per cent either dropped out of a course or had to repeat a year; and 80 per cent missed college lectures/classes/labs.

Over one quarter of players chose their career path on leaving second-level education based on their being able to play inter-county.

Over 40 per cent of players indicated that they would not select the same post-second-level career pathway again. This rises to over 50 per cent among players that selected their post-second-level pathway to enable them to play inter-county.

### **Professional career**

The study highlights that inter-county play impacts players' professional career and is another area that warrants further attention.

Some players are selecting sectors of employment with lower levels of working hours, namely those that enter public sector jobs, with 'education' being the main public sector sub-sector in which players are employed. While this may assist players to meet the demands required to play senior inter-county, the research revealed that there is a trade-off in terms of earnings.

### **Risky behaviours**

The research found that relative to a comparator group of males from the general population, frequency of alcohol consumption tended to be lower among senior inter-county players. However, there was substantial variation across the season, with drinking much more likely during pre-season and, particularly, the off-season.

Furthermore, when alcohol consumption did take place, the study highlighted that players consumed higher quantities relative to the general male population of similar age. Again, this is particularly the case during pre-season and the off-season.

The research indicates that three out of four senior inter-county players engage in potentially hazardous drinking (as measured by AUDIT-C screening scores) during pre-season, rising to nine out of ten during the off-season. These high proportions of hazardous levels of drinking are a particular concern when considering the consequent harmful effects of alcohol misuse. Further research is required to understand the underlying mechanisms driving these observed patterns in alcohol consumption.

There is some evidence, based on respondents' perceptions of teammates' behaviours, that gambling may be common among senior inter-county players.

The research also revealed that perceptions of teammates' engagement in illicit drug use appear low. Nevertheless, players believe that almost a fifth of their teammates engage in this risky behaviour on a monthly basis.

How participation in senior inter-county Gaelic games may relate to risky behaviours such as these represents an important policy area for further research.

### **Supplement use**

Most players took supplements, with the rate being higher for footballers and for players playing at higher levels of competition.

Recommendation by the team was the most common reason given by players for taking supplements. However, the research also revealed that many players sourced their supplements from outside of the inter-county set-up.

The research found that while teams recommended supplement use, only just over half of players stated that supplement intake was monitored within their county set up.

Almost all players indicated that they saw anti-doping testing and compliance as important to protecting the integrity of Gaelic games. However, many players were not satisfied with the information provided about anti-doping testing and compliance.

### **Provided and required supports**

The research highlights that the timing of when Player Charter supports are provided to players, particularly to teams in the lower playing levels, is an issue that needs further attention, especially the payment for expenses and provision of gear.

The study also finds that satisfaction with the way a player's code (football/hurling) is treated by their County Board, in terms of access to pitches, meals, gear, etc., compared to the other code in their county is lower among teams in the lower playing levels. This issue will also undoubtedly impact players' welfare and, therefore, needs further attention.

The research found that there was agreement among a large percentage of players that their inter-county manager actively encouraged balance between playing inter-county and players' personal, social and professional lives. However, this finding did not necessarily tally with some of the other results in the study around the percentages of players missing lectures/classes/ labs and work because of their inter-county commitments. Given these seemingly contradictory results, this is an

issue that warrants further research, particularly if the governing bodies intend to develop and implement effective policies to address the inter-county time commitment issue. The underlying drivers of the levels of commitment (e.g. management teams, the expansion in backroom team personnel, players' own sporting aspirations) need to be deciphered first.

The research indicates that the two key areas that players would like to receive additional support with in playing senior inter-county are their 'professional career' and 'keeping their inter-county participation in perspective'. Some of the other findings from the research could be used to assist in addressing these two matters.

### **Changes to inter-county experience and set-up**

The research found that the length of the playing season and the time commitments involved in the games, including travel time, are the two main factors that players would change about their inter-county experience. Some of the other main areas that players would change are the reintroduction of enjoyment and fun into the games; a reduction in the amount of training and to play more matches; and to have more personal time.

The research indicates that most of the issues that players would change about the inter-county set-up are under the remit of either the inter-county management team or the players' County-Boards.

Some of the other main changes to the inter-county set-up that were identified in the research are amendments to competition structures, having a more level playing field in the games, and distinct time for club and county.

### **CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

The research in the current study has shown that although the inter-county games are amateur sports, many players are allowing them to dictate their career path: just over a quarter of players stated that a job or education/training course that facilitated them to play inter-county was the most important factor that determined what they did when they left second-level education, with this percentage higher among the top-tier players. This, at least, was the situation for 2016 players. The intensity and depth of players' commitments to the inter-county game may have increased since these data were gathered in 2016, and this should be borne in mind when considering this finding, and also the other findings that have emerged from the study. If the commitments associated with playing the senior inter-county games continue to intensify, demands may be higher now and may continue to rise in the future.

The study highlighted that there are effects on players' professional careers from the commitment levels required to play inter-county, mainly via lower earnings. The large percentages of players studying 'education' and 'arts and humanities' in third level, and further work in the 'education' sector, are contributing to this finding. Based on the research, one of the main channels through which this is taking place is players working fewer hours. The research suggests that another contributing factor to players' lower earnings relative to their non-playing peers is their promotion prospects. This is particularly the case for players in the lower playing levels in both football and hurling.

While the percentage of players reporting alcohol consumption is similar to males of similar age in the general population, when alcohol is consumed players are drinking higher quantities. This is particularly the case during the pre-season and off-season. Might the way that the inter-county games are currently being played – the high commitment levels with very little downtime (Kelly et al., 2018) – be contributing to this risky behaviour among players? This is an issue that warrants further attention.

Supplements are now an integral part of players' nutrition and are recommended by teams. However, many players are sourcing their supplements from outside of the inter-county set-up, and only 56 per cent of players indicated in the research that supplement use is monitored within their team. This is an area that needs attention to ensure that the correct supplements are being consumed, and consumed correctly.

Another key issue emerging from the research is inequalities across the playing levels in both the effects of playing inter-county and the treatment of inter-county players with regard to Player Charter and County Board supports. Although one might expect no distinction by playing level with regard to these matters in an amateur sport, lower-tier counties appear to be bearing the brunt of these issues.

The two key areas that players would like to receive support with in assisting them to play inter-county are their 'professional career' and 'how to keep their inter-county participation in perspective' (i.e. there is more to life than just playing inter-county). Some of the other findings from this study could be utilised to address these two matters. In particular, the main issues that the research found that players would like to change about their inter-county experience are: a reduction in the length of the playing season, less time commitment, and the reintroduction of enjoyment into the games. If policies were implemented by the national governing bodies to address these issues, they might prevent some of the education and professional career experience issues identified in the research from emerging for future generations of players.



Ultimately, unless the drivers that are giving rise to the current inter-county commitment levels required from players are identified and addressed, the knock-on education, professional career and other effects identified in this study are likely to be amplified among future generations of players. One needs to bear in mind at all times that this is in the context of Gaelic games being amateur sports.

## MAIN FINDINGS

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### CHAPTER 2 POST-SECONDARY SCHOOL PATHWAYS AND EDUCATION EXPERIENCES

- Senior inter-county players are highly educated individuals: 61 per cent have a degree or higher qualification compared to 35 per cent of the general male population of the same age.
- For over a quarter of players (26 per cent), the most important factor that influenced what they did on leaving second-level education was selecting a job or education/training course that would facilitate them to play inter-county.
- Being able to play inter-county was a slightly bigger influencing factor on the post-second-level education career decisions of Division 1 footballers (32 per cent) and MacCarthy Cup hurlers (34 per cent).
- Just over 41 per cent of players indicated that they would not select the same post-second-level career pathway again.
- Levels of discontentment about their chosen post-second-level career path were higher among older players (49 per cent), among those that selected their post-second-level pathway to enable them to play inter-county (52 per cent), and among inter-county players compared to their non-playing peers of similar age (36 per cent).
- ‘Education’ was by far the most popular third-level field of study among inter-county players: 26 per cent pursued this course compared to only 4 per cent of males of similar age in the general population.
- ‘Arts and humanities’ (19 per cent) and ‘health and welfare’ (12 per cent) are two other fields of study that players are over-represented in compared to the general male population of the same age (8 and 4 per cent respectively).
- Of the players that selected their post-second-level pathway to enable them to play inter-county, 34 per cent chose to study ‘education’, with very few selecting to study STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) courses.
- Seventeen per cent of players that undertook more than one full-time further or higher education course indicated that their decision to return to education to pursue a different course was taken to enable them to play inter-county.
- Eighty-one per cent of players indicated that they had difficulty balancing the demands of studying and playing during their education course. This issue was slightly bigger among footballers (83 per cent) compared to hurlers (78 per cent).
- Sixteen per cent of players either dropped out of a course or had to repeat a year because of the demands of playing inter-county.

- Eighty per cent of players indicated that they missed college lectures/classes/labs because of their inter-county commitments: this was slightly higher among footballers (83 per cent) compared to hurlers (76 per cent).
- Twenty-nine per cent of players strongly agreed/agreed that their inter-county and/or college football/hurling commitments contributed to them failing one or more of their exams; 37 per cent strongly agreed/agreed that these sporting commitments contributed to them performing poorly in their course.

### **CHAPTER 3 PROFESSIONAL CAREER EXPERIENCES AND DECISIONS**

- Of the players whose main economic status is employment, 95 per cent are employees and 5 per cent are self-employed. This compares to 90 and 10 per cent respectively among the general male population of the same age.
- Most players work full-time: 93 per cent, and this compares with 88 per cent among their non-playing peers.
- Most players are 'professionals' (42 per cent) or 'associate professionals' (24 per cent).
- Compared to the general male population of the same age, players are under-represented in 'skilled trades' (11 per cent compared to 18 per cent) and 'sales and customer services' (5 per cent compared to 11 per cent) occupations.
- A larger percentage of players work in the public sector compared to males of similar age in the general population (32 per cent compared to 9 per cent) and, in particular, in the education sector (23 per cent of players).
- Players working in the public sector work fewer hours per week compared to their playing counterparts in the private sector (35 hours compared to 40 hours); and also compared to males of similar age in the general population that work in the public sector (39 hours).
- When compared to the general male population of the same age, players' median net weekly income is €13 more: €500 compared to €487.
- Players working in the private sector have higher median net weekly earnings: €500 compared to €480 for the general male population of the same age. However, players working in the public sector earn less (€500 compared to €588 for their non-playing counterparts that work in the public sector), as do those working full-time (€500 compared to €525) and those with a degree or higher education qualification (€500 compared to €637).
- Thirty-nine per cent of players that held a job during the 2016 season strongly agreed/agreed that their ability to play senior inter-county was an important factor in the decision to take the job that they were in. This was 50 per cent among Division 1 footballers and 35–38 per cent among players in the football divisions below this. It was

higher among MacCarthy Cup hurlers (48 per cent) compared to players in the lower-level hurling competitions.

- Seventy-one per cent of MacCarthy Cup hurlers indicated that being an inter-county player helped them to get their job. This was only 49 per cent among hurlers in the lower playing levels.
- Sixty-two per cent of Division 1 footballers were of the view that being an inter-county player help them to get their job. Again, this percentage was lower among players in the lower divisions (51 per cent).
- Job turnover between 2016 and 2017 was higher among inter-county players (20 per cent) compared to the general male population of the same age (10 per cent).
- The main reason players changed job between 2016 and 2017 was that it was the end of a temporary contract/made redundant/dismissed (26 per cent).
- Fourteen per cent of players changed job between 2016 and 2017 because they found it too difficult to combine their job with their inter-county commitments.
- Thirty per cent of players felt that being an inter-county player had negatively impacted their earnings. This was higher among MacCarthy Cup hurlers (30 per cent) compared to players in the lower hurling grades (23 per cent). In relation to footballers, a slightly higher percentage of players in the lower football divisions held this view (36 per cent) compared to Division 1 players (31 per cent).
- Twenty per cent of players were of the view that being an inter-county player negatively impacted their promotion prospects. This was higher among players aged 31 and above (30 per cent).
- A bigger percentage of Division 1 footballers and MacCarthy Cup hurlers were of the view that being an inter-county player had a positive impact on their promotion prospects: 30 and 26 per cent respectively compared to only 16 per cent among players in the lower football and hurling divisions.
- Sixty-six per cent of 2016 players indicated that they missed work because of their inter-county commitments. This was much higher among both Division 1 footballers (79 per cent) and MacCarthy Cup hurlers (75 per cent) compared to players in the other playing levels.

#### **CHAPTER 4 ENGAGEMENT IN SELF-REPORTED RISKY BEHAVIOUR**

- Eighty-nine per cent of 2016 players reported alcohol consumption, which was similar to a comparative group of males in the general population (87 per cent).
- The proportions of players consuming alcohol did not vary greatly by age.

- Compared to the general population, apart from those aged 22–25, senior inter-county players were more likely to report alcohol consumption across all age categories (18–21, 26–30 and 31 and above).
- Among 2016 footballers, those competing at the most elite level (Division 1) were less likely to self-report alcohol consumption (85 per cent). The proportion of players reporting alcohol consumption rose linearly among the lower playing levels: 87 per cent of Division 2 players, 91 per cent of Division 3 players and 95 per cent of Division 4 players.
- For 2016 hurlers, the opposite relationship between alcohol consumption and playing level was observed. The proportion of players reporting alcohol consumption was highest among MacCarthy Cup hurlers (91 per cent) and then fell gradually by hurling grade: 88 per cent of Christy Ring hurlers, 86 per cent of Nicky Rackard players and 85 per cent of Lory Meagher players.
- Frequency of alcohol consumption among players varies across the stages of the season: it was lowest during the Championship and National League for 2016 players, and then increased markedly during the pre-season and, in particular, the off-season. For example, only 1 per cent of players reported drinking once a week during the Championship. This rose to 5 per cent during the National League, 14 per cent during the pre-season and 30 per cent during the off season. These figures compare with 21 per cent of the general male population of the same age reporting drinking once a week.
- The average number of standard drinks consumed by a 2016 inter-county player on a typical drinking day was lowest during the National League (8.5 drinks<sup>1</sup>) and Championship (8.9 drinks). It increased during the pre-season (9.7 drinks) and was highest during the off-season (11.4 drinks). Across all stages of the season, the average number of standard alcoholic drinks consumed by players was higher compared to the general male population of similar age (8.2 drinks).
- The proportion of 2016 players that engaged in binge-drinking (6 or more standard alcoholic drinks on one occasion) was lowest during the Championship (48 per cent) and National League (56 per cent) and higher during the pre-season (73 per cent) and off-season (88 per cent). The percentage of the general male population of the same age as players that engage in binge-drinking is 66 per cent.
- Most players that consume alcohol binge-drink between 2 and 11 times a year (52 per cent).
- Less than 3 per cent of 2016 players who consume alcohol reported binge-drinking once a week in comparison to 20 per cent in the general population.
- AUDIT-C scores, which assess potential hazardous and harmful drinking patterns, for 2016 players were above 5 (an indicator of problem drinking) on average in both the pre-season

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<sup>1</sup> A standard drink of alcohol is a half pint or a glass of beer, lager or cider; a small glass of wine; or a single measure of spirits.

(5.8) and off-season (6.8) and below 5 during the Championship (3.9) and National League (4.6).

- The mean AUDIT-C score for the general male population of the same age as players was 6.6, which is similar to the off-season score for players.
- Ninety-one per cent of 2016 players who consume alcohol recorded an AUDIT-C score of 5 or above during the off-season. This fell to 47 per cent during the Championship. Among the general male population of the same age, 80 per cent recorded an AUDIT-C score of 5 or above.
- Risky drinking behaviour, as measured by the AUDIT -C score, did not vary noticeably by playing level.
- Eighty per cent of 2016 players believe that their teammates engage in gambling on either a daily or a weekly basis.
- Seventy-seven per cent of players believe that their teammates do not engage in recreational drug use.

## **CHAPTER 5 DIET, SUPPLEMENT USAGE AND ANTI-DOPING TESTING**

- Sixty per cent of 2016 players' diet/nutrition intake was monitored within their inter-county set-up.
- Diet/nutrition intake monitoring was highest among Division 3 (80 per cent) and Division 1 (73 per cent) footballers, and MacCarthy Cup hurlers (89 per cent). It was very low among the lower hurling grades (Christy Ring, Lory Meagher and Nicky Rackard).
- Most players were very satisfied (41 per cent) or somewhat satisfied (30 per cent) with their post-training/match meals, but there was variation across playing levels.
- Those in the top tiers in both football and hurling were the most satisfied with their post-training/match meals, with those in the lower levels less so (Division 4 footballers and Nicky Rackard and Lory Meagher hurlers).
- Seventy-eight per cent of players whose diet/nutrition intake is monitored reported being satisfied with their post -training/match meals: this compares with 60 per cent of players that are not monitored.
- Ninety-two per cent of 2016 players had ever taken supplements. The figure was higher among footballers (97 per cent) than hurlers (88 per cent).
- During the 2016 season, 82 per cent of players took supplements. Again, this was higher among footballers: 87 per cent compared to 76 per cent of hurlers.
- Supplement use during the 2016 season was highest among Division 3 (92 per cent) and Division 1 (90 per cent) of footballers, and lowest among Division 4 (81 per cent) players.

- Eighty-four per cent of MacCarthy Cup hurlers took supplements during the 2016 season, compared to only 49 per cent of Lory Meagher players.
- Eighty-one per cent of players that took supplements during the 2016 season were recommended to do so by their team.
- A large percentage of players sourced their supplements outside their team; 32 per cent of players sourced their supplements from the internet or other people.
- Eighty-five per cent of players saw anti-doping testing and compliance as important to protecting the integrity of Gaelic games.
- Twenty-three per cent of players were ever tested for doping, with 35 per cent of players aged 31+ ever tested.
- Fifty-nine per cent of players were very or somewhat satisfied with the information provided about anti-doping testing and compliance.

## **CHAPTER 6 PLAYERS' VIEWS ON PROVIDED AND REQUIRED SUPPORTS**

- Forty-six per cent of 2016 players indicated that they were very/somewhat satisfied with the level of expenses that they received. This compares with 38 per cent being very/somewhat dissatisfied.
- Fifty-nine per cent of players were very/somewhat dissatisfied with the timing of when expenses are paid.
- A larger percentage of Division 3 and 4 footballers (82 and 60 per cent respectively) were very/somewhat dissatisfied with the timing of when their expenses were paid, as were Nicky Rackard and Lory Meagher hurlers (77 and 72 per cent respectively).
- Over two-thirds of players were satisfied with the gear that was provided to them under the Player Charter. However, this was lower among Division 4 footballers (57 per cent) and Lory Meagher hurlers (52 per cent).
- Almost half of players were very/somewhat dissatisfied with the timing of when gear is provided. This was a bigger issue among Division 3 (60 per cent) and Division 4 (48 per cent) footballers, and Lory Meagher (76 per cent) and Christy Ring (62 per cent) hurlers.
- Forty-five per cent of players indicated that they were very/somewhat satisfied with the support that their code received from the County Board in comparison to the other code in the county. However, the percentage that was very/somewhat dissatisfied was only marginally less than this (41 per cent).
- The percentage of players that were very/somewhat dissatisfied with how their code was treated by the County Board in comparison to the other code in their county was much higher among Division 4 and 3 footballers (44 and 33 per cent respectively), and Christy Ring (76 per cent), Nicky Rackard (78 per cent) and Lory Meagher (94 per cent) hurlers.

- Two-thirds of 2016 players strongly agreed that their inter-county manager actively promoted the best interests of the team. This percentage was lower among players aged 31 and above (57 per cent compared to 66/67 per cent for the other age cohorts).
- Quite a large percentage of players felt that their manager was only concerned about their ability to perform on the pitch: 31 strongly agreed/agreed with this, with 27 per cent somewhat agreeing.
- Sixty-three per cent of players strongly agreed/agreed/somewhat agreed that their inter-county manager actively encouraged balance between playing inter-county and players' personal, social and professional lives.
- Forty-one per cent of players strongly disagreed/disagreed that that their team manager dictated all aspects of their lives, on and off the pitch. Only 16 per cent of players strongly agreed/agreed with this statement.
- The two key areas that 2016 players identified that they would like to receive additional support with in playing inter-county was 'how to progress professional career (work, education)' (69 per cent), and 'keeping our inter-county participation in perspective (i.e., there is more to life than just playing inter-county)' (69 per cent).
- The other main areas that players would like to receive additional support/help with were: emotional or mental health difficulties (55 per cent); preparing for life after inter-county (51 per cent); and the long-term consequences of Gaelic game-related injuries (including concussion) (49 per cent).

## **CHAPTER 7 CHANGES PLAYERS WOULD MAKE TO INTER-COUNTY EXPERIENCE AND SET-UP**

- The five highest ranked items that 2016 players would change about their inter-county experience were: (i) the length of the season; (ii) the time commitment involved, including travel time; (iii) the lack of enjoyment in the games at present; (iv) the amount of training and games; and (v) personal time.
- The five highest placed items that players would change about their inter-county set-up were: (i) management team matters; (ii) County Board matters; (iii) the length of the season; (iv) the time commitment involved, including travel; and (v) more matches.





# CHAPTER 1

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## Introduction

### 1.1 CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

Following the publication of research that examined the commitments required by male Gaelic players to play senior inter-county, and knock-on effects (Kelly et al., 2018), the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and Gaelic Players Association (GPA) established a working group to make a more in-depth analysis of the report's findings.<sup>2</sup> On foot of that work, this group decided that further research was required to investigate in more detail a number of issues that emerged from the original study.

### 1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

Following this recommendation from the working group, the GAA and GPA jointly commissioned the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) to conduct an independent examination of the following issues:

1. post-secondary school pathway and education experiences of senior inter-county players;
2. professional career experiences and decisions;
3. engagement in risky behaviours (e.g. alcohol consumption);
4. players' nutrition and supplement usage;
5. players' views on both provided and required supports;
6. what they would change about their experience of playing senior inter-county and the set-up.

The analysis presented in this report is based on 2016 senior inter-county players. The purpose of the research is to assist the two associations to understand what players need and expect regarding player welfare services. Specifically, what supports, structures and systems are required to assist them to manage their professional and personal lives while playing senior inter-county Gaelic games?

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<sup>2</sup> Female players are not covered in this research, or the previous study (Kelly et al., 2018), as they are governed by separate associations: camogie by the Camogie Association of Ireland (CAI) and ladies' Gaelic football by the Ladies Gaelic Football Association (LGFA). The Women's Gaelic Players Association (WGPA) is the player welfare body for female players.

### 1.3 DATA AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted using data from the Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016). For the initial study that examined the commitments required to play senior inter-county (Kelly et al., 2018), the SSICP-2016 was designed and administered to all 2016 players. The survey fieldwork took place between May and August 2017. As can be seen from Table 1.1, a total of 1,037 players completed the SSICP-2016. This gave a response rate of 54 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

TABLE 1.1 SURVEY OF SENIOR INTER-COUNTY PLAYERS 2016 (SSICP-2016): SURVEY RESPONSE OVERVIEW

	Number	Response rate (%)
<b>Full population of 2016 senior inter-county players</b>	<b>1,947</b>	
Chose not to participate in research	1	
Completed pilot questionnaire	14	
<b>Administered final version of questionnaire</b>	<b>1,932</b>	
Completed questionnaire in full	993	
Completed questionnaire partially	44	
<b>Total for analysis</b>	<b>1,037</b>	<b>53.7</b>

Source: Authors' own calculations.

Given that not all players completed the SSICP-2016, a weight variable was created using 2016 GPA player population data and other data collected during the course of the initial research.<sup>4</sup> This weight variable has been applied to all the analyses conducted in the report to ensure that the results are representative of all 2016 senior inter-county players. It is important to note, however, that the results are based solely on the players that succeeded in making it into one of the 2016 inter-county panels, and not on other players that might have made similar choices around their education or professional career to try to reach or sustain inter-county-level participation but were not successful in doing so (e.g. players dropped after the provincial or National League competitions<sup>5</sup>).

For most of the SSICP-2016 variables, there is very little item non-response. More detailed information on the SSICP-2016 can be found in Kelly et al. (2018).

<sup>3</sup> The response rates by code and playing level can be found in Appendix Table B.3.1 in Kelly et al. (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Identification of 2016 players that ceased playing in 2017.

<sup>5</sup> See Kelly et al. (2018) for further information on these two competitions.

While the SSICP-2016 is the main data source used in this report, some of the examinations in Chapters 2 to 4 are supplemented by analysis of other data sources that allow for comparison of senior inter-county player characteristics (e.g. educational attainment, occupation) and decisions around education/professional careers and behaviours (e.g. alcohol consumption) with the general male population of similar age. Specifically, Census 2016, Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Learners survey, Leaving School in Ireland (LSI) longitudinal study, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) and Healthy Ireland Survey (HIS) data were utilised. These additional sources allow for results presented in this report to be understood in the context of non-inter-county peers.

The analysis is descriptive in nature and focuses on *all* senior inter-county players. However, some of the examinations are also broken down by the two inter-county Gaelic games, Gaelic football and hurling: these are referred to as the player's 'code' in the report. We also conduct some of the analyses by age group (ages 18–21, 22–25, 26–30 and 31 and above) and playing level. Playing level is identified using the 2016 National League structure for Gaelic footballers and the Championship cup structure for hurlers. There are four football divisions (Divisions 1 to 4). There are five hurling Championship cups, but the analysis in this report is based on four (the MacCarthy Cup, Christy Ring Cup, Nicky Rackard Cup and Lory Meagher Cup) as the fifth competition (the McDonagh Cup) was established only in 2018.<sup>6</sup> A list of the county teams in each of the football divisions and hurling Championship cups in 2016 is provided in Appendix A. Individual county team analyses were not feasible due to the small number of cases at that level of disaggregation, and also to protect players' anonymity. More detailed information on Gaelic games in general can be found in Chapter 2 of Kelly et al. (2018).

While the approach used in the report is quantitative in nature, qualitative information gathered during the player workshops for the first study (Kelly et al., 2018, Chapter 4) is used to supplement some of the analysis presented in Chapter 3. Specifically, it provides further insight into some of the earnings findings and other professional career results presented in Section 3.2.

In addition, the analysis presented in Chapter 7 is based on two open-ended questions included at the end of the SSICP-2016 questionnaire that captured players' views on what they would change about their inter-county experience and the set-up. This qualitative information was coded and quantified to identify the key areas that players would change about both their inter-county experience and the set-up. However, the selected quotes that are presented in Chapter 7 do not capture all players' viewpoints and, therefore, are not representative of all inter-

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<sup>6</sup> This is the second-tier competition, with the winner joining the MacCarthy Cup at the quarter-finals stage.

county players: this is the case with all types of qualitative research. Nevertheless, the selected citations are informative and provide valuable insights into the issues examined in Chapter 7.

Some readers will be used to seeing tests of significance and confidence intervals presented with research results. Such tests are appropriate when the analysis is based on a random sample of the individuals being researched. Confidence intervals and significance tests are a way of understanding how large this difference is likely to be, so that we can say that in 95 per cent<sup>7</sup> of samples of this size and design, we would expect the mean to be in this range. However, when collecting the data for the original study (i.e. Kelly et al., 2018), we sought to interview all 2016 senior inter-county players and not a random sample. As a result, tests of significance and confidence intervals are not appropriate as we are not generalising from a random sample to the population. Given this, when we discuss differences between sub-groups in the report, for example Division 1 and 2 footballers, we only consider situations where there is a minimum difference of 5 percentage points between the two groups being compared.

#### **1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT**

The remainder of the report is structured as follows. Chapters 2 to 7 each present a descriptive analysis of the issues requiring examination, while Chapter 8 outlines the main conclusions and policy implications that have emerged from the research.

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<sup>7</sup> The conventional level of significance in social science research uses significance tests at the 5 per cent level and 95 per cent confidence intervals.

## CHAPTER 2

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### Post-secondary school pathways and education experiences

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

With increasing demands on elite sports players, there is growing concern internationally about the impact of sport on the educational development of athletes, especially younger athletes (European Commission, 2012). In particular, there is concern that younger athletes' ability to focus on their education may not be protected where sports coaches or managers pressure them to pursue sports goals at the expense of their education (Henry, 2013).

Research has also examined the extent to which student-athletes' involvement in sport negatively affects personal, academic and career development. The findings suggest that student-athletes are more likely to struggle in adjusting to college life and in making educational decisions and career plans than students not involved in sports (Burns et al., 2013). They often begin their college career with 'vague or non-existent' career goals while they invest heavily in their athletic roles (Lally and Kerr, 2005). Furthermore, research has found that the squeeze on student-athletes' time means that their studies, assignments and attendance can become of secondary importance (Simiyu, 2010). In addition, injuries sustained while playing sport can impact on their educational development. For example, if student-athletes are hospitalised or require recovery time at home, they will miss lectures, classes and/or labs, and also coursework/assignments. In the previous senior inter-county player research, Kelly et al. (2018) found that almost a third of 2016 players were absent from work/college for between one and six days because of an injury that they sustained during the 2016 season. Another 21 per cent missed work/college for between one and two weeks, and 16.8 per cent were absent for three weeks or more.

There are concerns around sports people's athletic identity<sup>8</sup> as well (Brewer et al., 1993). It has been found that sports people with over-developed athletic identities are less prepared for life after their sporting careers (Baillie and Danish, 1992; Lavalee and Robinson, 2007). Known as 'identity foreclosure', this can lead to athletes abandoning academic qualifications, employment opportunities and emotional relationships in order to pursue sporting success (Baillie and Danish, 1992; Brewer et al., 1993). However, by broadening their identity beyond their sport, studies have shown that athletes may have greater confidence about the

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<sup>8</sup> Athletic identity is the degree to which an individual identifies with their role as an athlete.

future, improved self-esteem, better attitude to others and also improvements in their sporting careers (Cresswell and Eklund, 2006; Price et al., 2010).

In general, it is increasingly acknowledged in the sports research field that having interests outside of sport has multiple benefits for athletes. As well as broadening their identity (beyond that of an athlete only), non-athletic pursuits can lead to the development of transferable skills (e.g. leadership skills), improve wellbeing and prevent burnout. All of these benefits can, in turn, positively impact their performance in sport. For example, Price et al. (2010) found that player participation in important non-sporting activities, such as education or employment, or time spent with partners, family and friends, positively impacted not only their careers and wellbeing but also their sporting lives (see also McKenzie et al., 2003).

Given this international research, this chapter examines the education experiences of 2016 senior inter-county players. Specifically:

1. How does their education profile compare with the general population of similar age?
2. Has the ability to play inter-county sports impacted their post-secondary school career path?
3. How has playing senior inter-county sports impacted the education experiences of those who pursued further/higher education?
4. If players were free to choose their post-secondary school pathway again, would they select the same or a different career path?

Focusing specifically on third-level inter-county players, Lane (2015) found that 56 per cent of the 2014–2015 academic year cohort reported that they would like to give more time to their studies. More recently, the GPA (2019) found that this figure was 69 per cent among the 2018–2019 academic year cohort. Lane (2015) also found that 40 per cent of 2014–2015 third-level inter-county player students had to repeat exams and 14 per cent an entire year. Among 2018–2019 players, these two figures had fallen marginally to 35 and 11 per cent respectively (GPA, 2019). Lane (2015) noted the level of pressure and demand placed on this group of Gaelic players because of being involved with multiple teams, including their club, county and college teams.

The work presented in this chapter builds on the analysis undertaken by Lane (2015) and the GPA (2019) by examining the education experiences across all senior inter-county players. The data used do not capture whether inter-county players miss out on the opportunity to engage in extracurricular activities during their further/higher education years. However, based on their education potentially

being impacted, it is likely that they are. This is a potential area for future research as further/higher education years interlink with young adults' formative years, and non-education activities remain important elements of that experience.

## 2.2 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

On average, senior inter-county players are allocating just over six hours per day to their inter-county commitments;<sup>9</sup> or, as a baseline measure, up to 31 hours per week<sup>10</sup> (Kelly et al., 2018). Given this, one might be concerned that players are neglecting their educational development and, therefore, will have lower levels of educational attainment than their non-playing counterparts. One could equally make the case, though, that senior inter-county players are highly driven individuals and, even with the time that they commit to their sport, will have higher levels of educational attainment. Demand-side factors may also give rise to today's players having higher levels of education; for example, if players are being recruited by universities/colleges that want them to assist in winning the prestigious third-level Gaelic game competitions (Sigerson Cup, Fitzgibbon Cup, etc.). Supply-side factors, in the form of scholarships, may also play a role in the educational attainment levels of inter-county players.<sup>11</sup>

In order to examine players' education on a comparative basis, we use Census 2016 data to compare the educational attainment profile of 2016 players with that of the general population of the same age; specifically, males aged 18 to 42 years born in the Republic of Ireland.<sup>12</sup> The findings from this work are presented in Table 2.1. Although Gaelic games are all-Ireland sports, because the Irish Census is based on the 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland, we present the educational attainment profile for all senior inter-county players (column 2) and then separately with players from the six northern counties removed (column 3). As can be seen from Table 2.1, there is very little difference in the education attainment levels of players when this restriction is made to the data.

The results (Table 2.1, column 3) illustrate that senior inter-county players are highly educated individuals: just over 61 per cent have a degree or higher

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<sup>9</sup> This relates to a weekday (as opposed to a weekend) pitch-based training day. The corresponding time for a sports conditioning training day is 4.4 hours for a match week and 5.4 hours for a non-match week (Kelly et al., 2018).

<sup>10</sup> This baseline figure of 31 hours per week, which relates to the Championship season (late May–June) in 2016, is an underestimation of players' overall inter-county time commitment. The estimate does not include the duration spent on training at weekends, including travel, or the time given to matches. In addition, the figure does not include the mental time that players put into their game, whether it is in preparation for a match or training, or the time that can go into thinking about one's performance in the hours/days after either (see Kelly et al., 2018).

<sup>11</sup> For example, UCD's Ad Astra Elite Sports Scholarship; DCU's GAA Academy Sport Scholarship; NUIM's GAA Sports Scholarship Programme; NUIG's CAO Performance Points Scholarship, Elite Sport Scholarship and Sports Scholarships; the Queen's GAA Elite Athlete Programme and Sean O'Neill GAA Academy Scholarships; UCC's GAA Scholarship programme, GPA's Third Level Scholarship, and GPA's Enhanced Scholarship.

<sup>12</sup> Immigrants are excluded.



qualification compared to 35 per cent of the general male population of the same age. A slightly greater percentage of players have a lower secondary or less qualification: 19 per cent compared to 16 per cent for the general population of the same age. Much smaller proportions have upper secondary (6 per cent compared to 31 per cent) or post-secondary (7 per cent compared to 18 per cent) qualifications.

TABLE 2.1 HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION COMPLETED: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE (PER CENT)

	2016 Players		Census 2016
	32 Counties	Republic of Ireland	Republic of Ireland
Lower secondary or less	18.1	19.2	16.1
Upper secondary	5.5	5.5	30.8
Post-secondary, non-tertiary	6.8	6.5	17.5
Higher education non-degree	8.1	7.5	3.9
Ordinary degree	33.9	32.9	8.6
Honours degree	24.4	25.2	17.5
Master's or postgraduate	3.2	3.2	8.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Census 2016.*

Note: *Census data reweighted to make them representative of the education profile of 2016 senior inter-county players. Special tabulation provided by the Central Statistics Office (CSO), Ireland's national statistical data collection agency, which administers the Census.*

Even when we examine the education profile of senior inter-county players by age group (Table 2.2), we find that players across all age categories have higher levels of educational attainment compared to those in the general male population of the same age.

It is important to note that this result may reflect unobserved differences between inter-county players and the general male population of the same age. In particular, compared to the general population, players may come from socio-economic backgrounds that are more likely to participate in higher education, such as professional or farming backgrounds (McCoy et al., 2010).

TABLE 2.2 HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION COMPLETED BY AGE GROUP: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE (PER CENT)

Republic of Ireland	Aged 18–21		Aged 22–25		Aged 26–30		Aged 31 +	
	2016 Players	Census 2016	2016 Players	Census 2016	2016 Players	Census 2016	2016 Players	Census 2016
Secondary or lower	73.4	80.7	18.5	44.7	10.7	37.6	21.2	37.0
Post-secondary/ higher education non-degree	9.7	16.8	15.2	20.6	12.0	22.9	21.6	25.2
Higher education degree or higher	17.0	2.4	66.4	34.7	77.3	39.4	57.2	37.7
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Census 2016.

Note: Census data reweighted to make them representative of the education profile of 2016 senior inter-county players. For comparability with Census 2016 data, Republic of Ireland players only. Special tabulation provided by the CSO.

## 2.3 POST-SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOL PATHWAY

### 2.3.1 Determining factors

To examine more closely if playing inter-county is having an impact on players' education and professional career development, we asked 2016 players which of the following were the two most important influencing factors when they were deciding what to do when leaving second-level school:

1. taking a job or education/training course that I would be interested in;
2. taking a job or education/training course that would enable me to play inter-county;
3. taking an education/training course that would enable me to get the job I wanted.

Players were also given an opportunity to specify other factors that were more important than the options given: less than 10 per cent did so.<sup>13</sup>

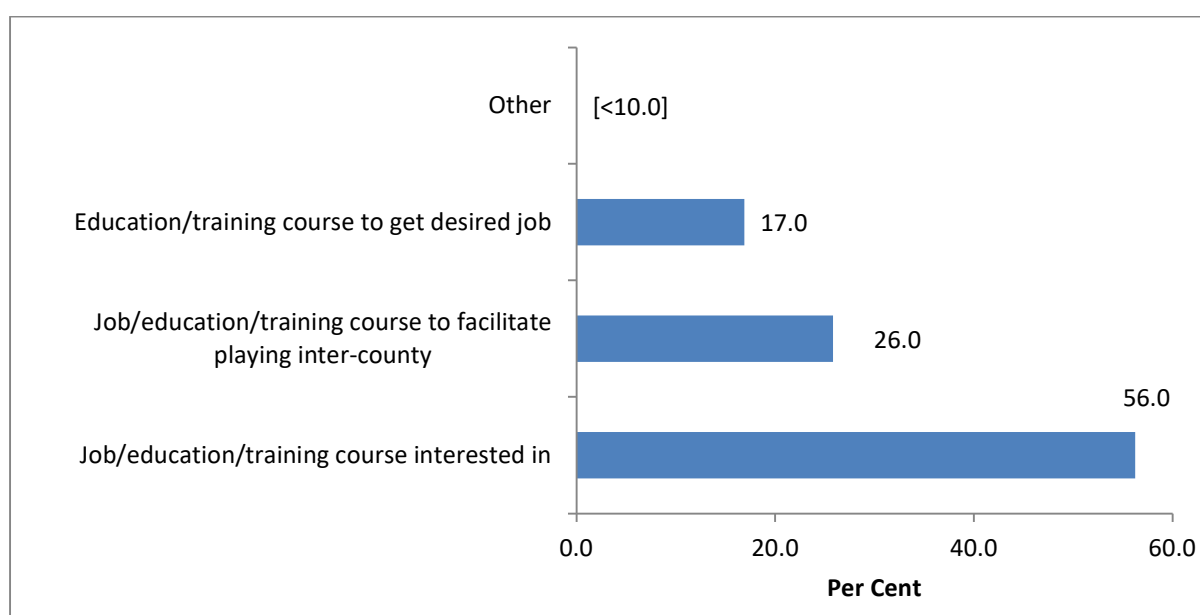
Taking the first response provided by players to represent the most important factor that influenced what they did on leaving second-level school,<sup>14</sup> we can see from Figure 2.1 that for over half of players (56 per cent), taking a job or

<sup>13</sup> For those that did, examples of other important influences included: (i) financial independence, (ii) career guidance, (iii) scholarship, (iv) convenience, (v) financial security, (vi) parents.

<sup>14</sup> We do not present an aggregate measure for the two options selected because 37 per cent of players did not choose two factors; therefore, to do so would only produce skewed results. Given how the survey was set up online for completion, we can assume that the first response identifies players' most important factor. This cannot be said for those that completed the questionnaire on paper (12 per cent). Therefore, as a robustness check, we excluded the players from this group that provided two options. This exclusion made no difference to the results (see footnote 9).

education/training course that they were interested in was the most important. However, for 26 per cent of players, taking a job or education/training course that enabled them to play inter-county was the most important. For 17 per cent the post-second-level school pathway chosen was to facilitate them getting their desired job.<sup>15</sup>

**FIGURE 2.1 MOST IMPORTANT INFLUENCE IN DECIDING WHAT TO DO WHEN LEAVING SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOL: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

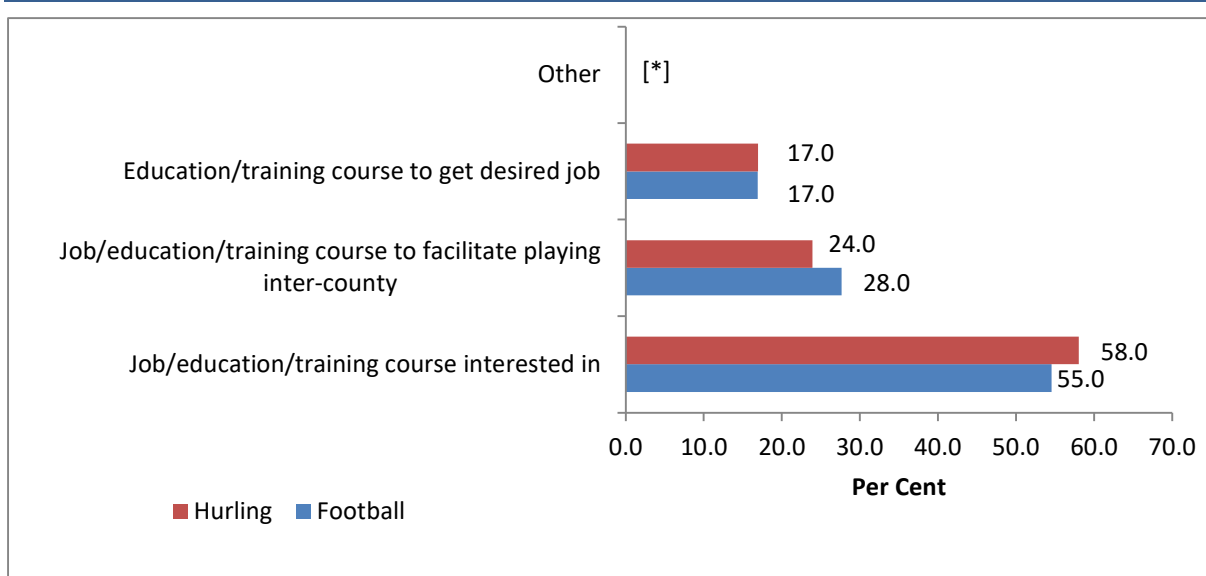
Note: The percentages in square brackets ([]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

Being able to play inter-county was a slightly bigger influencing factor on post-second-level decisions among 2016 footballers (28 per cent compared to 24 per cent of hurlers; Figure 2.2), and in particular among Division 1 and 3 footballers (32 and 30 per cent respectively; Table 2.3). It was also a big determinant for MacCarthy Cup hurlers (34 per cent).

It is interesting to note that, among hurlers, MacCarthy Cup players had the lowest percentage that pursued a job/education/training course that they were interested in, whereas among football players this percentage was relatively similar across the divisions.

<sup>15</sup> Excluding the paper respondents that provided two responses, the results are as follows: 53 per cent for taking a job or education/training course that the player was interested in; 27 per cent for taking a job or education/training course that enabled him to play inter-county; and 19 per cent for taking an education/training course that enabled the player to get the job he wanted.

**FIGURE 2.2 MOST IMPORTANT INFLUENCE IN DECIDING WHAT TO DO WHEN LEAVING SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOL: 2016 PLAYERS – CODE**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: \* Number of players used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

**TABLE 2.3 MOST IMPORTANT INFLUENCE IN DECIDING WHAT TO DO WHEN LEAVING SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOL: 2016 PLAYERS – PLAYING LEVEL (PER CENT)**

Football	Division 1	Division 2	Division 3	Division 4
Job/education/training course interested in	56.0	53.0	54.0	56.0
Job/education/training course to facilitate playing inter-county	32.0	27.0	30.0	21.0
Education/training course to get desired job	[<12.0]	20.0	[<17.0]	21.0
Other	*	*	*	*
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100
Hurling	MacCarthy Cup	Christy Ring	Nicky Rackard	Lory Meagher
Job/education/training course interested in	51.0	64.0	62.0	75.0
Job/education/training course to facilitate playing inter-county	34.0	[<18.0]	[<13.0]	*
Education/training course to get desired job	13.0	18.0	25.0	*
Other	*	*	*	–
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: The percentages in square brackets ([ ]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

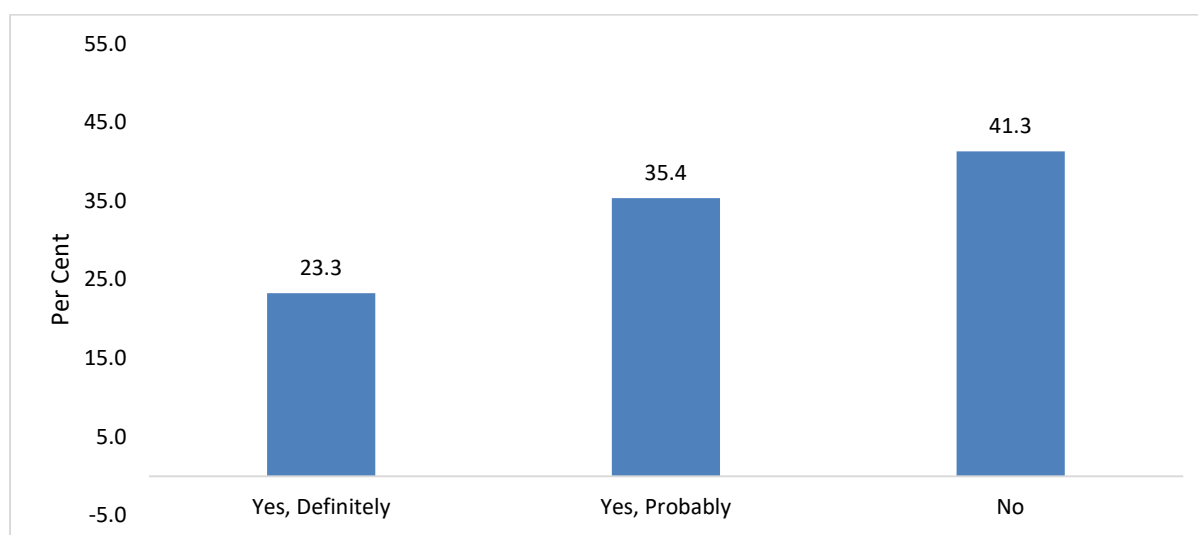
\* Number of players used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

– Not selected as an option.

### 2.3.2 Views on pathway chosen

Players were asked whether, if they were free to choose their post-second-level school pathway (i.e. education, training or job) again, they would select the same or a different route. Just over 41 per cent of players indicated that they would not select the same pathway (Figure 2.3).

**FIGURE 2.3 TAKE SAME PATHWAY AGAIN AFTER LEAVING SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOL: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

As can be seen from Table 2.4, slightly bigger percentages of Division 2 to Division 4 footballers would choose a different pathway to the one chosen on leaving second-level (42–44 per cent). The same is true for MacCarthy Cup and Lory Meagher hurlers (47 per cent).

**TABLE 2.4 TAKE SAME PATHWAY AGAIN AFTER LEAVING SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOL: 2016 PLAYERS – PLAYING LEVEL (PER CENT)**

	Division 1	Division 2	Division 3	Division 4
Yes, definitely	26.0	19.8	21.3	26.9
Yes, probably	35.2	36.3	36.8	28.9
No	38.8	43.8	41.9	44.2
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100
	MacCarthy Cup	Christy Ring	Nicky Rackard	Lory Meagher
Yes, definitely	21.0	24.0	30.5	*
Yes, probably	31.8	42.4	39.3	39.0
No	47.3	33.6	30.2	47.0
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: \* Number of players used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

Forty-one per cent of players indicate that they would choose a different pathway after leaving second-level education to the one chosen. In order to put this figure in context, we compare their viewpoint with two other groups of young males using data from the Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Learners survey and the Leaving School in Ireland (LSI) longitudinal study.<sup>16</sup> The objective of the PLC Learners survey, which was conducted in 2015/2016, was to identify the effectiveness and impact of PLC provision. The survey was administered to a sample of Leaving Certificate students who left their course in 2009 and to a sample of PLC students who left their programme in 2010.<sup>17</sup> The LSI longitudinal study, which was carried out in 2012, surveyed a cohort of young people three to four years after they completed their Leaving Certificate to identify their post-school pathways and experiences on leaving second-level.<sup>18</sup>

For this comparative analysis, the LSI and PLC data were restricted to males only. The average age of the 2016 senior inter-county cohort of players is 24.7 years. The LSI survey respondents are 21/22, so they are slightly younger than the inter-county players. In order to match the age distribution of the players' data, the PLC data were restricted to those aged 18–42. Given that the LSI and PLC surveys were conducted in the Republic of Ireland, players from the six northern counties were removed for the comparative analysis.<sup>19</sup>

Although the timeframes and samples of the LSI and PLC surveys are not directly comparable with the inter-county players' data, the views of these two groups of young people on their chosen post-second-level pathway still provide useful benchmarks with which to compare the players.<sup>20</sup> When we undertake this assessment, we find that a much higher percentage of senior inter-county players compared to non-players would not choose the same pathway on leaving second-level as the one chosen (Table 2.5): 42 per cent compared to 36 per cent for the young males surveyed for the PLC study and 23 per cent for the LSI young male sample.

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<sup>16</sup> Both studies asked respondents for their views on their chosen post-second-level pathway.

<sup>17</sup> For further information on the study, see McGuinness et al. (2018).

<sup>18</sup> For further information on the study, see McCoy et al. (2014).

<sup>19</sup> In comparing the results presented in Table 2.5 with those in Figure 2.3, one can see that this restriction makes very little difference to players' views on their chosen post-second-level pathway.

<sup>20</sup> The response categories used to capture the respondents' views on their post-second-level pathway in the PLC and LSI survey differ slightly to those in the SSICP-2016 questionnaire. The question asked in the three surveys was the same, but the response categories in the PLC and LSI surveys were 'yes', 'to some extent' and 'no'. For this comparative work, it is assumed that these options respectively correspond to 'yes, definitely', 'yes, to some extent' and 'no' in the inter-county players' data.

Discontentment seems to be higher among players aged 22 and above, as players aged 18–21 have relatively similar levels of regret to the comparably aged males surveyed in the LSI study: 29 and 23 per cent respectively (Table 2.5).

The other interesting point to note from this age examination (Table 2.5) is that levels of dissatisfaction increase with age, from 29 per cent among players aged 18–21 to 49 per cent among players aged 31 and above.

TABLE 2.5 TAKE SAME PATHWAY AGAIN AFTER LEAVING SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOL: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO OTHER YOUNG ADULT MALES (PER CENT)

	General population		Inter-county players				
	PLC survey	LSI survey	All players	Aged 18–21	Aged 22–25	Aged 26–30	Aged 31+
Yes, definitely	34.4	51.4	22.0	29.8	18.2	20.2	[<22.0]
Yes, probably	29.4	26.1	36.2	40.8	37.7	32.5	30.0
No	36.2	22.5	41.8	29.4	44.1	47.4	49.0
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); PLC Learners Survey (2015/2016); Leaving School in Ireland Survey (2012).

Note: The percentages in square brackets ([ ]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution. Republic of Ireland players only aged 18–42; PLC Survey males aged 18–42; LSI Survey males aged 21–22.

This higher level of discontent with players' future career decisions on leaving second-level education seems to be directly related to some players allowing their sport to dictate what career path they pursued on leaving second-level. This is because we find that levels of dissatisfaction are much greater among those that selected their post second-level pathway to enable them to play inter-county (Figure 2.4). If they could, 52 per cent of this cohort of players would choose a different pathway to the one chosen. This compares with 38 and 33 per cent respectively for players who chose a pathway that interested them or a route that led to the job that they wanted.<sup>21</sup> As can be seen from Table 2.5, levels of dissatisfaction for these two groups of players (38 and 33 per cent respectively) are in line with the young males surveyed for the PLC study (36 per cent).

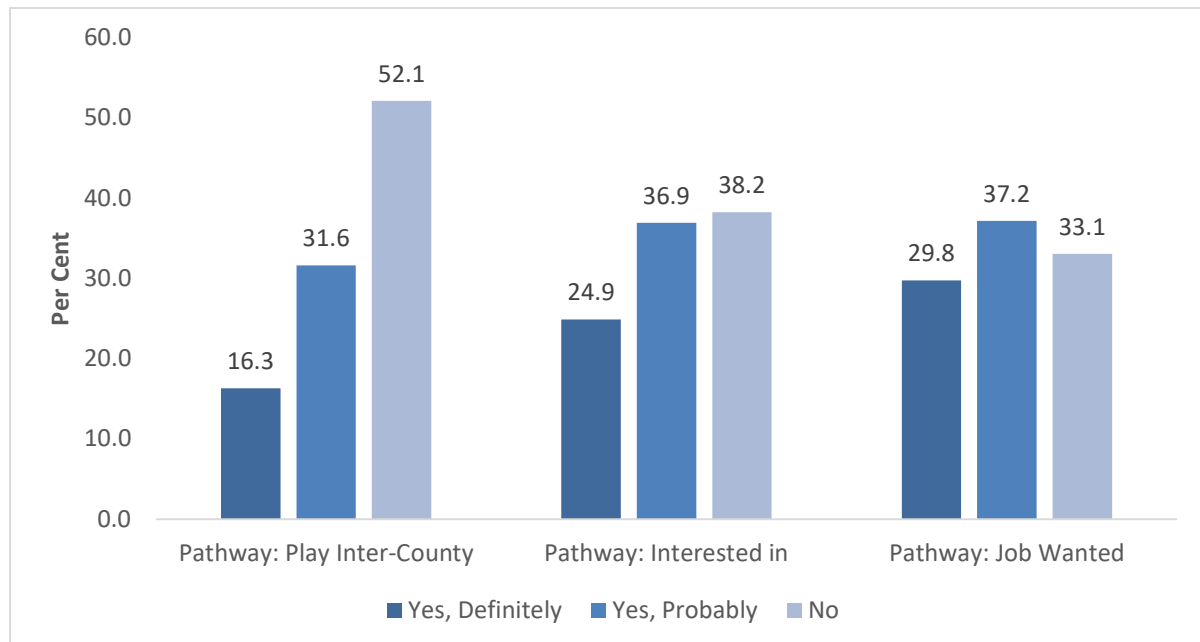
In fact, when those that selected their post-second-level pathway to facilitate them to play inter-county are removed from the examination presented in Table 2.5, the overall percentage of players that would not select the same pathway taken after second-level falls from 42 to 39 per cent. For those aged 18–21, this percentage is

<sup>21</sup> Overall, of the 41.3 per cent of players that would not take the same path after leaving second-level school, 52 per cent had taken a job or education/training course that that they were interested in when they left second-level, 14 per cent a job or education/training course that would facilitate them to get their desired job, and 33 per cent a job or education/training course that enabled them to play senior inter-county.

now 25 per cent, which is down from 29 per cent and almost equivalent to the views of the young males in the LSI survey (23 per cent). There is also a sizeable drop in levels of dissatisfaction about their chosen pathway for players aged 22–25, from 44 to 40 per cent, but less so for the older age cohorts: now 48 per cent for those aged 26–30 and 47 per cent for players aged 31 and above.

Regarding the players that selected their post-second level career path to enable them to play inter-county, it is important to note that we do not know what the counterfactual would be for this group of individuals. In other words, we cannot know what education/career choices these players would have made in the absence of inter-county and whether these choices would have led to better outcomes compared to their peers that did not play inter-county. For example, if a player chose to study a particular course in college because he thought that it would facilitate him to play inter-county, would he have been unemployed had he not selected that course? Given that we cannot identify what the counterfactual would be from the available data, this is something that needs to be borne in mind when discussing this group of players’ career path choice and subsequent experiences.

**FIGURE 2.4 TAKE SAME PATHWAY AGAIN AFTER LEAVING SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOL: 2016 PLAYERS – POST-SECOND-LEVEL PATHWAY DETERMINING FACTOR**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).



## 2.4 IMPACT OF PLAYING SENIOR INTER-COUNTY ON PLAYERS' FURTHER/HIGHER EDUCATION CHOICES AND EXPERIENCES

Eighty-six per cent of 2016 players indicated that they undertook a further or higher education course on completion of their second-level education. This section focuses on this group of players' experiences of combining their education with their inter-county commitments.

### 2.4.1 Field of study

Table 2.6 presents the field of study for the highest level of education course that 2016 players completed and graduated.<sup>22</sup>

The field of study 'education' was by far the most popular course: 25 per cent pursued it. This was followed by 'arts and humanities' and 'engineering, manufacturing and construction' (17 per cent). As well as the field of study 'education' leading to teaching, some individuals who undertake 'arts and humanities' will go into this profession.

TABLE 2.6 FIELD OF STUDY FOR HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION COURSE COMPLETED: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE

	All players	Football	Hurling
Education	25.0	25.0	26.0
Arts and humanities	17.0	17.0	17.0
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	17.0	13.0	20.0
Social sciences, business and law	15.0	16.0	13.0
Science, mathematics and computing	14.0	15.0	12.0
Health and welfare	12.0	13.0	10.0
Other subjects	*	*	*
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: Due to small numbers, 'other subjects' includes 'agriculture and veterinary' and 'services'. Information based on players with a Post Leaving Certificate or higher qualification.

\* Number of players used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

There was some variation by a player's code (Table 2.6). After 'education' (26 per cent), 'engineering, manufacturing and construction' was pursued by a larger percentage of hurlers: 20 per cent compared to 13 per cent of footballers. For footballers, the fields of 'social sciences, business and law' and 'science,

<sup>22</sup> Analysis restricted to players with a Post Leaving Certificate or higher qualification.

mathematics and computing' were slightly more popular: undertaken by 16 and 15 per cent respectively compared to 13 and 12 per cent of hurlers.

Using Census 2016 data,<sup>23</sup> Table 2.7 presents how senior inter-county players' fields of study compared with the general male population of the same age. This analysis reveals that players are over-represented in the fields of 'education' (26 per cent compared to 4 per cent), 'arts and humanities' (19 per cent compared to 8 per cent) and 'health and welfare' (12 per cent compared to 4 per cent). They are under-represented in 'social sciences', 'business and law' (15 per cent compared to 25 per cent) and 'engineering, manufacturing and construction' (14 per cent compared to 32 per cent) courses.

TABLE 2.7 FIELD OF STUDY FOR HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION COURSE COMPLETED: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE (PER CENT)

	2016 players (aged 18–42)	Census 2016 (aged 18–42)
Education	26.0	3.5
Arts and humanities	19.0	7.5
Social sciences, business and law	15.0	25.3
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	14.0	32.3
Science, mathematics and computing	13.0	14.0
Health and welfare	12.0	4.2
Other subjects	*	13.3
<b>Total</b>	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); 2016 Census.<sup>24</sup>

Note: Due to small numbers, 'other subjects' includes 'agriculture and veterinary' and 'services'.

Information based on players with a Post Leaving Certificate or higher qualification.

For comparability with Census 2016 data, Republic of Ireland players only.

\* Number of players used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

Based on Eurostudent data (2016),<sup>25</sup> apart from 'engineering', there is very little difference in the average number of hours of lectures/tutorials per week between the fields of study in which players are over-represented and under-represented: 'education' (19.2 hours), 'arts and humanities' (15.5 hours), and 'health and

<sup>23</sup> To ensure that the Census field of study data are comparable with the players, the results are based on males aged 18–42 years of age born in the Republic of Ireland with a Post Leaving Certificate or higher qualification. To make sure that the players data lined-up with the Census, players from the six northern counties were removed from the players results that are presented in Table 2.7: as can be seen from comparing the results in Tables 2.6 and 2.7, this restriction makes very little difference to the players' field of study findings.

<sup>24</sup> Special tabulation provided by the CSO.

<sup>25</sup> The data relates to 'all students': a breakdown for full-time and part-time students was not available.

welfare' (22.3 hours) compared to 'social sciences' (15.2 hours),<sup>26</sup> 'business and law' (15.4 hours)<sup>27</sup> and 'engineering'<sup>28</sup> (22.3 hours).<sup>29</sup>

Given the level of dissatisfaction that players that selected their post-second-level pathway to enable them to play inter-county expressed about their chosen route (Section 2.3.1), we examined their fields of study. Thirty-four per cent of this group of players chose to study 'education' (Table 2.8). This is much higher compared to players that chose a pathway that they were interested in (24 per cent) and those who pursued an education/training course that would lead to their desired job (19 per cent).

'Health and welfare' was another popular field of study among the group of players that chose their course to enable them to play inter-county (19 per cent). As well as physiotherapy, nursing, and sports science courses, this field would include courses such as strength and conditioning, sport and exercise, coaching, physical fitness and personal training, and health and human performance.

TABLE 2.8 FIELD OF STUDY FOR HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION COURSE COMPLETED: 2016 PLAYERS – POST-SECOND-LEVEL PATHWAY DETERMINING FACTOR

	All players	Pathway: Play inter-county	Pathway: Interested in	Pathway: Job wanted
Education	25.0	34.0	24.0	19.0
Arts and humanities	17.0	17.0	17.0	17.0
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	17.0	[<10.0]	20.0	16.0
Social sciences, business and law	15.0	11.6	16.0	16.0
Science, mathematics and computing	14.0	[<9.0]	13.0	24.0
Health and welfare	12.0	19.0	10.0	*
Other subjects	*	*	*	*
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: Due to small numbers, 'other subjects' includes 'agriculture and veterinary' and 'services'.

The percentages in square brackets ([ ]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

\* Number of players used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

Very few of these players selected STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) courses: less than 10 per cent pursued 'engineering, manufacturing and construction', and less than nine per cent 'science, mathematics and computing' (Table 2.8). While the reason for this was presumably that the jobs associated with

<sup>26</sup> Includes journalism and information.

<sup>27</sup> Includes administration.

<sup>28</sup> Includes manufacturing and construction.

<sup>29</sup> [http://database.eurostudent.eu/#topic=time\\_budget\\_all&countries=%5B%22IE%22%5D&focusgroup=e\\_field](http://database.eurostudent.eu/#topic=time_budget_all&countries=%5B%22IE%22%5D&focusgroup=e_field)

these fields would not be flexible enough to enable the players to give the commitment required to play inter-county, such a decision could have implications for the future job satisfaction, earnings and career progression of these players, especially in the context of an open, evolving Irish economy.

#### 2.4.2 Players' further/higher education experiences

Seventeen per cent of players who undertook more than one full-time further or higher education course indicated that their decision to return to education to pursue a different course was taken to enable them to play inter-county.

When players were asked if they had difficulty in balancing the demands of studying and playing during their education course, 30 per cent of players said that they had a great deal of difficulty (Table 2.9). Another 51 per cent had some difficulty, while only 20 per cent of players had little or no difficulty. In the GPA's most recent student report (2019), 62 per cent of 2018–2019 players indicated that as a student-athlete they found it difficult to manage all their commitments (college, sport, work and relationships). Among the 2014–2015 academic year cohort, Lane (2015) found this figure to be 58 per cent.

A larger percentage of footballers experienced a great deal of difficulty in combining their studies and inter-county commitments: 33 per cent compared to 27 per cent of hurlers.

TABLE 2.9 DIFFICULTY IN BALANCING THE DEMANDS OF STUDYING AND PLAYING DURING FURTHER/HIGHER EDUCATION COURSE: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE

	All players	Football	Hurling
A great deal	29.7	32.6	26.6
Some difficulty	50.8	50.3	51.4
Little to no difficulty	19.5	17.1	22.0
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

As can be seen from Table 2.10, a great deal of difficulty in combining their studies and inter-county commitments was experienced by Division 2 (36 per cent) and Division 3 (34 per cent) footballers, and also MacCarthy Cup hurlers (34 per cent). Over 50 per cent of Division 1 footballers indicated that they experienced some difficulty in balancing their studies and inter-county commitments.

TABLE 2.10 DIFFICULTY IN BALANCING THE DEMANDS OF STUDYING AND PLAYING DURING FURTHER/HIGHER EDUCATION COURSE: 2016 PLAYERS – PLAYING LEVEL

	Division 1	Division 2	Division 3	Division 4
A great deal	31.0	36.0	33.7	29.0
Some difficulty	54.0	48.0	47.1	51.0
Little to no difficulty	[<16.0]	[<16.0]	19.2	[<20.0]
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100
	MacCarthy Cup	Christy Ring	Nicky Rackard	Lory Meagher
A great deal	33.9	23.8	16.7	*
Some difficulty	50.6	51.6	55.1	47.0
Little to no difficulty	15.6	24.6	28.2	38.0
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

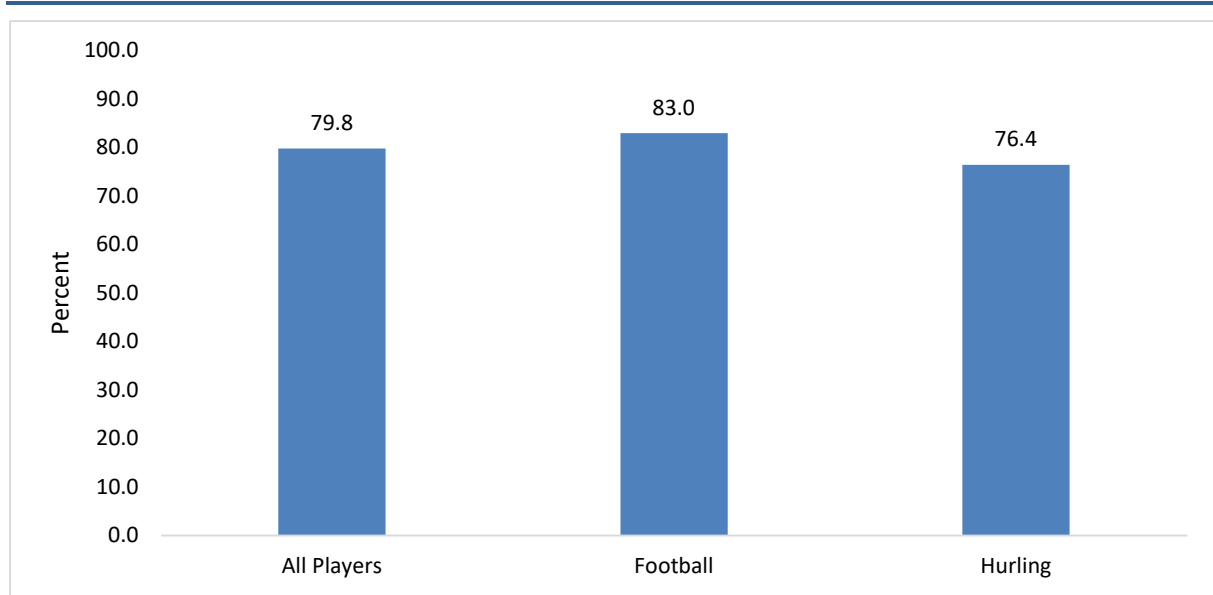
Note: The percentages in square brackets ([ ]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

\* Number of players used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

Sixteen per cent of 2016 players either dropped out of a course or had to repeat a year because of the demands of playing inter-county. Among 2018–2019 inter-county student players, the GPA (2019) found that 11 per cent had to repeat an entire academic year and 35 per cent exams. Among 2014–2015 players, these figures were 14 and 40 per cent respectively (Lane, 2015). In its report, the GPA highlights that these two figures are higher to what they are for the general student population: based on Higher Education Authority data, 2.9 per cent of the general student population were repeat students in 2015/2016, while a recent study by the Student Union of Ireland found that 13.5 per cent of students were repeating one or more elements of their course (GPA, 2019).

Eighty per cent of 2016 players indicated that they missed college lectures/classes/labs because of their inter-county commitments (Figure 2.5). This was higher among footballers: 83 per cent compared to 76 per cent of hurlers.

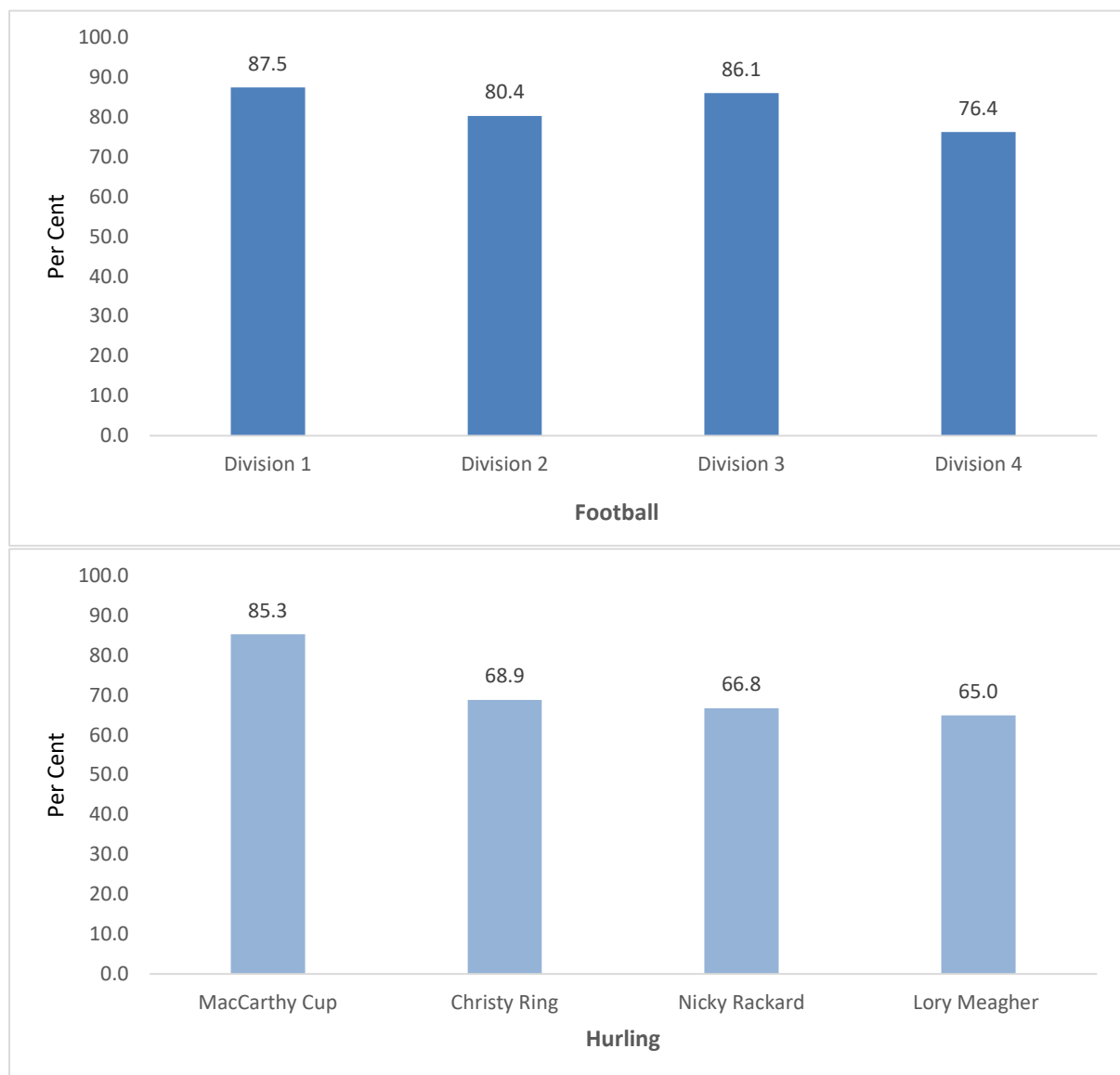
**FIGURE 2.5 MISSED COLLEGE LECTURES/CLASSES/LABS BECAUSE OF INTER-COUNTY COMMITMENTS: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE**



Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).*

As can be seen in Figure 2.6, a bigger percentage of Division 1 and Division 3 footballers missed college lectures/classes/labs because of their inter-county commitments (88 and 86 per cent respectively), as did MacCarthy Cup hurlers (85 per cent).

While these figures appear high, we do not have absenteeism data from further/higher education for the general male population of similar age to compare them with.

**FIGURE 2.6 MISSED COLLEGE LECTURES/CLASSES/LABS BECAUSE OF INTER-COUNTY COMMITMENTS: 2016 PLAYERS – PLAYING LEVEL**

Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

When players were asked if their inter-county and/or college football/hurling commitments meant that they got extra help with their coursework, 15 per cent of players strongly agreed/agreed that they did. This percentage was slightly greater among footballers: 16 per cent compared to 13 per cent of hurlers (Table 2.11).

A larger proportion of Division 1 footballers strongly agreed/agreed that they got extra help with their coursework – 20 per cent. This was also the case for

MacCarthy Cup hurlers (19 per cent)<sup>30</sup> and for players who chose their post second-level pathway to enable them to play inter-county (19 per cent).<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, a majority of players (78 per cent) strongly disagreed/disagreed that they had to get extra assistance with their studies because of their inter-county and/or college football/hurling commitments (Table 2.11).

**TABLE 2.11 MY INTER-COUNTY AND/OR COLLEGE FOOTBALL/HURLING COMMITMENTS MEANT THAT I GOT EXTRA HELP WITH MY COURSEWORK: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE (PER CENT)**

	All players	Football	Hurling
Strongly agree/agree	14.5	16.4	12.7
Strongly disagree/disagree	78.2	77.5	78.8
Not applicable	7.4	6.2	8.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Twenty-nine per cent of players strongly agreed/agreed that their inter-county and/or college football/hurling commitments contributed to their failing one or more of their exams (Table 2.12). This was greater among Division 2 (34 per cent) and Division 1 (31 per cent) footballers, and also MacCarthy Cup hurlers (31 per cent) and players who selected their post-second-level pathway to facilitate them to play inter-county (38 per cent).<sup>32</sup>

**TABLE 2.12 MY INTER-COUNTY AND/OR COLLEGE FOOTBALL/HURLING COMMITMENTS CONTRIBUTED TO MY FAILING ONE OR MORE OF MY EXAMS: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE (PER CENT)**

	All players	Football	Hurling
Strongly agree/agree	29.0	30.0	28.0
Strongly disagree/disagree	50.6	50.2	50.9
Not applicable	20.4	19.8	21.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

<sup>30</sup> See Appendix B, Table B.1.

<sup>31</sup> See Appendix B, Table B.2.

<sup>32</sup> See Appendix B, Tables B.3 and B.4.



When players were asked if their inter-county and/or college football/hurling commitments contributed to their performing poorly in their course, 37 per cent of players strongly agreed/agreed that they did (Table 2.13). This was somewhat higher among footballers: 38 per cent compared to 35 per cent of hurlers.

A particularly large percentage of Division 2 footballers strongly agreed/agreed that their inter-county and/or college football/hurling commitments contributed to their performing poorly in their course: 42 per cent.<sup>33</sup> This was also the case among MacCarthy Cup hurlers (40 per cent) and those who chose their post-second-level pathway to enable them to play inter-county (47 per cent).<sup>34</sup>

TABLE 2.13 MY INTER-COUNTY AND/OR COLLEGE FOOTBALL/HURLING COMMITMENTS CONTRIBUTED TO MY PERFORMING POORLY IN MY COURSE: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE (PER CENT)

	All players	Football	Hurling
Strongly agree/agree	36.6	38.2	34.9
Strongly disagree/disagree	54.8	54.2	55.5
Not applicable	8.6	7.7	9.7
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Finally, when players were asked to rate their overall grade compared to other students in their study programme (for their most recent year of study, or the final year for players that had graduated), 32 per cent were of the view that they had achieved a higher/much higher than average grade. Forty-eight per cent felt that their grade was about average, while the remaining 21 per cent felt that their grade was lower/much lower than average (Table 2.14). This last percentage was higher for players that selected their post-second-level pathway to enable them to play inter-county: 26 per cent of this group rated their grade as being lower/much lower than average compared to other students in their study programme (Table 2.15).

<sup>33</sup> See Appendix B, Table B.5.

<sup>34</sup> See Appendix B, Table B.6.

TABLE 2.14 HOW PLAYERS RATED THEIR OVERALL GRADE COMPARED TO OTHER STUDENTS IN THEIR STUDY PROGRAMME: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE (PER CENT)

	All players	Football	Hurling
Lower/much lower than average	20.7	21.0	20.4
About average	47.9	45.5	50.3
Higher/much higher than average	31.5	33.5	29.3
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

TABLE 2.15 HOW PLAYERS RATED THEIR OVERALL GRADE COMPARED TO OTHER STUDENTS IN THEIR STUDY PROGRAMME: 2016 PLAYERS – POST-SECOND-LEVEL PATHWAY DETERMINING FACTOR (PER CENT)

	All players	Pathway: Play inter-county	Pathway: Interested in	Pathway: Job wanted
Lower/much lower than average	20.7	25.9	19.2	17.9
About average	47.9	45.4	48.9	48.8
Higher/much higher than average	31.5	28.7	31.9	33.3
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).



## CHAPTER 3

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### Professional career experiences and decisions

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Maintaining 'dual careers' of work, education or training and elite sports has become a policy concern in recent years (European Commission, 2012). In this regard, one of the findings from the recent senior inter-county player study was that 83 per cent of players agreed/strongly agreed that the working conditions associated with their paid job needed to be flexible to enable them to play senior inter-county (Kelly et al., 2018).

This finding, and also the research on player burnout, work–life balance and athletic identity, highlights the importance of players being involved in activities outside of their sports for their non-sport careers and general wellbeing (e.g. McKenzie et al., 2003; Cresswell and Eklund, 2006; Price et al., 2010). This chapter examines the extent to which playing senior inter-county has impacted players' professional careers. In particular, it considers the following questions.

1. How does their job profile (employment type, occupation, hours worked, earnings, etc.) compare with the general male population of the same age?
  - For example, have a higher proportion of players become self-employed or gone into part-time jobs because such routes provide them with more flexibility and the time needed to play inter-county? Alternatively, are fewer players choosing to become entrepreneurs because the time commitments required to play inter-county do not facilitate them to devote the time needed to build a successful business?
2. Is the ability to play inter-county an important influence in a player's job selection decision?
3. What percentage of players change jobs because of their inter-county commitments?
4. Does playing inter-county assist players in gaining employment, and do their inter-county commitments ever result in their missing work?
5. What impact do players believe that playing inter-county has on their earnings, job security, promotion prospects and job satisfaction?

In Section 3.2 various player employment characteristics are compared to the general male population of the same age. This comparative work is undertaken using data from the 2017 Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC). The SILC, which is carried out by the Central Statistics Office (CSO),<sup>35</sup> is a nationally representative data source:<sup>36</sup> the official data source on household and individual income in the Republic of Ireland. The 2017 SILC contains income data from 2016 and 2017, which are very comparable with the income data captured in the SSICP-2016. The SILC data also contain information on those in employment, along with various other individual, family, household, and socio-economic data.

For the comparative analyses that follow, the SILC data are restricted to males aged 18–38,<sup>37</sup> so that the sample used lines up with the age profile of players in employment. It is important to note that the profile of respondents will still differ somewhat from the 2016 senior inter-county players. For example, a higher proportion of the general male population in the SILC data are likely to be aged 35–38 compared to the proportion that will be in this age group within the SSICP-2016 data. This is due to smaller numbers of players continuing to play senior inter-county when they reach their mid-thirties.<sup>38</sup> There will also be other underlying differences between the groups. For example, if senior inter-county players postpone family formation decisions until after they finish, or are near the end of, their inter-county career, the proportion of players that are married or fathers may differ from the general male population of the same age.<sup>39</sup> Given that the comparative analysis that follows is descriptive in nature, it is not possible to control for these underlying differences between the two groups. Therefore, readers need to be aware that some of the differences that emerge in the comparative analysis may be due to variations in the underlying characteristics of the groups. However, using the SILC data provides a useful benchmark from which to interpret players' results.

In addition to the age restriction imposed on the SILC data, the SSICP-2016 data are restricted to Republic of Ireland players in order to ensure that the players' data are consistent with the SILC data.

Given the precarious nature of self-employment, particularly in terms of hours worked and pay, we focus on employees only for the comparative analyses. We

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<sup>35</sup> Ireland's national statistical data collection agency.

<sup>36</sup> The survey has been carried out annually since 2004.

<sup>37</sup> There are 585 male employees aged 18–38 in the 2017 SILC data. This is the unweighted sample figure. However, the data were weighted to the population for the analyses contained in the report.

<sup>38</sup> Of the general male population aged 18 to 38 in the SILC data, 27.5 per cent are aged 35 to 38 years. This compares to 1 per cent of 2016 senior inter-county players. On the other hand, 23.9 per cent of players are aged 18–21 compared to 12.2 per cent of the general male population in the SILC data.

<sup>39</sup> In relation to marital status, 63 per cent of senior inter-county players are single compared to 57.2 per cent of the general male population of the same age.

also restrict the data to those that have been working for at least 12 months.<sup>40</sup> As will be seen in the next section, this restriction, and the exclusion of players from the six northern counties, makes very little difference to the findings.

## 3.2 PROFESSIONAL CAREER PROFILE OF 2016 PLAYERS

### 3.2.1 Employment status

Eighty-eight per cent of the sampled players held a job during the 2016 season. Of this, 28 per cent were students. Given that the focus of this chapter is on players' whose main economic status is employment, this group of student players who worked for a short time, or on a part-time basis, are excluded from the examinations that follow.<sup>41</sup>

Of those players who held a job during the 2016 inter-county season, the majority were employees: 94 per cent compared to 6 per cent being self-employed (Table 3.1).<sup>42</sup> This percentage of self-employed players is somewhat lower compared to the general male population of the same age (10 per cent).

**TABLE 3.1 EMPLOYMENT STATUS: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE (PER CENT)**

	All players	Republic of Ireland Gaelic players	General male population
Employee	94.3	95.4	89.6
Self-employed	5.7	4.6	10.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2017.

Almost all players that were employees worked full-time<sup>43</sup> (Table 3.2). At 93 per cent, this figure is slightly larger than for the general male population of the same age (88 per cent).

<sup>40</sup> This is because the net income data in SILC are the individual's total net annual income. However, some individuals may work for less than 12 months in the year (e.g. three months) and, if included in the analysis, would pull down the average value. We impose the same restriction on the SSICP-2016 data using information that was gathered on the year and month in which they started working in their 2016 job.

<sup>41</sup> When players whose main economic status in 2016 was studying (either further education or higher education) are excluded, 95.9 per cent of players held a job during the 2016 inter-county season.

<sup>42</sup> A very small percentage of players (less than 2 per cent) identified their employment status as 'assisting relative/family worker' or 'on a state-sponsored employment scheme' (e.g., Community Employment, Tús, JobBridge): these players were excluded when calculating the figures presented in Table 3.1.

<sup>43</sup> In both the SILC and SSICP-2016 questionnaires, respondents self-define whether they work full-time or part-time, as opposed to this information being based on a certain cut-off point in terms of hours.

TABLE 3.2 EMPLOYEE TYPE: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE (PER CENT)

	All players	Republic of Ireland Gaelic players	General male population
Full-time	93.3	92.6	88.4
Part-time	6.7	7.4	11.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2017.

### 3.2.2 Occupation

Regarding 2016 players' occupations (Table 3.3), the majority are professionals (42 per cent). This is followed by associate professional (22 per cent) and technical and skilled trades (13 per cent). When we focus on employees only,<sup>44</sup> the percentage of players that are in skilled trades falls marginally to 10 per cent.

TABLE 3.3 OCCUPATION: 2016 PLAYERS (PER CENT)

	All players	Employee players
Managers, directors and senior officials	4.0	4.0
Professionals	42.0	43.0
Associate professional and technical	22.0	23.0
Administrative and secretarial	6.0	7.0
Skilled trades	13.0	10.0
Caring, leisure and other services	*	*
Sales and customer services	5.0	5.0
Process, plant and machine operatives	*	*
Elementary†	7.0	7.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: \* Number of players used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

† Elementary occupations consist of simple and routine tasks that mainly require the use of hand-held tools and often some physical effort.

Comparing the occupation distribution of players to the general male population of the same age (Table 3.4), we find that smaller percentages of players are in skilled trades (11 per cent compared to 18 per cent), sales (5 per cent compared to 11 per cent) and elementary (8 per cent compared to 17 per cent) occupations. On the other hand, much larger proportions are in higher occupation groups:

<sup>44</sup> Self-employed, those assisting relatives/family workers, and those on a state-sponsored employment scheme excluded.

specifically, professional (42 per cent compared to 19 per cent) and associate professional and technical (24 per cent compared to 13 per cent) occupations.

TABLE 3.4 OCCUPATION: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE (PER CENT)

	Republic of Ireland Gaelic players	General male population
Managers, directors and senior officials	[<3.0]	6.0
Professionals	42.0	19.0
Associate professional and technical	24.0	13.0
Administrative and secretarial	6.0	*
Skilled trades	11.0	18.0
Caring, leisure and other services	*	*
Sales and customer services	5.0	11.0
Process, plant and machine operatives	*	*
Elementary	8.0	17.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2017.

Note: The percentages in square brackets ([ ]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

\* Number used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

### 3.2.3 Sector of employment

Approximately a third of employed players work in the public sector (Table 3.5), which is more than three times as large as for the general male population of the same age (32 per cent compared to 9 per cent).

TABLE 3.5 PUBLIC/PRIVATE SECTOR EMPLOYMENT: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE (PER CENT)

	All players	Republic of Ireland Gaelic players	General male population
Public sector	32.9	32.2	9.4
Private sector	67.1	67.8	90.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2017.

When we take a closer look at players' sectors of employment (Table 3.6),<sup>45</sup> we find that the largest percentage are employed in education: 23 per cent. This is considerably larger than for the general male population of the same age, where the percentage is so small that it cannot be presented for reliability reasons. Of the

<sup>45</sup> See Appendix C, Table C.1 for the employment sector distribution for 'all players' and 'employee only' players.



32 per cent of players employed in the public sector (Table 3.5), 69 per cent are employed in education.

TABLE 3.6 SECTOR OF EMPLOYMENT: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE (PER CENT)

	Republic of Ireland Gaelic players	General male population
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	*	*
Mining and quarrying	–	*
Manufacturing	13.0	16.0
Electricity, gas, steam, air conditioning supply	*	*
Water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation	*	*
Construction	9.0	10.0
Wholesale and retail trade	11.0	19.0
Transportation and storage	*	*
Accommodation and food services	*	7.0
Information and communication	4.0	8.0
Financial and insurance activities	8.0	5.0
Real estate activities	*	–
Professional, scientific and technical activities	10.0	9.0
Administrative and support service activities	[<3.0]	*
Public administration and defence	6.0	6.0
Education	23.0	*
Human health and social work	[<3.0]	*
Arts, entertainment and recreation	4.0	*
Other service activities	–	*
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2017.

Note: The percentages in square brackets ([ ]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

\* Number used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

After education, the three next biggest sectors of employment for players are manufacturing (13 per cent), wholesale and retail (11 per cent) and professional, scientific and technical activities (10 per cent). For the general male population of the same age, the top four employment sectors are wholesale and retail (19 per cent), manufacturing (16 per cent), construction (10 per cent) and professional, scientific and technical activities (9 per cent).

### 3.2.4 Hours worked

The median number of hours worked per week by all players, including employee only players,<sup>46</sup> is 40 (Table 3.7).<sup>47</sup>

TABLE 3.7 USUAL NUMBER OF HOURS WORKED PER WEEK: 2016 PLAYERS

	All players	Employee players
Median	40	40

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

When players are compared to the general male population of the same age, we find that they work the same median number of hours per week: 40 (Table 3.8).

The only difference is in relation to the public sector. Players working in this sector work fewer hours per week compared to the general male population of the same age that work in this sector: 35 compared to 39. This is most likely due to employment of these players being concentrated in public education, a sub-sector that works, on average, fewer weekly paid hours (see below). These public sector worker players also work considerably fewer hours per week compared to their counterparts in the private sector (35 compared to 40).

TABLE 3.8 USUAL NUMBER OF HOURS WORKED PER WEEK: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE

	Republic of Ireland Gaelic players			
	All	Full-time	Public sector	Private sector
Median	40	40	35	40
	General male employee population			
	All	Full-time	Public sector	Private sector
Median	40	40	39	40

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2017.

### 3.2.5 Net weekly earnings

The median net weekly income<sup>48</sup> of all (employee) senior inter-county players is €500 (Table 3.9).<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Self-employed and those that assist relatives, are family workers or are on a state-sponsored employment scheme excluded.

<sup>47</sup> Median hours worked is the cut-off point where half the individuals in the population group under examination work more than the value and half work less.

<sup>48</sup> Median income is the cut-off point where half of individuals earn more than the amount and half earn less, i.e. the middle earner in the population group under examination.

<sup>49</sup> Net monthly earnings data are available from the authors on request.

TABLE 3.9 NET EARNINGS PER WEEK: 2016 PLAYERS (€)

	All players	Employee players
Median	500	500

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

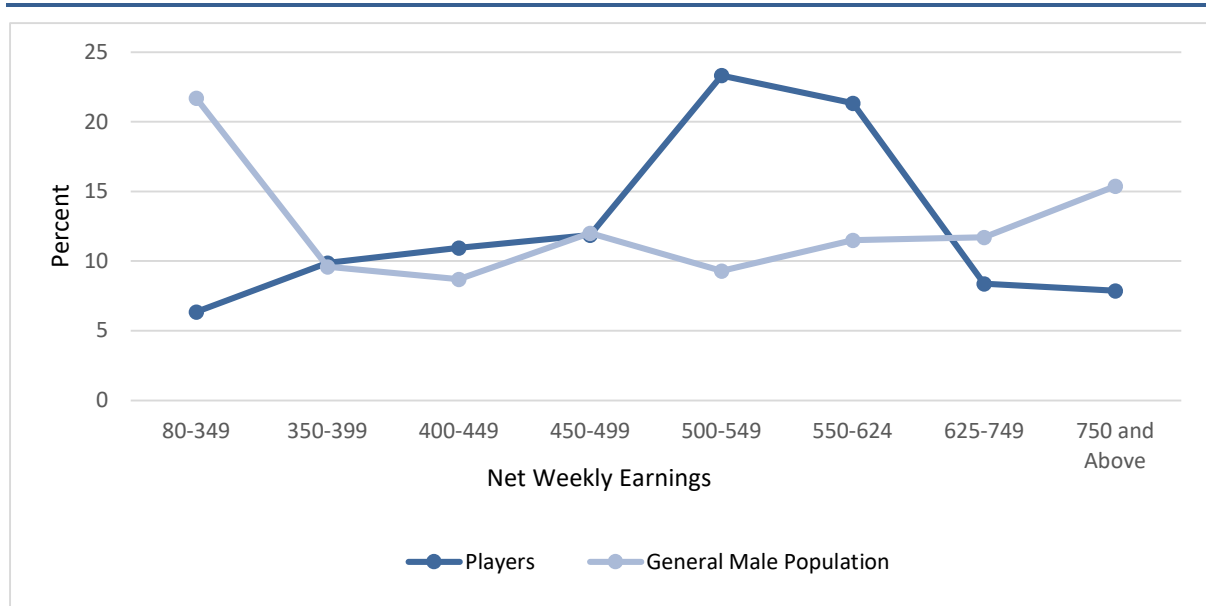
When compared to the general male population of the same age, we find that players' median net weekly income is €13 more per week: €500 compared to €487 (Table 3.10).

TABLE 3.10 NET EARNINGS PER WEEK: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE (€)

	All employees	Full-time	Public sector	Private sector	Degree or higher	Non-degree or lower
	<b>Republic of Ireland Gaelic players</b>					
Median	500	500	500	500	500	450
	<b>General male population</b>					
Median	487	525	588	480	637	438

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2017.

Three interesting findings emerge when we plot the earnings distributions of both groups (Figure 3.1). First, compared to the general population of the same age, a smaller percentage of players have net weekly earnings less than €350 (6 per cent compared to 22 per cent), while a larger proportion have between €500 and €624 (45 per cent compared to 21 per cent). On the other hand, a greater percentage of the general male population of the same age has net weekly earnings in excess of €624 (27 per cent compared to 16 per cent). In this context, players are less likely to be either very low or very high income earners.

**FIGURE 3.1 NET WEEKLY EARNINGS DISTRIBUTION: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE (€)**

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2017.

Players working in the private sector have higher median net weekly earnings: €500 compared to €480 for the general male population of the same age (Table 3.10). However, the percentage of players earning €650 per week and above is almost 10 percentage points less: 16 per cent compared to 25 per cent for the general male population of the same age.

The median net weekly earnings of players working full-time is less: €500 compared to €525 for the general male population of the same age. Given that their hours of work are the same (Table 3.8), this discrepancy in pay is being driven by other factors. There could be, for example, variations in their sectors of employment, positions held within their organisations (i.e. level of seniority), etc. The fact that the percentage of the general male population of the same age as players with net weekly earnings in excess of €644 is greater than the proportion of players (30 per cent compared to 16 per cent) may suggest that this discrepancy in pay has something to do with the positions held by players within their organisations.

Another area where there is a difference in net weekly pay is for players employed in the public sector: their median net weekly earnings are, on average, €88 less than the general male population of the same age that work in the public sector.<sup>50</sup> The underlying reason for this divergence in pay could be differences in the public

<sup>50</sup> Approximately 27 per cent of players working in the public sector have net weekly earnings in excess of €599: this compares with 41 per cent of the general male population of the same age.

sector sub-sectors that both groups are employed and variations in pay and hours worked across the different sub-sectors.

We saw in Table 3.6 that players are predominantly employed in education as compared with the general male population, while the proportion working in the public sector is much lower (Table 3.5), and is mainly in public administration and defence (6 per cent). Based on CSO (2019) Earnings, Hours and Employment Costs Survey (EHECS) data,<sup>51</sup> people employed in the education sector work, on average, fewer weekly paid hours. In 2016, their average weekly paid hours were 23.4, while this was 35.7 for those working in public administration and defence. This is a difference of 12.3 average weekly paid hours, and the difference is increasing over time: in quarter 2 2019, it stood at 13.4 hours.<sup>52</sup> Thus, this discrepancy in weekly hours worked between these two public sector sub-sectors could be part of the reason why players employed in the public sector earn less compared to the general male population of the same age that work in the public sector.

TABLE 3.11 AVERAGE WEEKLY PAID HOURS

Weekly paid hours	2016 (Q2)	2017 (Q2)	2018 (Q2)	2019 (Q2)*
Public administration and defence	35.7	36.5	36.9	37.0
Education	23.4	23.6	23.5	23.6
<b>Difference</b>	<b>12.3</b>	<b>12.9</b>	<b>13.4</b>	<b>13.4</b>

Source: CSO Earnings, Hours and Employment Costs Survey (EHECS) 2019.

Note: \* Preliminary estimates.

Players with a degree or higher qualification also earn less per week: at €500, their median net weekly pay is markedly lower than the €637 earned by the general male population of the same age with the same education levels. When we look at the top earners, we find that the percentage of players with a degree or higher qualification and net weekly earnings in excess of €652 is more than 30 percentage points lower compared to the general male population of the same age with the same education levels: 16 per cent compared to 49 per cent.

On the other hand, we find that players with a non-degree or lower education qualification have slightly higher median net weekly earnings compared to the general male population of the same age with the same education levels: €450 compared to €438. The percentage of this group of players with net weekly

<sup>51</sup> EHECS is a survey that collects earnings, labour costs, hours and employment data from enterprises each quarter. It provides the basis for the production of earnings and labour cost statistics in the different sectors of economic activity in the Republic of Ireland.

<sup>52</sup> See CSO (2019) for detailed breakdowns in the average weekly paid hours of work of the various public sector sub-sectors (civil service, defence, Garda Síochána, education, regional bodies, health, etc.).

earnings in excess of €549 is 24, which compares with 22 per cent of the general male population of the same age.

The reason why players with higher levels of education earn less could, again, be variations in their sectors of employment, job level, etc. For example, given that we know that those employed in the education sector, who will have a degree or higher qualification, earn less, if we exclude these players from the education level earnings analysis, we find that the median net weekly income of players with a degree or higher qualification increases to €520. While this is still lower than the €637 that is earned by the general male population of the same age with a degree or higher qualification, having a large proportion of players employed in the education sector (Table 3.6), where the hours worked and pay are lower, goes some way towards explaining why players with higher levels of education earn less compared to the general male population of the same age. Another potential explanation, as was given for some of the previous discrepancy in pay examinations (e.g. full-time), could be that these players are holding positions within their organisations that are at lower levels compared to the general male population of the same age with the same qualifications.

It is not possible to approximate what percentage of any of the observed earnings gap discussed here between players and the general male population of the same age (those working full-time etc.) is offset by the Government Eligible Expenses Scheme (GEES), player expenses, meals, sponsorship deals, etc. However, it is worth noting that such expense reimbursement will contribute to a narrowing of the gap. For example, Government funding for the GEES in 2016 was €1.6 million, with payments to players ranging from €494.52 to €1,066.97. For the 2018 season, when Government funding for the GEES had increased to €3 million, payments per player ranged from €1,266 for teams that exited the Championship earliest to €1,942 for teams that got to the All-Ireland finals.

### 3.2.6 Workshop insights

Questions probing players' earnings, specifically in terms of players' views on how their income might compare with their non-playing counterparts, were not included in the SSICP-2016 questionnaire. However, some insights into the earnings findings presented in the previous section, along with some of the other results presented in Section 3.2, were gathered at the player workshops.<sup>53</sup> It is important to note that the workshop information that is presented next does not capture all players' views and, therefore, is not representative of all 2016 players. Nevertheless, the evidence gathered at the workshops illustrates the experiences

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<sup>53</sup> See Kelly et al. (2018) for further details on the player workshops.

of some players and provides valuable insights on the impact of playing senior inter-county on players' professional careers.

When players were asked about the impact of playing senior inter-county on their professional careers at the workshops,<sup>54</sup> 50 per cent said it had a positive impact and 50 per cent negative.

In terms of the negative effects, players spoke about their career progression being 'limited'/'stalled'/'put on hold' because of their inter-county time commitments. Others viewed such commitments as posing a 'challenge' to progress up the career ladder. In particular, players felt that their inter-county time commitments prevented them from putting in the extra time and work required for promotion/career advancement. According to the players, the severity of this negative impact depended on a player's position within an organisation. Specifically, players indicated that the higher up the career ladder a player wanted to go, the more negative was the effect because he could not put in the time and work required to progress in his organisation. This will undoubtedly impact players' earnings.

At the workshops, some players indicated that because they could not work 'extra hours' (e.g. overtime) they incurred a financial cost, through lost earnings, from playing inter-county.

A number of players spoke about selecting their work location on the basis of minimising travel to and from training. Thus, in terms of employment opportunities, some were limiting themselves to posts within their counties, which did not necessarily pay as well or offer the same opportunities for advancement as jobs in more distant locations. In addition, players indicated that although there might be better job opportunities abroad, they were unlikely to migrate because this would prevent them from playing inter-county.

Depending on a player's profession, some missed out on the opportunity to travel abroad with their work: this, they felt, meant that they missed out on different types of work experience.

Players spoke about their jobs needing to be flexible, and the nature of the work not too taxing, to enable them to play inter-county. This, they indicated, had led some to select careers/occupations/jobs that they felt gave them the flexibility

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<sup>54</sup> For a summary of the workshops, see Kelly et al. (2018), Appendix B.2.

required to play inter-county (e.g. civil service, teachers), but not necessarily positions that paid well/offered good career promotion prospects.

Some players indicated that they had gone back to college to retrain in another profession, often teaching, as they discovered that the work and time commitments associated with the initial career path that they had chosen (e.g., engineering), even if the job paid well, were not conducive to playing inter-county.

In one workshop, a player indicated that he had become self-employed because, as an inter-county player, he was not able to do overtime, and this prevented him from progressing in his professional career. He became self-employed to make up for what he had lost out on, financially and in a career progression sense. He also felt that the profile he had developed as an inter-county player provided him with opportunities in this regard.

At the workshops, other players also spoke about the positive impacts playing senior inter-county could have on their professional careers – for example, increasing their employment opportunities and broadening networks generally – because being a senior inter-county player can help them to get certain jobs/develop connections. Some mentioned that playing senior inter-county can give players good life tools, including the development of skills that are transferable to, and valued in, a work environment (time management, self-discipline, leadership, teamwork, etc.). A few players mentioned that playing senior inter-county can give rise to sponsorship deals, but that this positive spin-off is not evenly spread.

### **3.3 PLAYERS' VIEWS ON THE IMPACT OF PLAYING SENIOR INTER-COUNTY ON THEIR PROFESSIONAL CAREER**

#### **3.3.1 Job selection decision**

In the SSICP-2016 questionnaire, players who held a job during the 2016 season were asked if the ability to play inter-county was an important factor in the decision to take the job that they were in. Thirty-nine per cent of players strongly agreed/agreed that it was, with another 18 per cent of players somewhat agreeing (Table 3.12).



TABLE 3.12 'BEING ABLE TO PLAY INTER-COUNTY WAS AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN MY DECISION TO TAKE THIS JOB': 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE (PER CENT)

	All players	Football	Hurling
Strongly agree/agree	38.7	40.2	37.1
Somewhat agree	18.3	16.8	19.8
Somewhat disagree	9.9	9.2	10.7
Strongly disagree/disagree	33.1	33.8	32.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

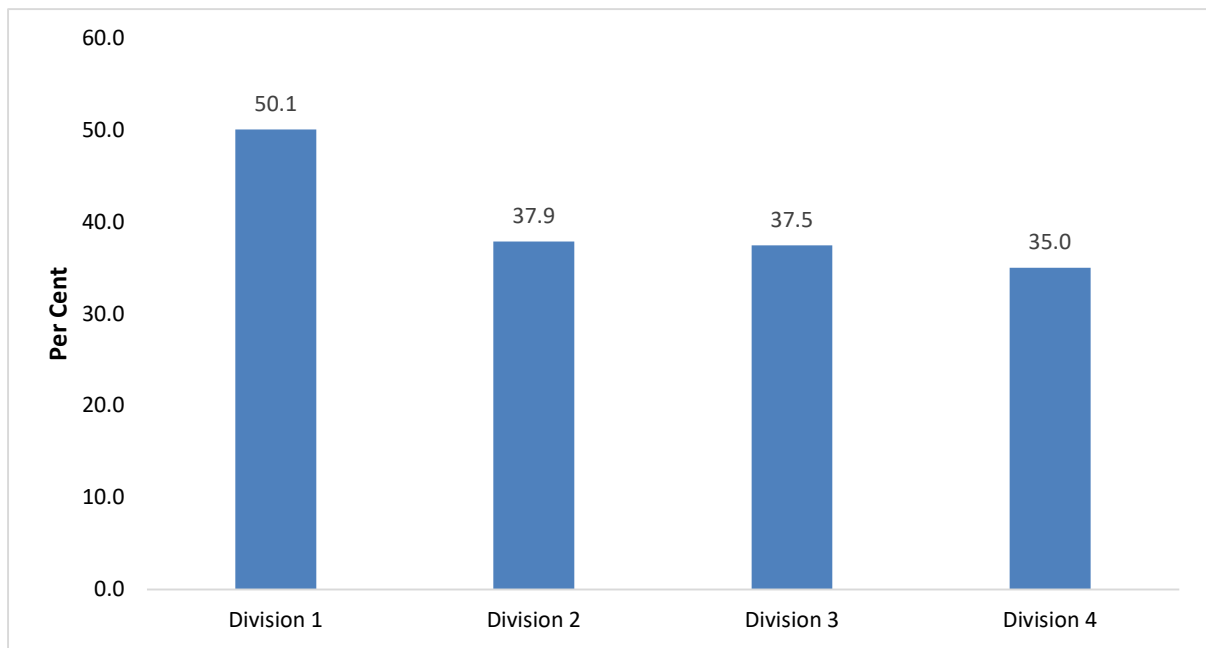
Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

At the aggregate level, there was no difference between footballers and hurlers in this regard (Table 3.12). However, there was variation by playing level. Just over half (50.1 per cent) of Division 1 footballers strongly agreed/agreed that the ability to play senior inter-county was an important factor in the decision to take the job that they were in compared to 35–38 per cent of players in the divisions below this (Figure 3.2).

A much higher percentage of MacCarthy Cup hurlers indicated that the ability to play inter-county was an important factor in their job choice decision: 48 per cent compared to 35 per cent of Christy Ring hurlers, less than 25 per cent of Nicky Rackard players, and a much lower percentage of Lory Meagher players (Figure 3.3). Being able to play senior inter-county was a more important factor in the job choice decision of players aged 18–25<sup>55</sup> than for players older than this (Figure 3.4).

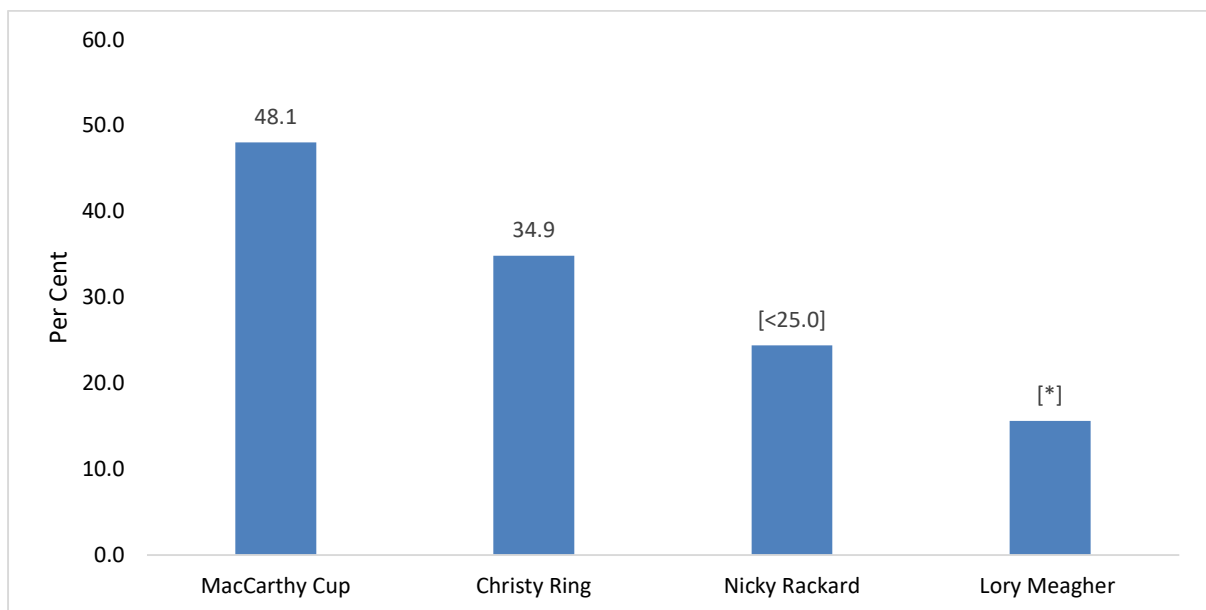
<sup>55</sup> The main economic status of only a small percentage of players aged 18–21 during the 2016 inter-county season was 'in employment'. These individuals were therefore combined with those aged 22–25 for the analyses conducted in this chapter.

**FIGURE 3.2 'BEING ABLE TO PLAY INTER-COUNTY WAS AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN MY DECISION TO TAKE THIS JOB' – STRONGLY AGREE/AGREE: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

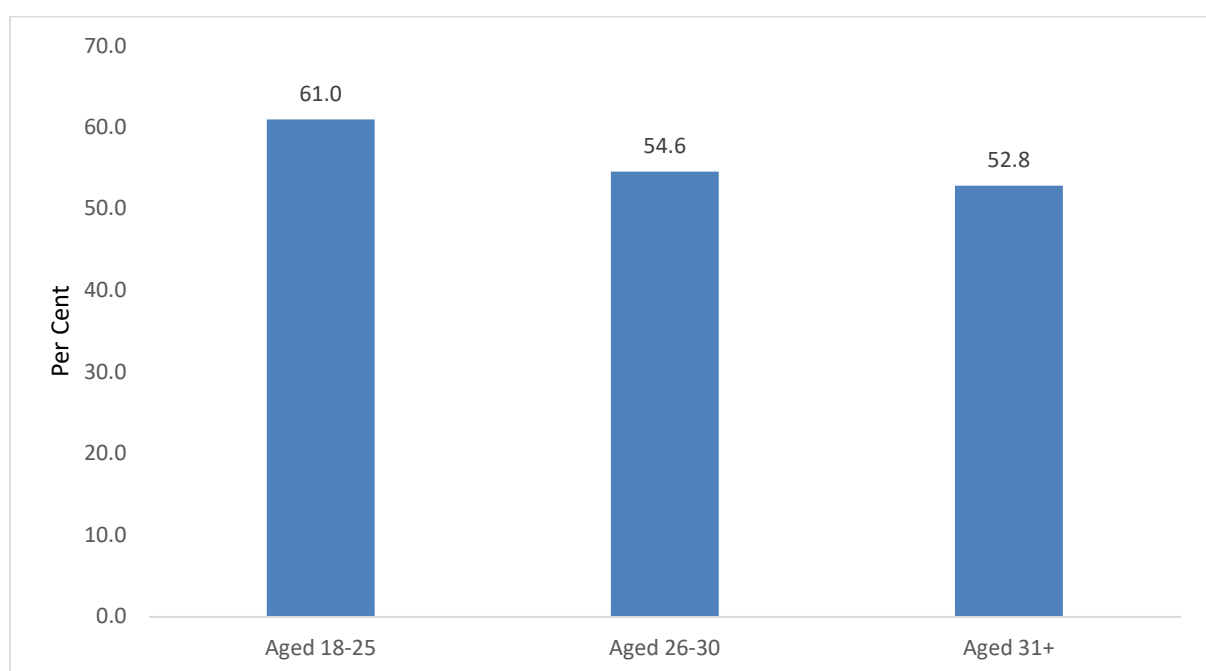
**FIGURE 3.3 'BEING ABLE TO PLAY INTER-COUNTY WAS AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN MY DECISION TO TAKE THIS JOB' – STRONGLY AGREE/AGREE: 2016 HURLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: The percentages in square brackets ([]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

\* Number used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

**FIGURE 3.4 'BEING ABLE TO PLAY INTER-COUNTY WAS AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN MY DECISION TO TAKE THIS JOB' – STRONGLY AGREE/AGREE/SOMEWHAT AGREE: 2016 PLAYERS – AGE GROUP**

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

### 3.3.2 Recruitment

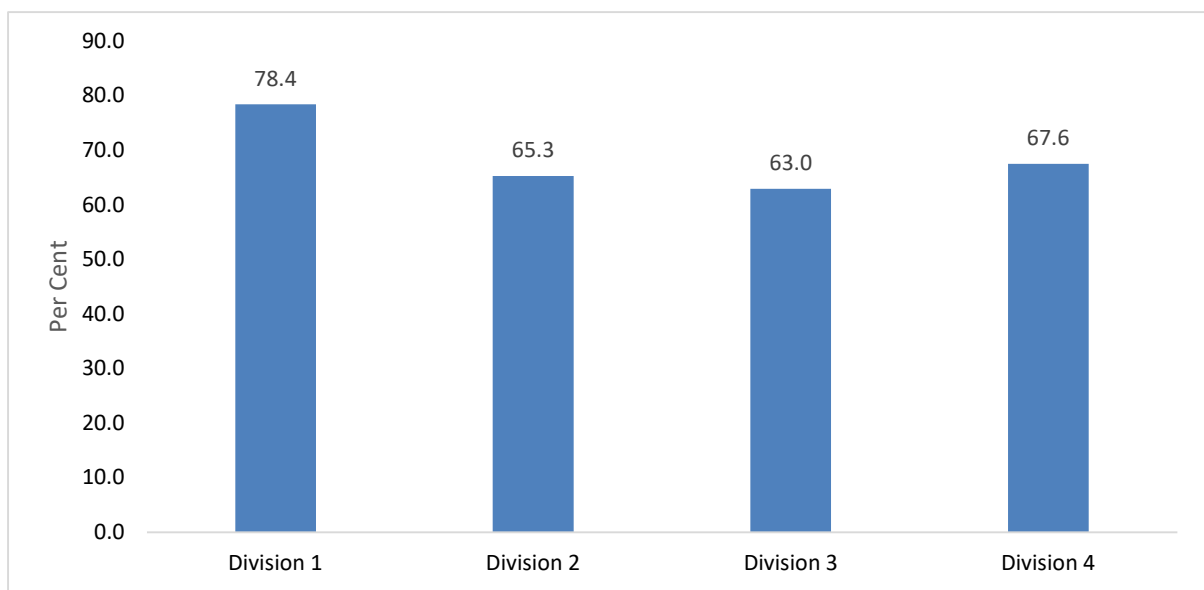
Seventy per cent of 2016 players indicated that their employer was aware that they were an inter-county player when they were being recruited (Table 3.13).

**TABLE 3.13 EMPLOYER AWARE PLAYER WAS INTER-COUNTY PLAYER WHEN RECRUITED: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE (PER CENT)**

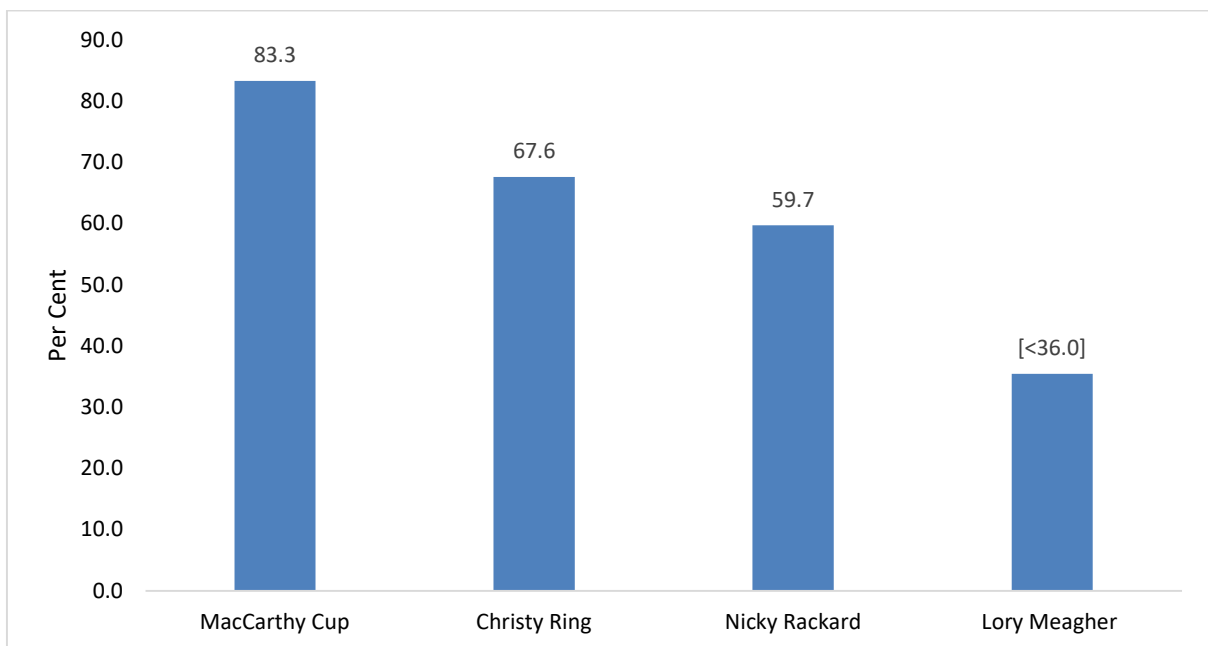
	All players	Football	Hurling
Yes	69.5	68.4	70.7
No	21.7	22.0	21.4
Don't know	8.8	9.6	7.9
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

This percentage was noticeably higher among top tier players: 78 per cent of Division 1 footballers (Figure 3.5) and 83 per cent of MacCarthy Cup hurlers (Figure 3.6). It was also somewhat higher among players aged 18–25 (Figure 3.7).

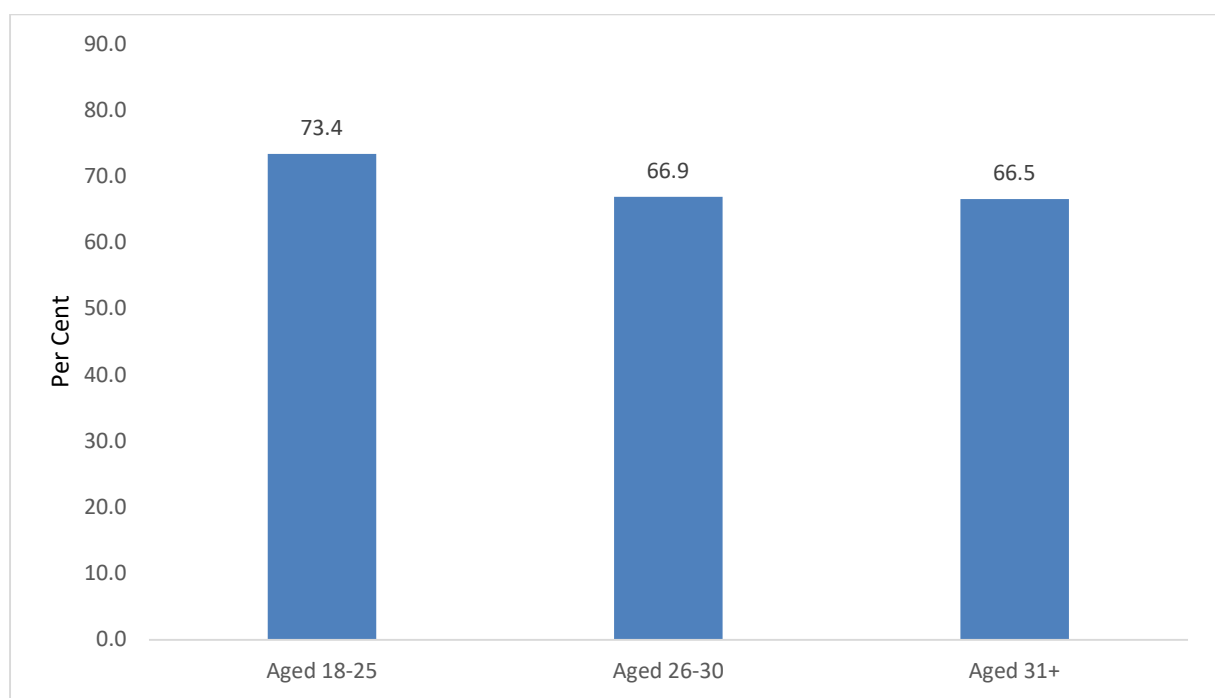
**FIGURE 3.5 EMPLOYER AWARE PLAYER WAS INTER-COUNTY GAELIC FOOTBALLER WHEN RECRUITED: 2016 PLAYERS**

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

**FIGURE 3.6 EMPLOYER AWARE PLAYER WAS INTER-COUNTY HURLER WHEN RECRUITED: 2016 PLAYERS**

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

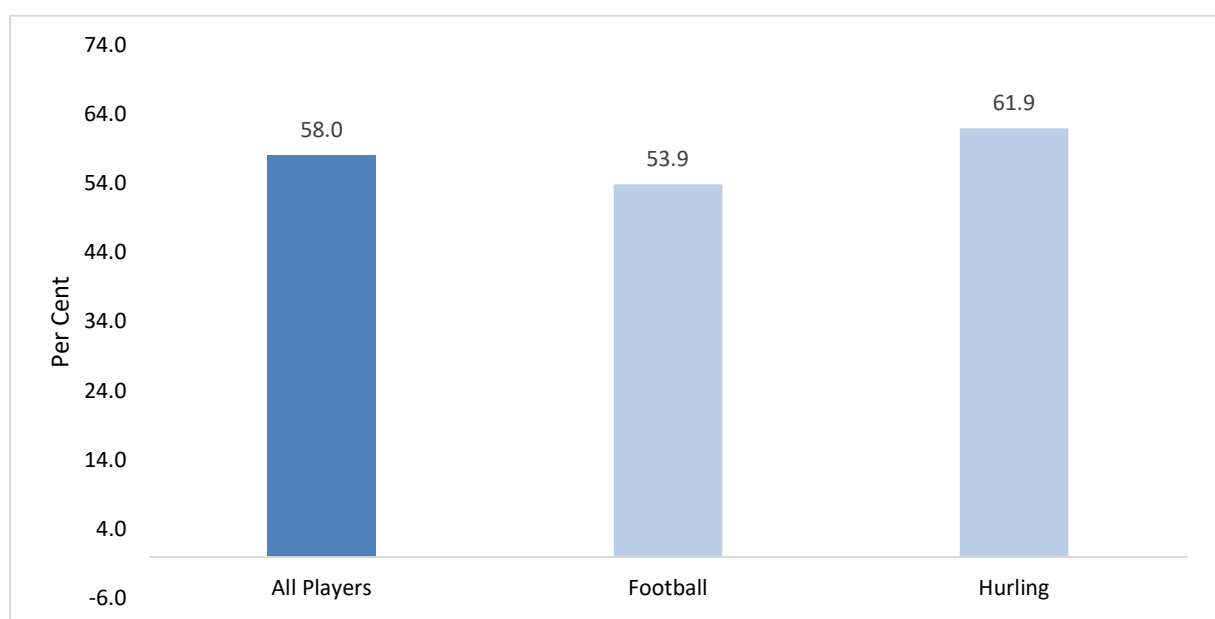
**FIGURE 3.7 EMPLOYER AWARE PLAYER WAS INTER-COUNTY PLAYER WHEN RECRUITED: 2016 PLAYERS – AGE GROUP**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

In the SSICP-2016, 58 per cent of players indicated that being an inter-county player helped them to get their jobs. This was higher among hurlers: 62 per cent compared to 54 per cent among footballers (Figure 3.8).

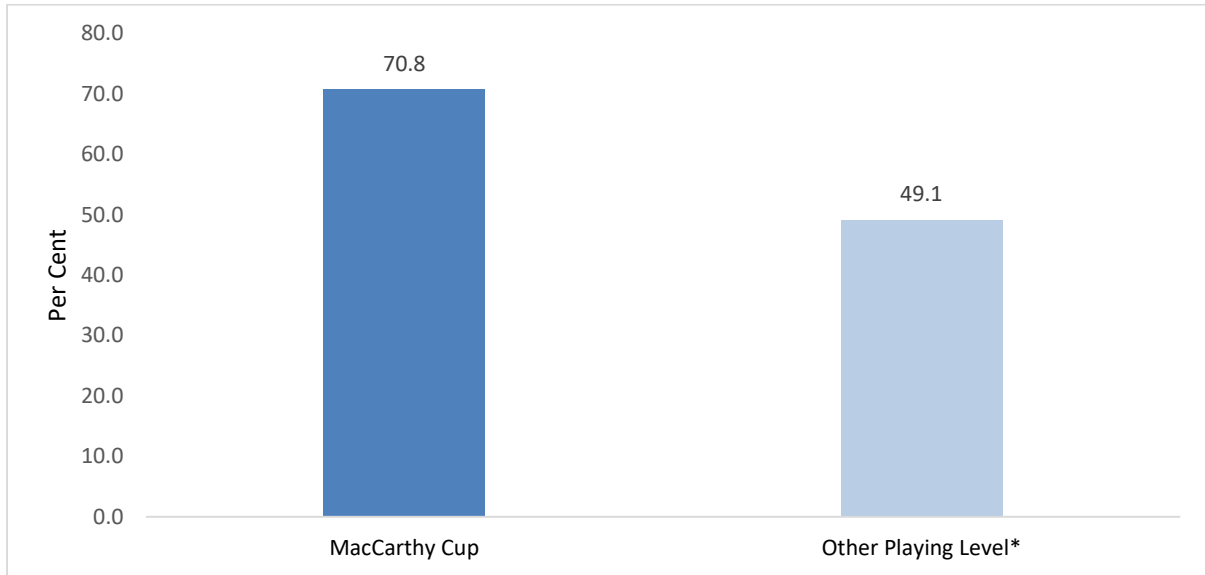
**FIGURE 3.8 ‘BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER HELPED ME TO GET MY JOB’: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

This was particularly the case for MacCarthy Cup hurlers: 71 per cent compared to 49 per cent among players in the other hurling grades (Figure 3.9).

**FIGURE 3.9 'BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER HELPED ME TO GET MY JOB': 2016 HURLERS**

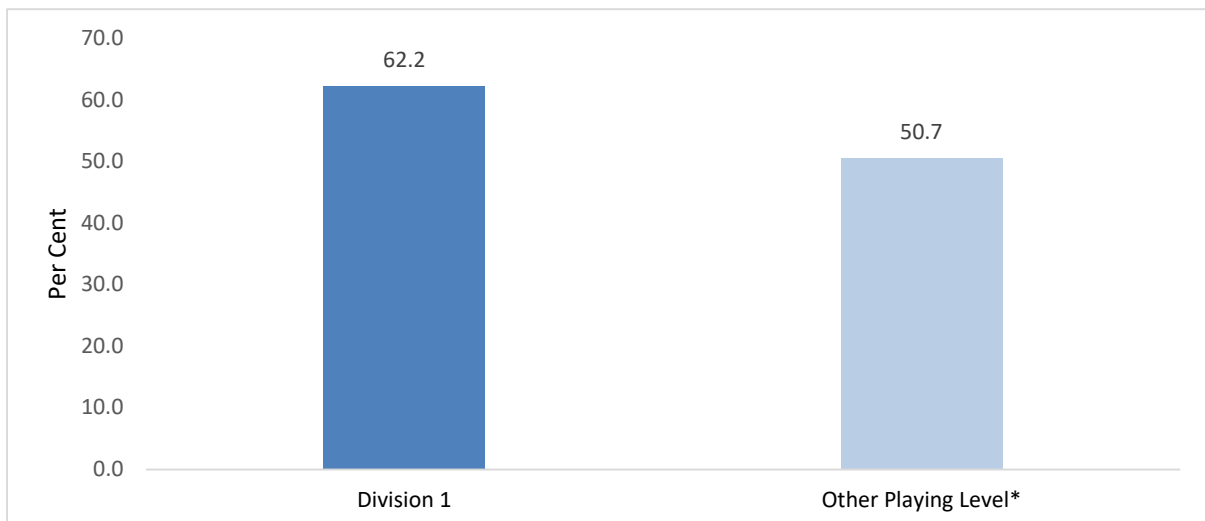


Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: \* 'Other playing level' relates to Christy Ring, Nicky Rackard and Lory Meagher players.

A greater percentage of Division 1 footballers believed that being an inter-county player helped them to get their job: 62 per cent compared to 51 per cent of players in the lower football divisions (Figure 3.10).

**FIGURE 3.10 'BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER HELPED ME TO GET MY JOB': 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS**



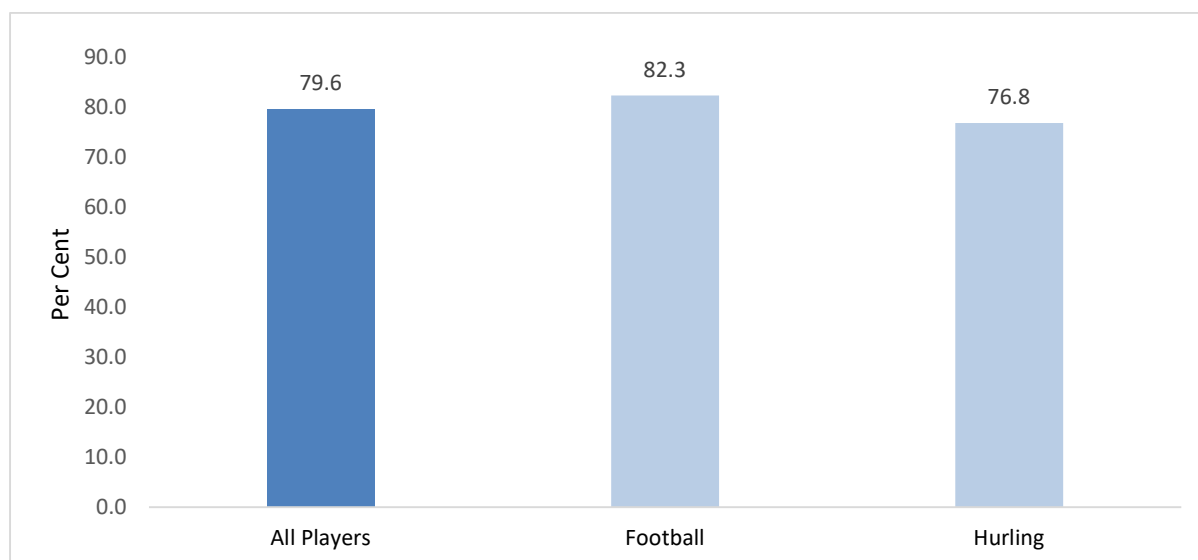
Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: \* 'Other playing level' relates to Division 2, Division 3 and Division 4 players.

### 3.3.3 Changed jobs

When the SSICP-2016 questionnaire was administered in 2017, the players who indicated that they held a job in 2016 were asked if they were still in the same job.<sup>56</sup> Almost 80 per cent of players indicated that they had not changed jobs (Figure 3.11), with this percentage slightly higher among footballers: 82 per cent compared to 77 per cent of hurlers.

**FIGURE 3.11 DID NOT CHANGE JOB BETWEEN 2016 AND 2017: 2016 PLAYERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

This percentage was somewhat lower among Division 2 footballers and considerably higher among Division 4 players: 75 and 91 per cent respectively (Table 3.14). It was also higher among Lory Meagher hurlers (85 per cent).

**TABLE 3.14 DID NOT CHANGE JOB BETWEEN 2016 AND 2017: 2016 PLAYERS – PLAYING LEVEL AND AGE**

Football	%	Hurling	%	Age (years)	%
Division 1	82.4	MacCarthy Cup	76.7	18–25	69.4
Division 2	75.0	Christy Ring	75.2	26–30	84.6
Division 3	83.3	Nicky Rackard	74.5	31+	93.8
Division 4	90.5	Lory Meagher	84.9		

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

<sup>56</sup> The SSICP-2016 was administered between May and the end of August 2017.

A smaller proportion of players aged 18–25 continued to hold their 2016 job in 2017: 69 per cent compared to 85 per cent of players aged 26–30 and 94 per cent of players aged 31 and above (Table 3.14).

Based on the 2017 SILC data, 10.3 per cent of the general male population of the same age as 2016 players changed jobs in the previous 12 months.<sup>57</sup> This means that job turnover between 2016 and 2017 was approximately 10 percentage points higher among senior inter-county players (20.4 per cent; Figure 3.11).

For the 20 per cent of players who changed job between 2016 and 2017, the main reason for doing so for just over a quarter of them (26 per cent) was the end of a temporary contact or they were made redundant or dismissed (Table 3.15).

Another 16 per cent of players changed jobs because there were limited opportunities for advancement in their 2016 job. Fourteen per cent indicated that they found it too difficult to combine their job with the commitments required to play inter-county; another 14 per cent of players changed job because they had no interest in the job content of their 2016 job.

The other reasons cited by players who changed job between 2016 and 2017 were that they had got a new job (less than 11 per cent of players), the level of pay was too low (less than 8 per cent of players), or some other reason (less than 13 per cent of players).<sup>58</sup>

The CSO's SILC data capture information on why respondents change job. However, it was not feasible to present this information in the report because of the numbers that changed job, and therefore the number of responses for the reasons for changing job, being too small.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> The 2017 SILC job change data relate the 12 months previous to the date of the survey interview and include promotion. This means that the time period for the general male population of the same age as players was approximately the same as it was for 2016 players.

<sup>58</sup> Some of the other reasons cited were: (i) limited opportunities to use skills/qualifications, (ii) travel, and (iii) education.

<sup>59</sup> Even if the responses given for changing job were pooled into two categories, there were still too few observations for the two categories to present this information in the report.



TABLE 3.15 MAIN REASON LEFT 2016 JOB: 2016 PLAYERS (PER CENT)

	All players
End of temporary contract, made redundant or dismissed	26.4
Limited opportunities for advancement	15.7
Too difficult to combine job with inter-county commitments	14.4
No interest in job content	13.9
Other	[<13.0]
New job	[<11.0]
Level of pay too low	[<8.0]
<b>Total</b>	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: The percentages in square brackets ([ ]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

### 3.3.4 Players' views on impact of playing inter-county on various aspects of their professional career

2016 players were asked about the extent to which they felt that being an inter-county player had impacted various aspects of their professional career: specifically, earnings, job security, promotion prospects and job satisfaction. In addition, players were asked if they had ever, aside from agreed leave with their employer, missed work because of their inter-county commitments.

#### *Earnings*

Thirty per cent of players felt that being an inter-county player had negatively impacted their pay. This was higher among footballers: 35 per cent compared to 26 per cent of hurlers (Table 3.16).

TABLE 3.16 PLAYERS' VIEWS ON IMPACT OF BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER ON THEIR EARNINGS: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE (PER CENT)

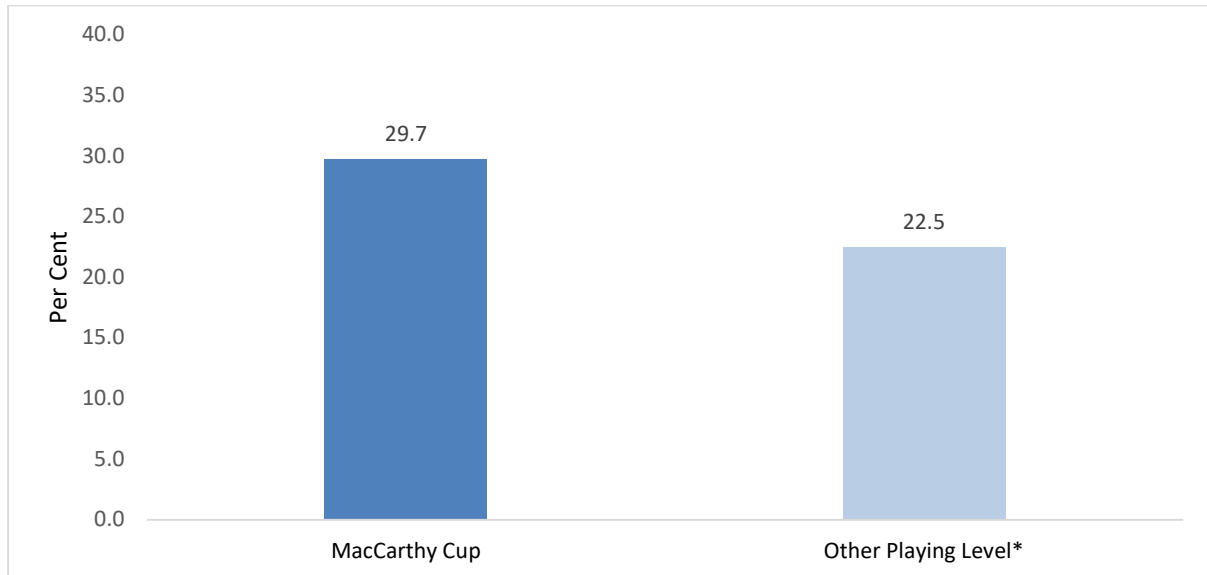
	All players	Football	Hurling
Negatively	30.4	34.5	26.1
Not at all	57.8	53.9	61.8
Positively	11.8	11.6	12.1
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

In relation to playing level, a somewhat larger percentage of MacCarthy Cup hurlers felt that being an inter-county player had negatively impacted their earnings: 30 per cent compared to 23 per cent of players in the other hurling grades (Figure 3.12).

It was the opposite for footballers, with a smaller percentage of the Division 1 players being of the view that being an inter-county player had negatively impacted their earnings: 31 per cent compared to 36 per cent of players in the lower playing divisions (Figure 3.13).

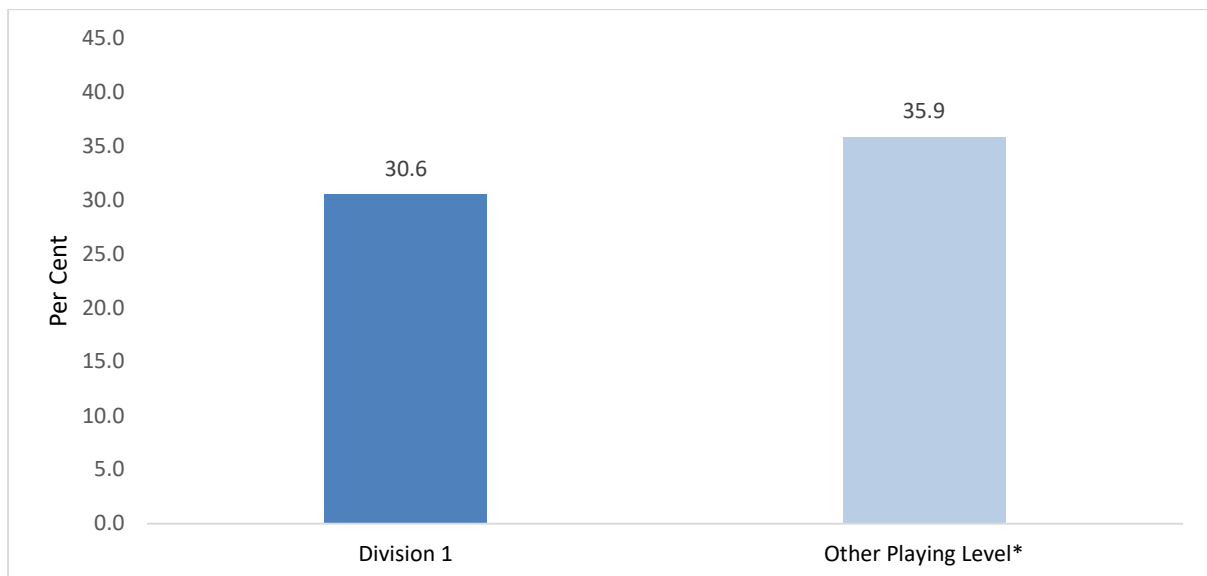
**FIGURE 3.12 BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER NEGATIVELY IMPACTS EARNINGS: 2016 HURLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: \* 'Other playing level' relates to Christy Ring, Nicky Rackard and Lory Meagher players.

**FIGURE 3.13 BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER NEGATIVELY IMPACTS EARNINGS: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS**



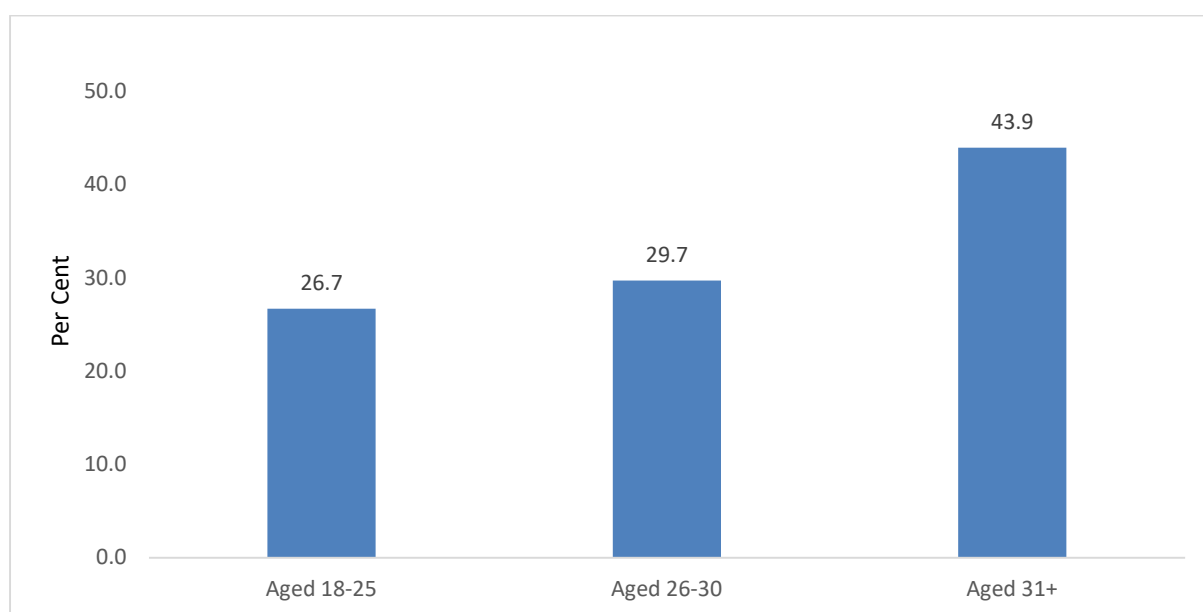
Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: \* 'Other playing level' relates to Division 2, Division 3 and Division 4 players.

Not surprisingly, the impact of being an inter-county player on earnings becomes more apparent as players age: 44 per cent of those aged 31 and above felt that

playing inter-county had negatively impacted their earnings compared to 30 per cent of those aged 26–30 and 27 per cent of those aged 18–25 (Figure 3.14).

**FIGURE 3.14 BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER NEGATIVELY IMPACTS EARNINGS: 2016 PLAYERS – AGE GROUP**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

### **Job security**

Just over a quarter of 2016 players believed that being an inter-county player had positively impacted their job security (Table 3.17).

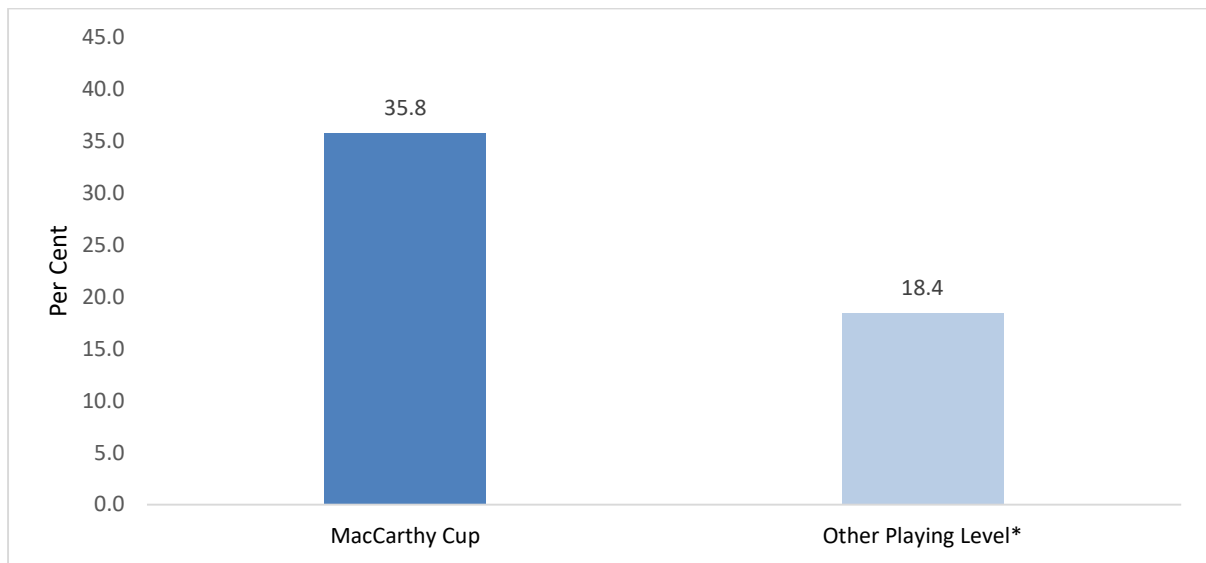
**TABLE 3.17 PLAYERS' VIEWS ON IMPACT OF BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER ON THEIR JOB SECURITY: 2016 PLAYERS (PER CENT)**

	All players
Negatively	11.0
Not at all	63.5
Positively	25.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

This was particularly the case for top-tier players. Specifically, 36 per cent of MacCarthy Cup hurlers were of the view that being an inter-county player had a positive impact on their job security compared to 18 per cent of hurlers in the lower grades (Figure 3.15). Among footballers, this percentage was 30 per cent for Division 1 players compared to 22 per cent for footballers in the other divisions (Figure 3.16).

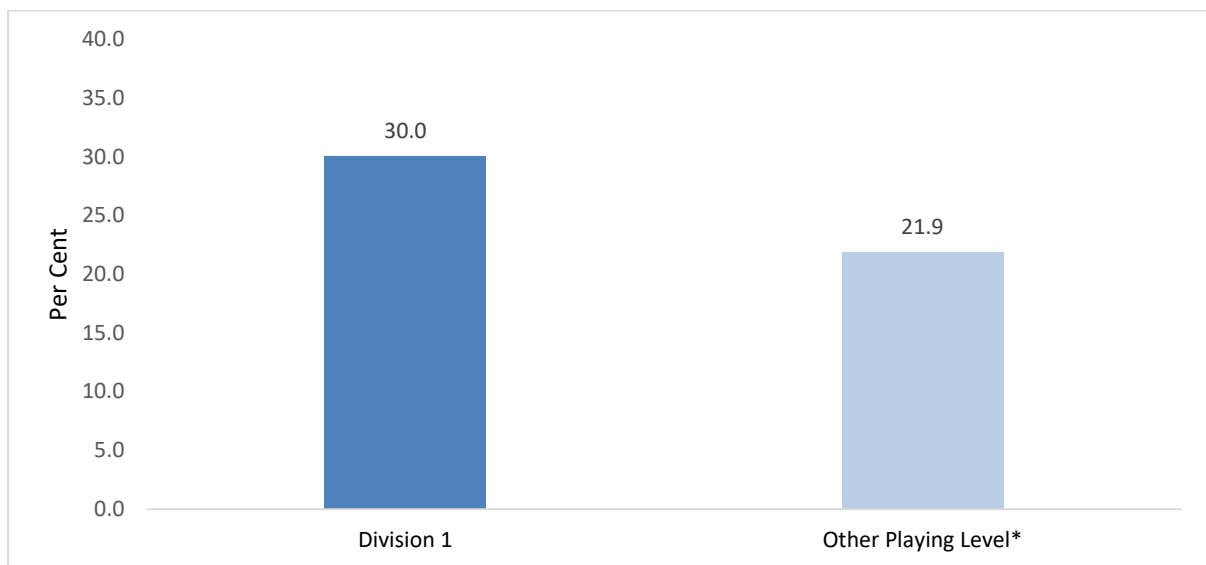
**FIGURE 3.15 BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER NEGATIVELY IMPACTS JOB SECURITY: 2016 HURLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: \* 'Other playing level' relates to Christy Ring, Nicky Rackard and Lory Meagher players.

**FIGURE 3.16 BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER NEGATIVELY IMPACTS JOB SECURITY: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: \* 'Other playing level' relates to Division 2, Division 3 and Division 4 players.

**Promotion prospects**

In relation to promotion prospects, just over a fifth of players indicated that being an inter-county player negatively impacted this aspect of their professional career. However, an equivalent proportion believed that it had a positive influence (Table 3.18).

The proportion of players that were of the view that playing inter-county had a negative impact on their promotion prospects was somewhat higher among footballers: 23 per cent compared to 17 per cent of hurlers (Table 3.18).

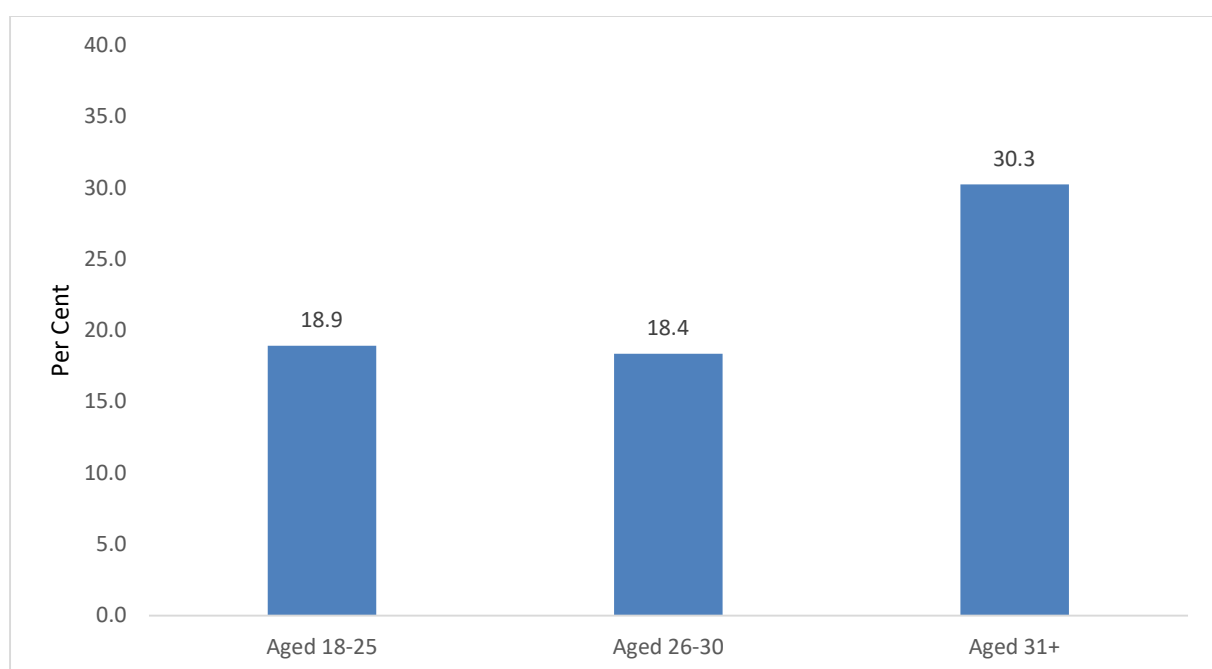
**TABLE 3.18 PLAYERS' VIEWS ON IMPACT OF BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER ON THEIR PROMOTION PROSPECTS: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE (PER CENT)**

	All players	Football	Hurling
Negatively	20.2	23.0	17.3
Not at all	59.7	57.8	61.8
Positively	20.1	19.3	20.9
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

A larger percentage of players aged 31 and above also felt that being an inter-county player had a negative impact on their promotion prospects: 30 per cent compared to 18–19 per cent among the younger age cohorts (Figure 3.17).

**FIGURE 3.17 BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER NEGATIVELY IMPACTS PROMOTION PROSPECTS: 2016 PLAYERS – AGE GROUP**

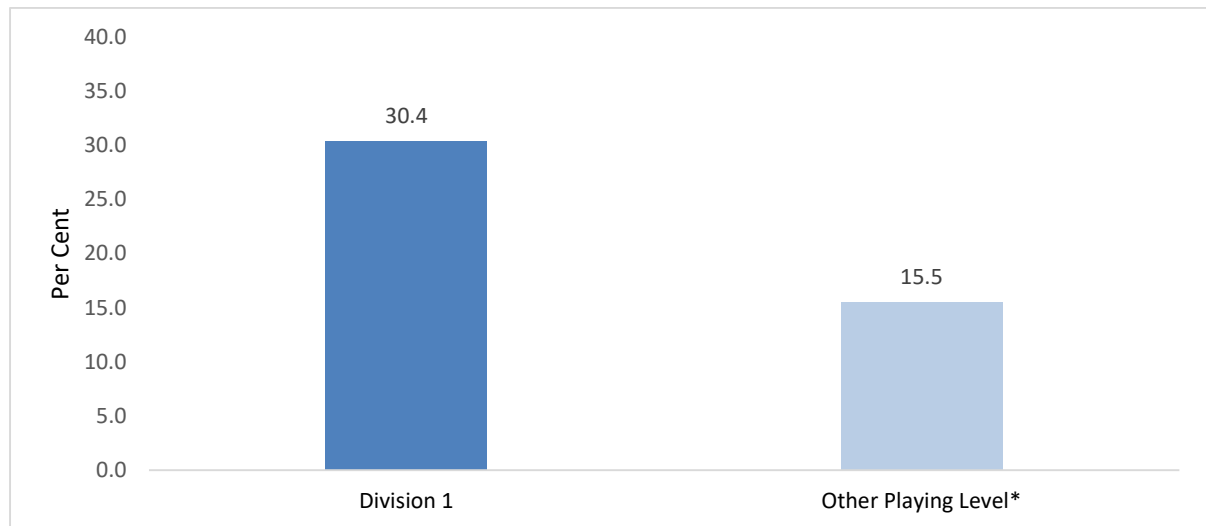


Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

As with job security, a bigger percentage of the top-tier players were of the view that playing inter-county had a positive impact on their promotion prospects: 30 per cent of Division 1 footballers and 26 per cent of MacCarthy Cup hurlers

compared to 16 per cent of players in the lower playing levels in both football and hurling (Figures 3.18 and 3.19).

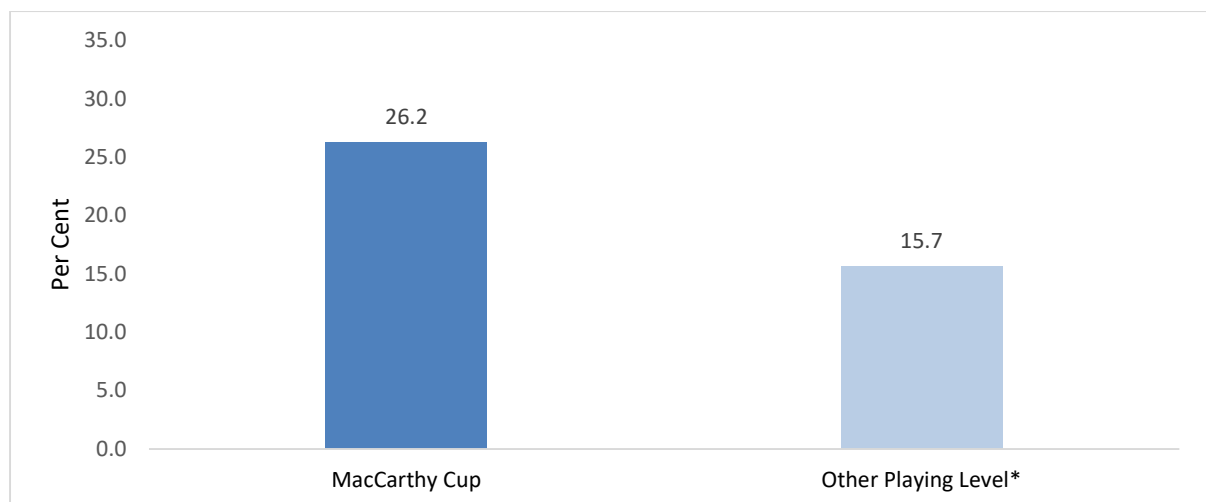
**FIGURE 3.18 BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER POSITIVELY IMPACTS PROMOTION PROSPECTS: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: \* 'Other playing level' relates to Division 2, Division 3 and Division 4 players.

**FIGURE 3.19 BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER POSITIVELY IMPACTS PROMOTION PROSPECTS: 2016 HURLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: \* 'Other playing level' relates to Christy Ring, Nicky Rackard and Lory Meagher players.

### **Job satisfaction**

As with players' views on the impact of being an inter-county player on their promotion prospects, just over a fifth indicated that playing inter-county negatively impacted their job satisfaction, and the same fraction felt that it had a positive effect (Table 3.19).

Twenty-five per cent of footballers said that playing inter-county had a negative impact on their job satisfaction compared to 18 per cent of hurlers.

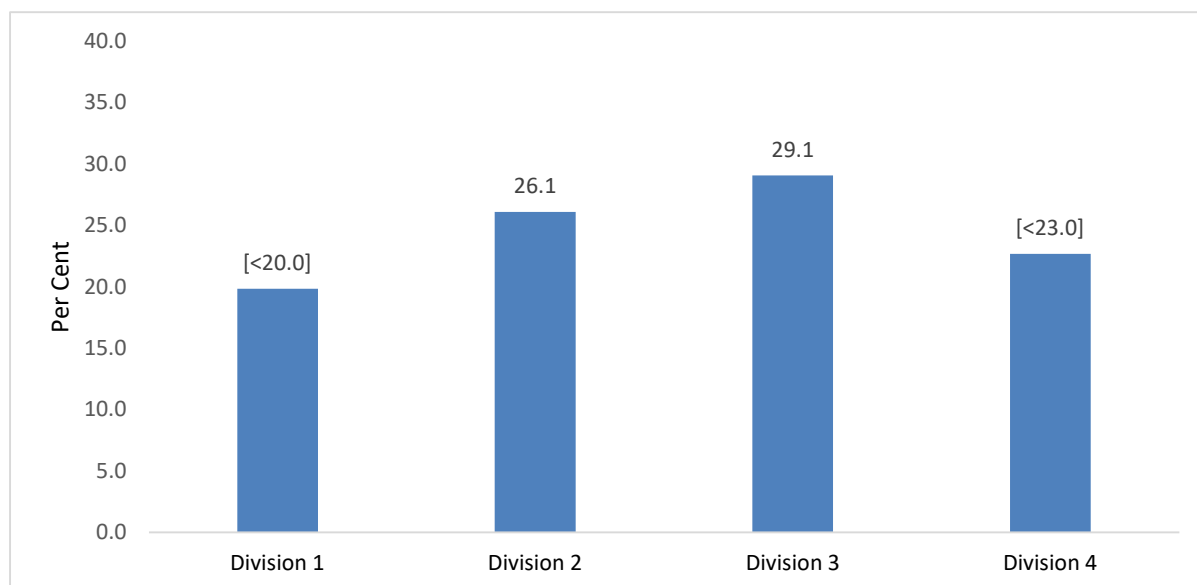
TABLE 3.19 PLAYERS' VIEWS ON IMPACT OF BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER ON THEIR JOB SATISFACTION: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE (PER CENT)

	All players	Football	Hurling
Negatively	21.2	24.5	17.8
Not at all	56.8	53.2	60.5
Positively	22.0	22.3	21.7
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

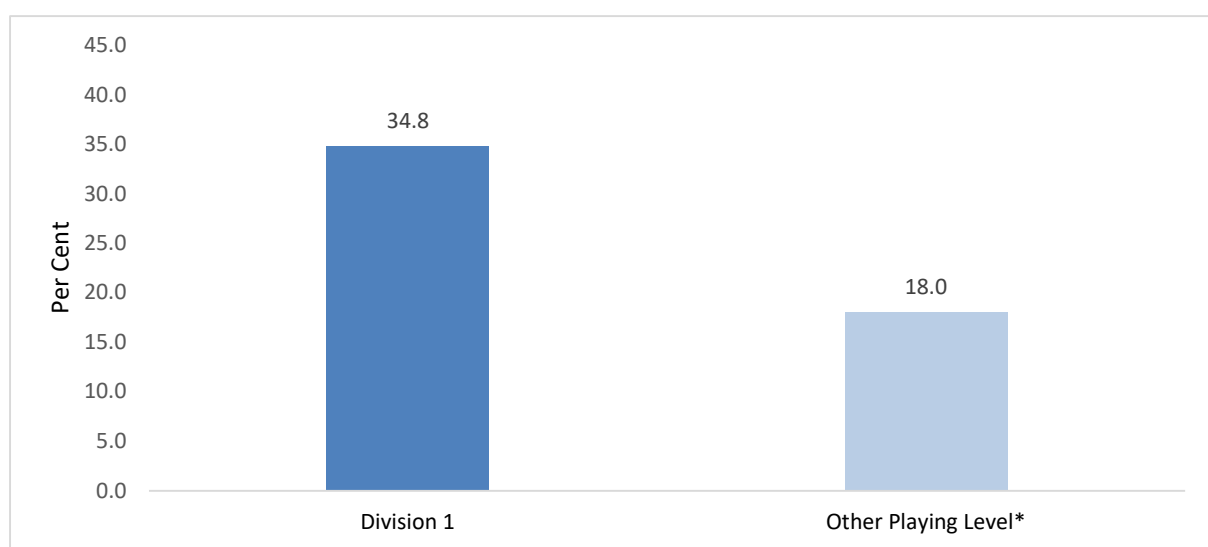
This negative view among footballers was predominantly held by players outside the top tier, especially Division 2 (26 per cent) and Division 3 (29 per cent) players (Figure 3.20).

FIGURE 3.20 BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER NEGATIVELY IMPACTS JOB SATISFACTION: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

On the other hand, a great proportion of Division 1 (i.e. top-tier) footballers indicated that being an inter-county player had a positive impact on their job satisfaction: 35 per cent compared to 18 per cent of players in the lower playing levels (Figure 3.21).

**FIGURE 3.21 BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER POSITIVELY IMPACTS JOB SATISFACTION: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS**

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: \*'Other playing level' relates to Division 2, Division 3 and Division 4 players.

There was very little difference among hurlers with regard to the proportion that were of the view that playing inter-county had a negative impact on their job satisfaction (Table 3.20). However, a higher percentage of MacCarthy Cup hurlers indicated that playing inter-county had a positive impact on this aspect of their professional career (Table 3.20).

**TABLE 3.20 PLAYERS' VIEWS ON IMPACT OF BEING AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER ON THEIR JOB SATISFACTION: 2016 HURLERS (PER CENT)**

	MacCarthy Cup	Other playing level*
Negatively	18.5	17.1
Not at all	56.2	64.8
Positively	25.4	18.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

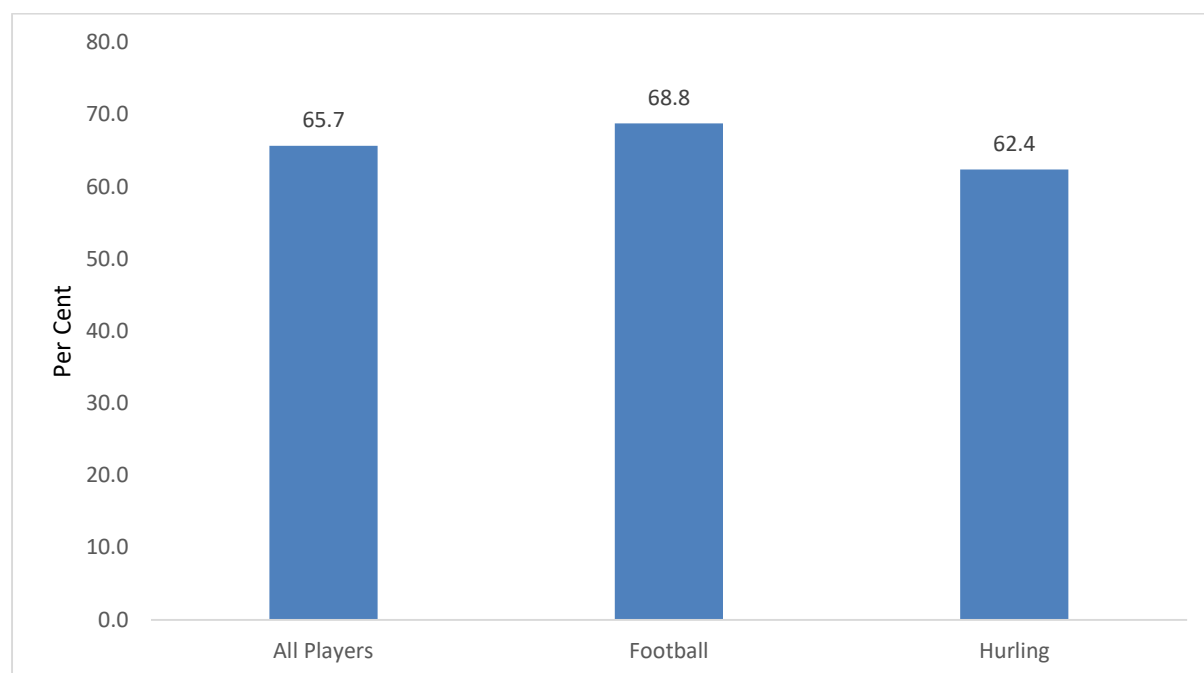
Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: \*'Other playing level' relates to Christy Ring, Nicky Rackard and Lory Meagher players.

### ***Missed work due to inter-county commitments***

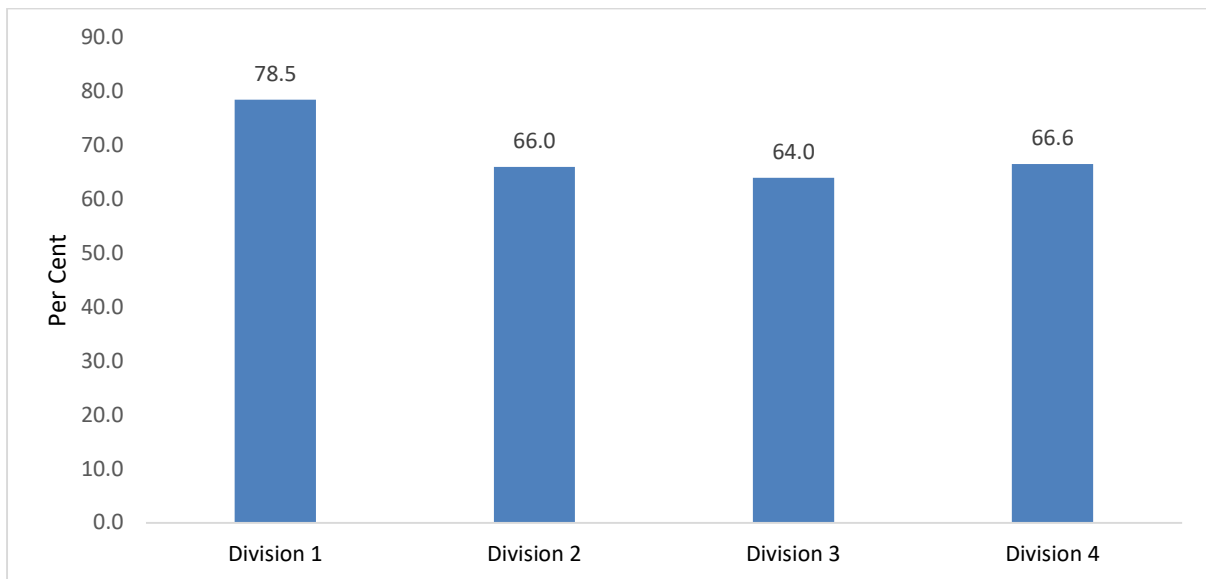
Apart from agreed leave with their employer, 66 per cent of 2016 players indicated that they missed work because of their inter-county commitments (Figure 3.22). This was somewhat higher among footballers: 69 per cent compared to 62 per cent of hurlers.



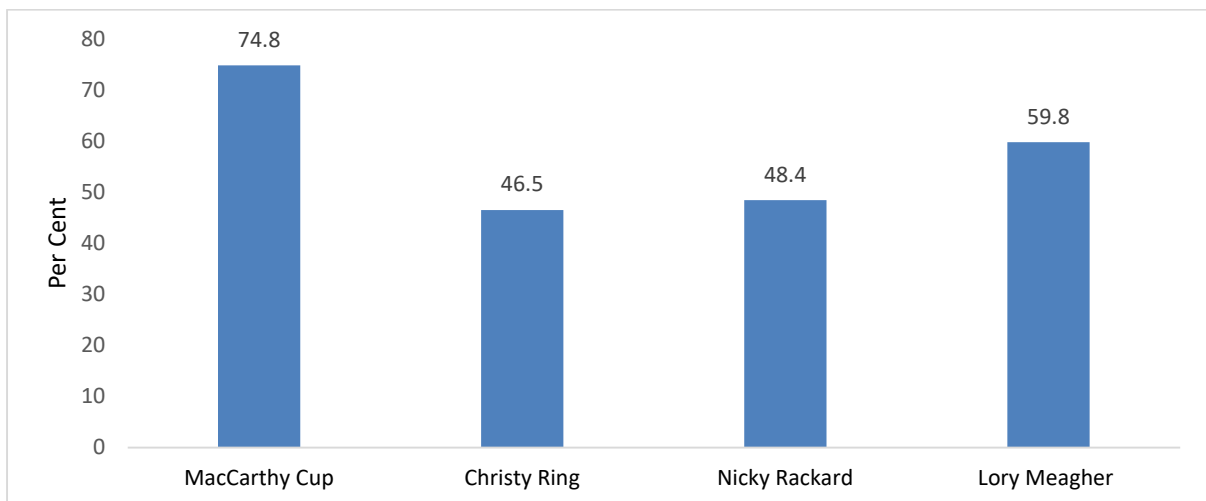
**FIGURE 3.22 MISSED WORK BECAUSE OF INTER-COUNTY COMMITMENTS: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE**

Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

When we examined this issue by playing level, we found that the percentages that missed work because of their inter-county commitments were much higher among the top-tier players: 79 per cent of Division 1 footballers (Figure 3.23) and 75 per cent of MacCarthy Cup hurlers (Figure 3.24).

**FIGURE 3.23 MISSED WORK BECAUSE OF INTER-COUNTY COMMITMENTS: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS**

Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).*

**FIGURE 3.24 MISSED WORK BECAUSE OF INTER-COUNTY COMMITMENTS: 2016 HURLERS**

Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).*

The only nationally representative absent-from-work data gathered for the general population in Ireland are absences for health-related reasons: personal health problems and/or work-related illness/injury. The CSO's Irish Health Survey (IHS) 2015<sup>60</sup> captures absences from work due to personal health problems: this also includes days lost due to accidents or injuries.<sup>61</sup> Based on these data, 24 per cent of 2015 respondents were absent from work due to personal health problems in

<sup>60</sup> The IHS data, which cover individuals aged 15 and above, were captured every quarter from quarter 4 2014 to quarter 4 2015.

<sup>61</sup> Respondents were asked about the number of days that they were absent from work due to personal health problems (including days lost due to accidents or injuries) in the previous 12 months.

the previous 12 months.<sup>62</sup> The IHS age group with the highest percentage absent from work were those most similar in age to senior inter-county players, specifically respondents aged 25–34: 37 per cent of this group were absent from work for personal health reasons in the previous 12 months, and the average number of days that they were absent for was 7.1. For those aged 15–24, the absence figure was 22 per cent and the average number of days was 2.

Although this figure of 37 per cent is not directly comparable with the senior inter-county players' data, as it relates to work absences because of personal health problems, it is still much lower to the percentages reported by 2016 players for being absent from work because of inter-county commitments. Furthermore, Kelly et al. (2018) found that 52 per cent of 2016 players sustained an injury during the 2016 season. Of this group of players, 30 per cent did not require an absence from work/college because of the injury that they sustained. However, for those that did, the average number of days that they were absent for was 9.1 days, which is higher than the 7.1 days reported by those aged 24–34 in the IHS.

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<sup>62</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-ihs/irishhealthsurvey2015/ct/>

## CHAPTER 4

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### Engagement in self-reported risky behaviour

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we examine the association between participation in senior inter-county Gaelic games and dimensions of players' self-reported risky behaviours. Primarily, we focus on aspects of players' self-reported alcohol consumption and how it varies across the inter-county season. Findings related to 2016 players' alcohol consumption are also considered relative to a comparable representative sample of Irish adults. Additionally, players' beliefs regarding their inter-county teammates' engagement in other types of risky behaviour are examined.

A number of considerations underlie this analysis. While sport is a well-recognised factor in stress, depression and anxiety prevention, it has also been noted that practising sport at an elite level can give rise to mental health concerns (Schaal et al. 2011). A common suggestion is that alcohol and other risky behaviours (e.g. gambling, illicit drug use) might manifest as coping mechanisms to address sports-related stress and anxiety. This may be particularly true of elite-level athletes given the mental and physical demands, and time commitments, of elite sports participation (O'Brien et al., 2007; Lisha and Sussman, 2010).

Another important factor to consider is the notion of athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993). As described by Kelly et al. (2018), athletes, particularly those playing at a high level, may over-identify with their role as an athlete to the potential detriment of their wellbeing and social development. This may lead athletes to engage in behaviour perceived as normative among other athletes, such as alcohol consumption (Lisha and Sussman, 2010). Previous research has shown athletes to overestimate the amount of alcohol consumed by their peers, and these perceptions of social norms have been shown to predict personal use (Dams-O'Connorn et al. 2007). Relatedly, athletes engaged in team-based sports may face pressure to engage in alcohol consumption, justified in terms of its ability to improve team cohesion and bonding (O'Brien et al., 2007).

Empirically, most evidence suggests that not only do athletes tend to report more risky drinking patterns than their non-athletic peers (Martens et al., 2006), but patterns of alcohol consumption also vary by level of sports participation (Leichliter et al., 1998; O'Brien et al., 2005, 2007; Andes et al., 2012; Barry et al., 2015). Leichliter et al. (1998) found that the number of alcoholic drinks consumed per

week and engagement in binge-drinking<sup>63</sup> increased the more involved and invested American collegiate students were in sports. Marzell et al. (2015) found evidence that while elite intercollegiate athletes in the United States drank less frequently than intramural/club athletes, they reported heavier alcohol consumption when they did drink. Outside the United States, evidence from New Zealand suggests that elite sportspeople display different drinking patterns to other groups (O'Brien et al., 2005, 2007). O'Brien et al. (2007) found elite provincial (but not elite international) sportspeople to be at greater risk of hazardous drinking compared with non-elites and non-sportspeople. Other evidence suggests that alcohol consumption among athletes differs depending on the stage of the season, with more frequent and heavier alcohol consumption often taking place in the off-season (Bower and Martin, 1999; Dams-O'Connor et al., 2007; Dietze et al., 2008; Du Preez et al., 2017).

While a positive relationship can be identified between sports participation and alcohol consumption, this does not hold for other drug types. A review by Lisha and Sussman (2010) found that both cigarette and illicit drug use were overall negatively related to athletic participation. In contrast to alcohol, the authors argue that cigarette smoking and illicit drug use are not perceived social norms among athletes, and this may act to discourage their use. Additionally, illicit drugs and cigarette smoking may have more noticeable and immediate negative effects on sports performance compared with alcohol, and for this reason may be avoided (Lisha and Sussman 2010). Some research has also examined the relationship between sports participation and gambling, with evidence suggesting athletes may be more prone to gambling than other groups (Engwall et al., 2004; Nelson et al., 2007).

Recent evidence suggests that approximately three-quarters of the Irish population consume alcohol (Ipsos MRBI, 2015, 2016). Men report higher levels of alcohol consumption than females, while males aged 15–34 record the highest proportion of binge-drinking (Ipsos MRBI, 2015, 2016). Internationally, both alcohol consumption per capita and reported rates of binge-drinking in Ireland are among the highest in Europe (World Health Organization, 2018). Other risky behaviours such as problem gambling and illicit drug use have been found to be more common among males and younger age groups in Ireland (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2017) (National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol 2018).

While player burnout and work–life balance concerns have been the dominant themes in research on GAA players over the past 15 years (e.g. Kelly et al., 2018),

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<sup>63</sup> In this study, binge-drinking was defined as five or more drinks in a row for men, four or more for women.

there has been less of a focus on understanding patterns of risky behaviours among these players. One notable study by O’Farrell et al. (2010) did examine the prevalence of binge-drinking and alcohol-related harms among Gaelic club players in two counties between 2006 and 2008. Alcohol use was found to be high among these players compared to males in the general population of a similar age. Specifically, over half (54.3 per cent) of those surveyed stated that they binge-drink at least once a week compared to 40 per cent of males of a similar age in the general population. The study also found that alcohol-related harms were twice as high among Gaelic players compared to the general population (31.5 per cent compared to 15 per cent).<sup>64</sup> While informative, this analysis was localised to two counties and did not focus on patterns of alcohol consumption among senior inter-county players. It is important that senior inter-county players are considered as a distinct group in themselves as, based on evidence presented from other sporting contexts above, patterns of alcohol consumption may differ by level of sports participation.

## 4.2 SELF-REPORTED ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

In this section, we examine self-reported alcohol consumption among 2016 players. Where applicable, we compare their findings to those reported in the second wave of the Healthy Ireland Survey (HIS) for males of similar age (18–35-year-olds): these data were collected between September 2015 and May 2016 (Ipsos MRBI, 2016). The HIS is an annual interviewer-administered face-to-face survey commissioned by the Department of Health (Department of Health, 2016). The survey collects a wide range of information on topics such as smoking, alcohol consumption, diet, physical and mental health, and health service utilisation. The second wave of the HIS consisted of 7,498 interviews conducted with a representative sample of the population aged 15 and older living in Ireland (Ipsos MRBI, 2016).

Figure 4.1 compares self-reported alcohol consumption rates between 2016 inter-county players, all HIS respondents, and male HIS respondents aged 18–35.<sup>65</sup> In the SSICP-2016 data, 89 per cent of players responded positively when asked ‘Do you consume alcohol?’. In contrast, 75 per cent of all HIS respondents reported alcohol consumption in the 12 months prior to survey. However, this rises to 87 per cent

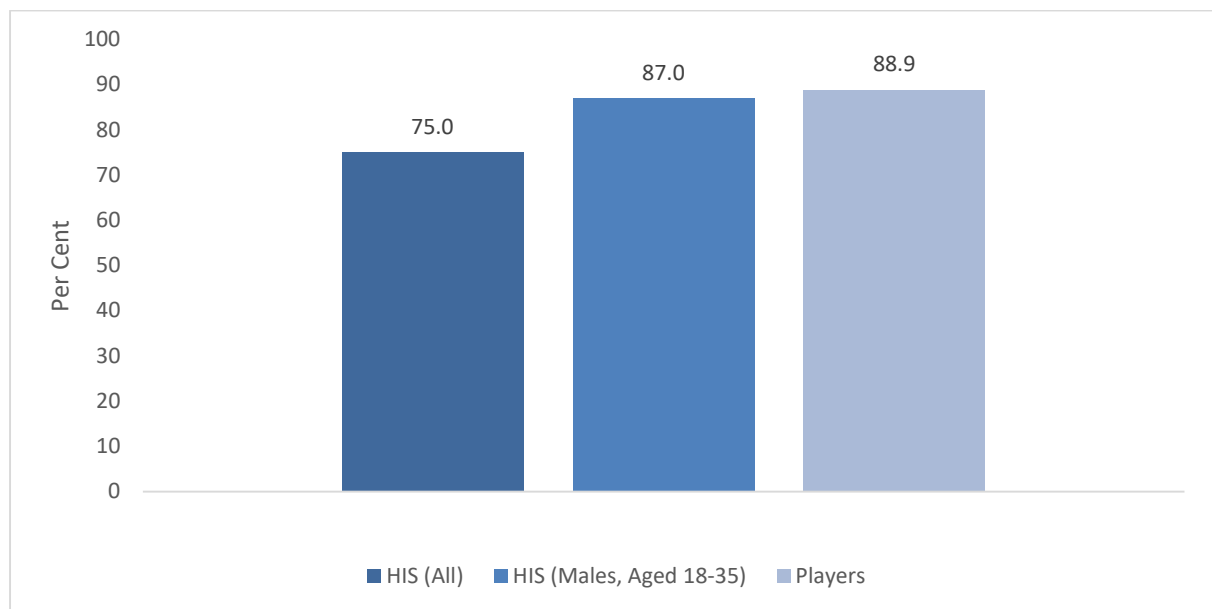
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<sup>64</sup> In a more recent study, O’Farrell et al. (2018) examined the effectiveness of an intervention to reduce alcohol misuse and related harms among Gaelic club players.

<sup>65</sup> While HIS is a Republic of Ireland survey, in this analysis we compare findings with all senior inter-county players. Restricting the analysis to Republic of Ireland players provides for very similar rates of self-reported alcohol consumption (see Appendix D, Table D.1).

for males aged 18–35, which is similar to the proportion of 2016 inter-county players who reported that they consume alcohol.

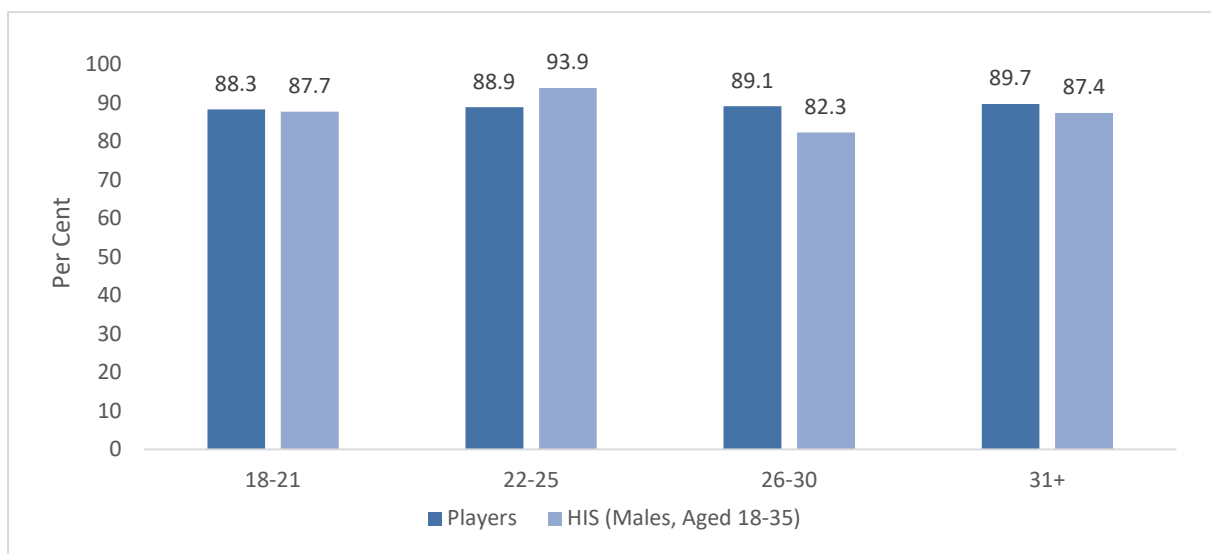
**FIGURE 4.1 SELF-REPORTED ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL POPULATION**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Wave 2 Health Ireland Survey (HIS-2016).

Figure 4.2 disaggregates the responses by age group. Overall, the proportion of players consuming alcohol did not vary greatly by age. In contrast, more variability was observable in the likelihood of alcohol consumption across age groups in the general population. In the HIS data, 94 per cent of those aged 22–25 reported alcohol consumption in the past year. However, this fell by 12 percentage points to 82 per cent for those aged 26–30. Senior inter-county players were more likely to report alcohol consumption compared with the general population across all age categories, apart from those aged 22–25.

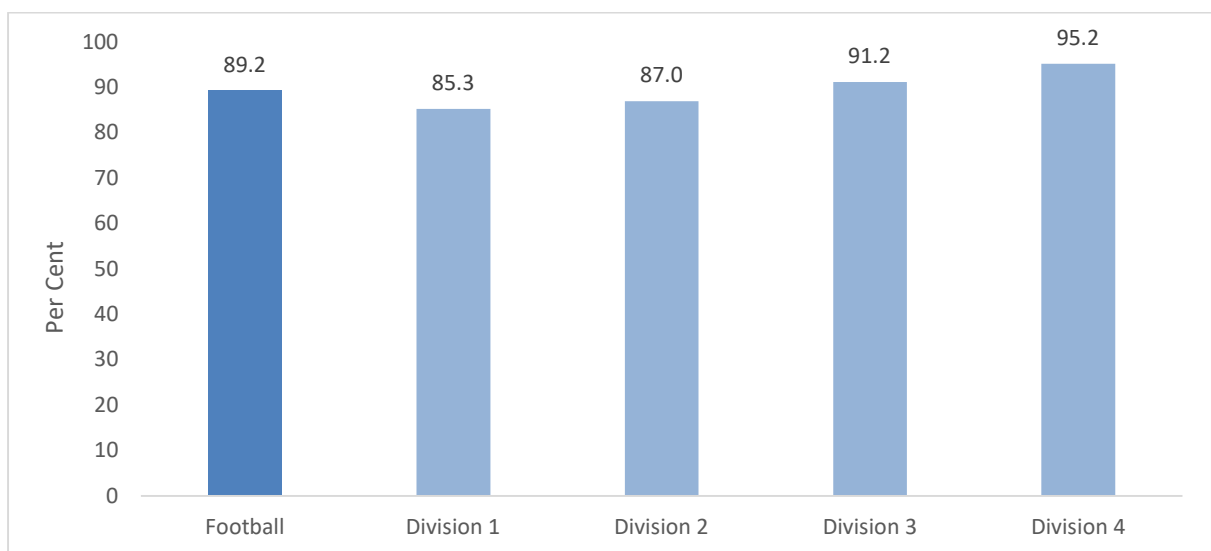
**FIGURE 4.2 SELF-REPORTED ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO THE GENERAL POPULATION – AGE GROUP**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Wave 2 Health Ireland Survey (HIS - 2016).

Figure 4.3 examines self-reported alcohol consumption among 2016 Gaelic footballers. Overall, 89 per cent reported that they consumed alcohol. However, a negative relationship is evident between higher playing levels and likelihood of alcohol consumption. At the most elite level, Division 1, 85 per cent of players indicated that they consumed alcohol; this rose to 87 per cent for Division 2, 91 per cent for Division 3 and 95 per cent for Division 4 players.

**FIGURE 4.3 SELF-REPORTED ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS**

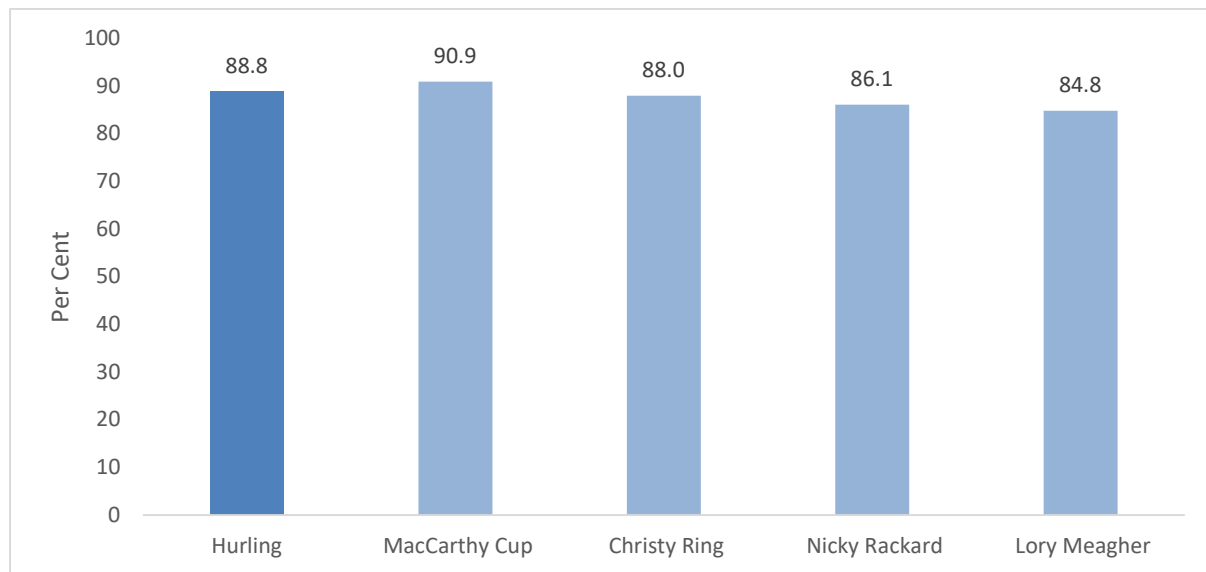


Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).



Figure 4.4 examines self-reported alcohol consumption among 2016 hurlers. Overall, 89 per cent reported that they consumed alcohol, a similar proportion to footballers (see Figure 4.3). However, compared with footballers, a reversed relationship is observable between likelihood of alcohol consumption and playing level. The likelihood of alcohol consumption was highest for MacCarthy Cup hurlers (the elite playing level hurlers) at 91 per cent and, declining by playing level, was lowest for Lory Meagher hurlers at 85 per cent.

**FIGURE 4.4 SELF-REPORTED ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION: 2016 HURLERS**



Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

Table 4.1 examines frequency of alcohol consumption throughout the 2016 season ('during the 2016 season, how often have you consumed alcohol?') among players that reported positive alcohol consumption and compares the findings with males aged 18–35 from the general population.<sup>66</sup>

As illustrated, frequency of alcohol consumption among players varies significantly throughout the season. Particularly, during the National League and Championship periods of the season 82 and 93 per cent of players reported consuming alcohol either 'once a month' or 'never'. During these periods only 5 per cent (National League) and 1 per cent (Championship) respectively reported weekly alcohol consumption.

However, frequency of alcohol consumption increased markedly during pre-season and, in particular, the off-season. Just 7 per cent of players reported never drinking

<sup>66</sup> The equivalent question asked of HIS Wave 2 respondents was 'how often have you consumed alcohol in the last 12 months?'

alcohol during pre-season, with virtually all respondents consuming alcohol during the off-season. During pre-season, 5 per cent of players reported twice-weekly alcohol consumption. This rose to 13 per cent during the off-season. However, these proportions remain considerably lower than the comparator group from the general population, where 21 per cent report twice-weekly alcohol consumption.

TABLE 4.1 FREQUENCY OF ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION THROUGHOUT PLAYING SEASON: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE (PER CENT)

	Pre-season	National League	Championship	Off-season	HIS <sup>1</sup> (males, 18–35)
Never	7.0	24.0	41.0	*	NA <sup>1</sup>
Once a month	39.0	59.0	52.0	10.0	23.0
2–3 times a month	35.0	12.0	5.0	43.0	19.0
Once a week	14.0	5.0	1.0	30.0	26.0
Twice a week	5.0	*	*	13.0	21.0
3 times a week	*	*	*	3.0	7.0
4 times a week	*	*	*	*	[<2.0]
5–6 times a week	*	*	*	*	*
Everyday	*	*	*	*	*
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Wave 2 Health Ireland Survey (HIS – 2016).

Notes: 1 As this question was only asked of those reporting positive alcohol consumption, this response is not applicable in HIS. However, it is applicable in the SSICP-2016 as there may be certain periods of the season (e.g. during the Championship) where no alcohol consumption takes place.

2 The percentages in square brackets ([ ]) are based on smaller numbers of respondents and should be treated with caution.

\* Number of respondents used to calculate this percentage is too small for results to be reliable.

Figure 4.5 examines the average number of standard<sup>67</sup> alcoholic drinks consumed on a typical day when alcohol consumption took place ('During the 2016 season, how many standard drinks of alcohol did you have on a typical day when you were drinking?') among players reporting positive alcohol consumption and compares their findings with males aged 18–35 from the general population.<sup>68</sup>

Similar to patterns observed in Table 4.1, the average number of standard alcoholic drinks consumed varied across the season. The average number of standard drinks consumed on a typical drinking day was lowest during the National League (8.5

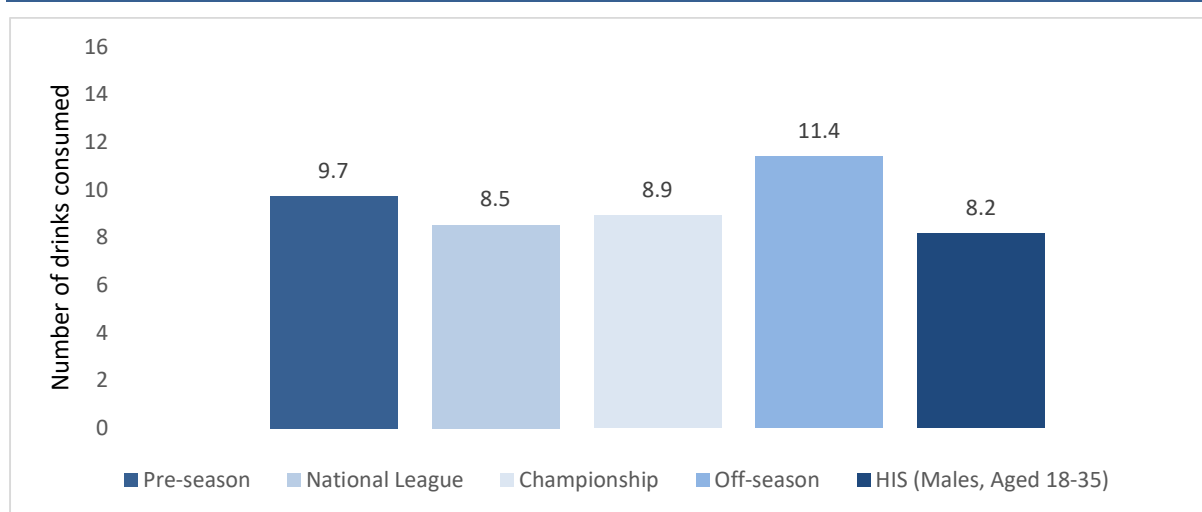
<sup>67</sup> A standard drink of alcohol is a half pint or a glass of beer, lager or cider; a small glass of wine; or a single measure of spirits.

<sup>68</sup> The equivalent question asked of HIS Wave 2 respondents was 'Thinking of a typical day in the last 12 months on which you had an alcoholic drink, how many standard drinks would you drink?'

drinks) and Championship (8.9 drinks), increased during pre-season (9.7 drinks), and was highest during the off-season (11.4 drinks).

Across all stages of the season, the average number of standard alcoholic drinks consumed was higher than that reported by the comparator group in the general population (8.2 drinks). Therefore, while findings from Table 4.1 overall suggest that senior inter-county players consume alcohol less often than their counterparts in the general population, they tend to consume more drinks, on average, when alcohol consumption does take place.

**FIGURE 4.5 AVERAGE NUMBER OF STANDARD ALCOHOLIC DRINKS CONSUMED ON A TYPICAL DAY WHEN DRINKING THROUGHOUT THE SEASON: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE**



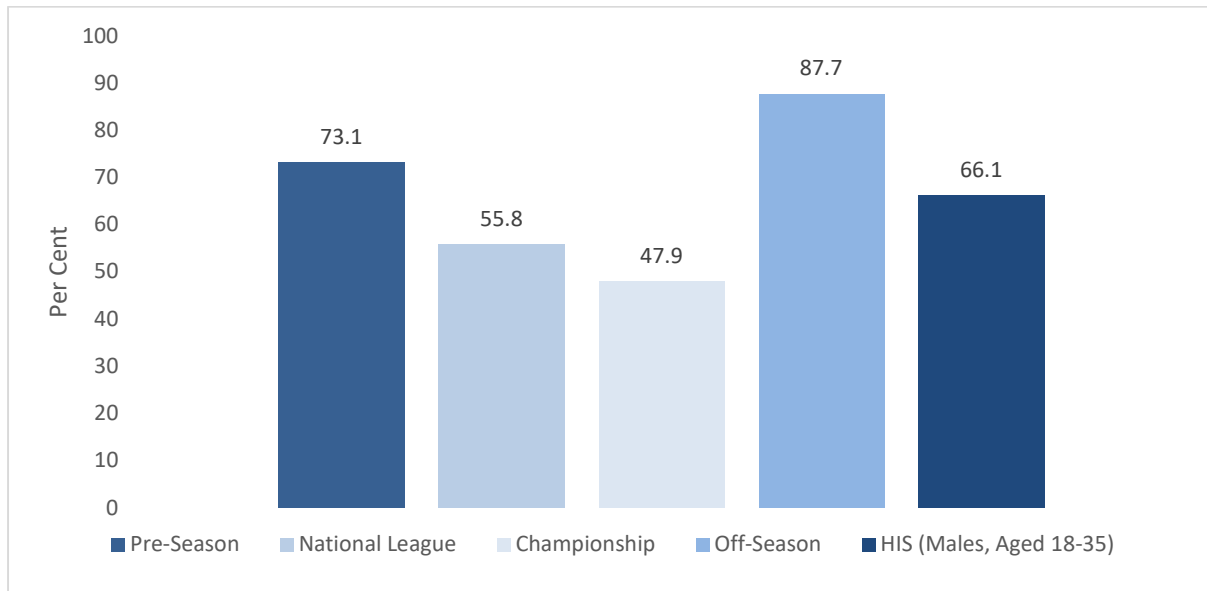
Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Wave 2 Health Ireland Survey (HIS – 2016).

Note: A small proportion of responses reporting >20 standard alcoholic drinks in one sitting, in the respective surveys, were excluded from the analysis

Figure 4.6 presents the proportion of players who engaged in binge-drinking, which is defined as consumption of greater or equal to 6 standard alcoholic drinks on a single drinking occasion and compares the players' findings with the comparator population group.

Mirroring findings from Figure 4.5, among players, the proportion of binge-drinking on a typical drinking occasion is lowest during the National League (56 per cent) and Championship (48 per cent) and increases during pre-season (73 per cent) and the off-season (88 per cent). In contrast, in the general population, 66 per cent of male drinkers aged 18–35 reported binge-drinking on a typical drinking occasion. There is also some evidence to suggest that binge-drinking rates are higher among younger, as compared with older, respondents (see Appendix D, Figure D.1).

**FIGURE 4.6 PROPORTION OF RESPONDENTS CONSUMING GREATER OR EQUAL TO SIX STANDARD DRINKS ON A TYPICAL DAY WHEN DRINKING: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Wave 2 Health Ireland Survey (HIS - 2016).

Building on Figure 4.6, Table 4.2 examines frequency of binge-drinking among players (over the entire 2016 season) and the comparator group from the general population.<sup>69</sup>

The distribution reported in Table 4.2 shows that most players who consume alcohol binge-drink between two and 11 times a year (52 per cent). In contrast, less than one in four of the general population of male drinkers aged 18–35 binge-drink with this frequency. While proportionately fewer players (4 per cent) reported never binge-drinking in comparison to the general population (7 per cent), the frequency of binge-drinking appears to be much higher among the general population. For instance, less than 3 per cent of senior-inter county players who consume alcohol reported binge-drinking once a week in comparison to 20 per cent in the general population.

<sup>69</sup> The equivalent question asked of HIS Wave 2 respondents was ‘During the last 12 months, how often have you consumed (drunk) the equivalent of 6 standard drinks on one drinking occasion?’.

TABLE 4.2 HOW OFTEN DID YOU DRINK THE EQUIVALENT OF SIX STANDARD DRINKS ON ONE DRINKING OCCASION?: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF THE SAME AGE (PER CENT)

	2016 players	HIS (males, 18–35)
Never	4.0	7.0
Once a year	4.0	5.0
2–5 times a year	27.0	14.0
6–11 times a year	25.0	9.0
Once a month	22.0	14.0
2–3 times a month	14.0	16.0
Once a week	3.0	20.0
Twice a week	*	13.0
3 times a week	*	[<2.0]
4 times a week	*	*
5–6 times a week	*	*
Every day	*	*
<b>Total</b>	100	100

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Wave 2 Health Ireland Survey (HIS – 2016).

Note: The percentages in square brackets ([ ]) are based on smaller numbers of respondents and should be treated with caution.

\* Number of respondents used to calculate this percentage is too small for results to be reliable.

### 4.3 ALCOHOL USE DISORDERS IDENTIFICATION TEST

Figure 4.7 reports Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test – Consumption (AUDIT-C) scores for senior inter-county players and the comparator group in the general population. The AUDIT-C is a short version of the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT), which was developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) to screen for excessive drinking and to identify persons with hazardous and harmful drinking patterns (Mongan and Long 2016). The AUDIT-C tool is internationally recognised, widely used, and validated (Bradley et al., 2007).

The first three questions of the AUDIT-C relate to those reported on in Table 4.1, Figure 4.5 and Table 4.2. Responses to each of the three questions are scored from 0 to 4 so that the overall AUDIT-C score ranges from 0 to 12 (see Table 4.3). A score of 5 or above is often considered as an indication of high-risk drinking (Bradley et al., 2007; O’Shea et al., 2017).

TABLE 4.3 AUDIT-C SCREENING TOOL: SCORING SYSTEM

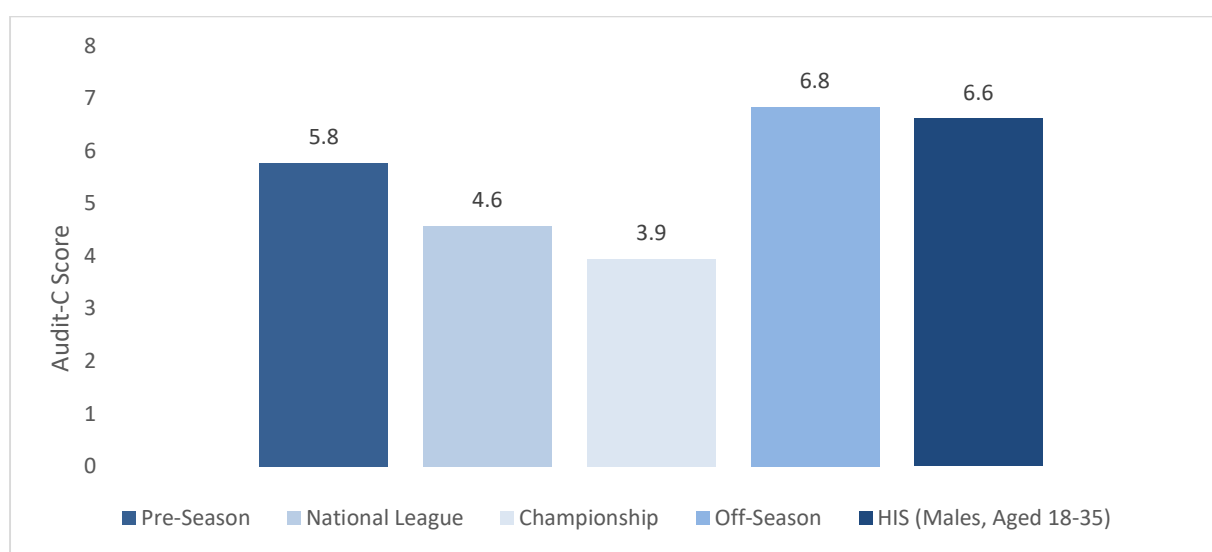
AUDIT-C questions	Scoring system				
	0	1	2	3	4
1. How often do you have a drink containing alcohol?	Never	Monthly or less	2–4 times per month	Weekly; 2–3 times per week	4+ times per week
2. How many units of alcohol do you drink on a typical day when you are drinking?	1–2	3–4	5–6	7–9	10+
3. How often have you had six or more standard drinks on a single occasion in the last year?	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily

Source: Adapted from O'Shea et al. (2017).

Figure 4.7 plots the mean AUDIT-C score for senior inter-county players by time of season and for the comparator group in the general population.<sup>70</sup> The mean AUDIT-C scores for players are above 5 (an indicator of problem drinking) in both pre-season (5.8) and the off-season (6.8), and below 5 during the National League (4.6) and Championship (3.9). The results are consistent with analysis presented above that shows that both frequency and intensity of drinking increased noticeably during pre-season and particularly off-season.

The mean AUDIT-C score for the general population of males aged 18–35 is calculated as 6.6, which is similar to the off-season score for players (6.8), but noticeably higher than for other periods of the season.

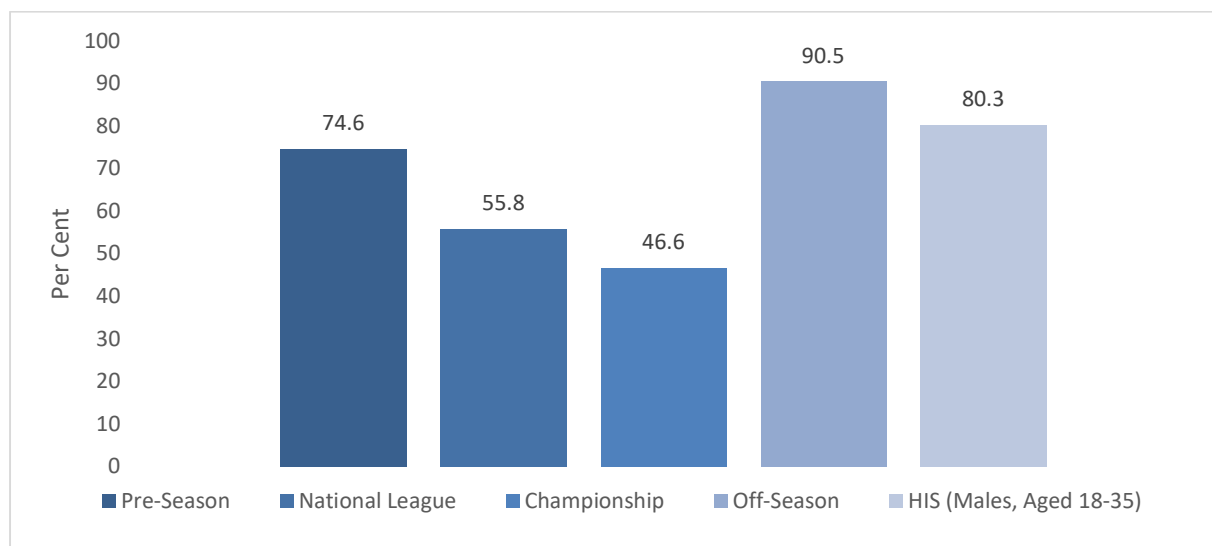
<sup>70</sup> AUDIT C scores are calculated separately by time of season for players, as the SSICP-2016 questions related to frequency of drinking, and number of standard drinks on a typical day, were asked by time of season. The question related to frequency of binge-drinking was asked across the entire season, and scores applied uniformly across time of season to calculate the overall AUDIT-C scores.

**FIGURE 4.7 AUDIT-C SCORE: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE (MEAN)**

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Wave 2 Health Ireland Survey (HIS – 2016).

Note: A small proportion of responses reporting >20 alcoholic drinks in one sitting, in the respective surveys, were excluded from the analysis.

In proportional terms, nine out of 10 senior inter-county players that consume alcohol recorded an AUDIT-C score of 5 or above during the off-season (91 per cent). During the Championship, this fell to under half of respondents (47 per cent). In comparison, an AUDIT-C score of 5 or above was recorded by 80 per cent of the general population of male drinkers aged 18–35.

**FIGURE 4.8 PROPORTION OF RESPONDENTS REPORTING AN AUDIT-C SCORE GREATER THAN OR EQUAL TO FIVE: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE**

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Wave 2 Health Ireland Survey (HIS – 2016).

Table 4.4 disaggregates mean AUDIT-C scores for players by code and playing level. Similar patterns are observable for both footballers and hurlers, with higher AUDIT-C scores reported during pre-season and off-season.

While variation was observable in the proportion of respondents self-reporting positive alcohol consumption by playing level for both footballers and hurlers (see Figures 4.3 and 4.4), similar variation was not observable in AUDIT-C scores. Of those who did report positive alcohol consumption, risky drinking behaviour (as measured by AUDIT-C) did not vary noticeably by playing level.

TABLE 4.4 MEAN AUDIT-C SCORE: 2016 PLAYERS – CODE AND PLAYING LEVEL

	Pre-season	National League	Championship	Off-season
<b>Football</b>	6.0	4.7	4.2	6.9
Division 1	5.9	4.9	4.7	7.0
Division 2	5.6	4.2	3.6	6.5
Division 3	6.2	4.9	4.4	7.0
Division 4	6.3	4.6	4.0	7.1
<b>Hurling</b>	5.5	4.5	3.7	6.8
MacCarthy Cup	5.4	4.4	3.9	6.9
Christy Ring	5.8	4.7	3.7	6.8
Nicky Rackard	5.5	4.4	3.1	6.5
Lory Meagher	5.9	4.9	4.1	6.8

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

#### 4.4 BELIEF REGARDING TEAMMATES' ENGAGEMENT IN RISKY BEHAVIOURS

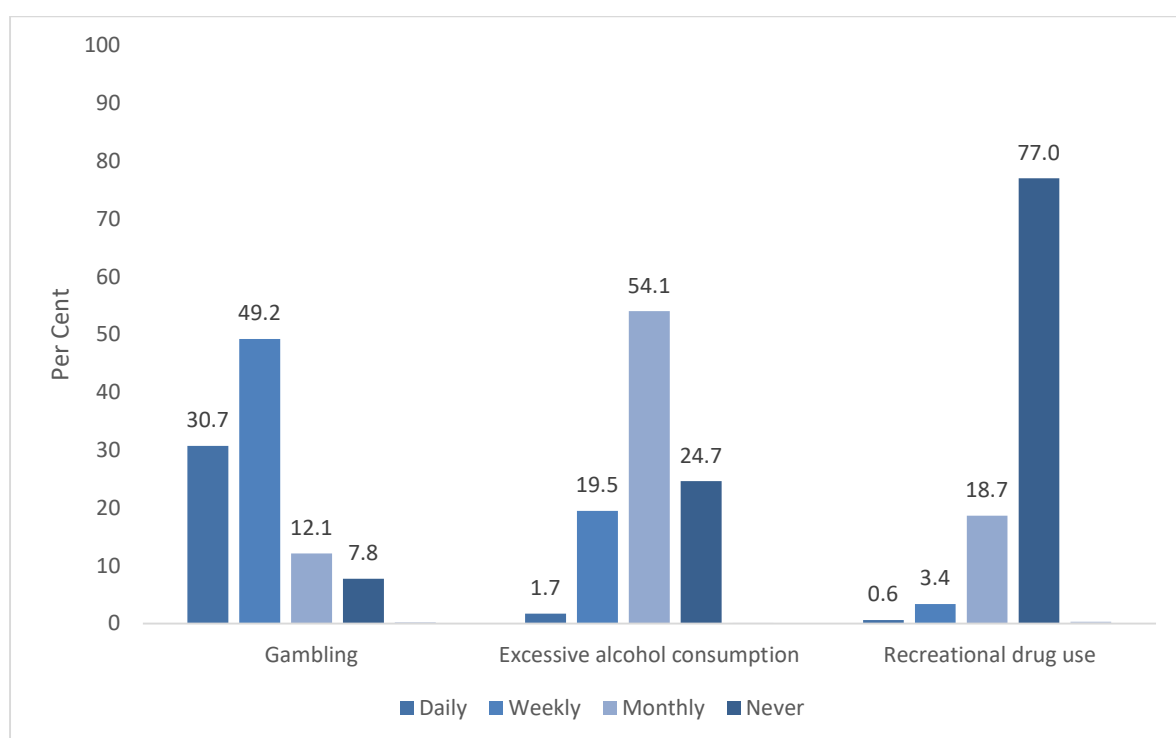
Figure 4.9 provides 2016 senior inter-county player responses to their beliefs regarding teammates' engagement in gambling, excessive alcohol consumption (subjectively defined by respondents), and recreational drug use. The question was phrased in this way due to concerns that players may not respond reliably when asked about their own engagement in these behaviours. All three types of risky behaviours plot very different frequency distributions.

Gambling appears to be the risky behaviour senior inter-county players perceive teammates to engage with most frequently. Nearly 80 per cent of respondents believe teammates engage in gambling on either a daily or a weekly basis. In contrast, the vast majority of players (77 per cent) believe teammates do not engage in recreational drug use.



Fifty-four per cent consider teammates to engage in excessive alcohol consumption on a monthly basis, while one in five (20 per cent) consider teammates' excessive alcohol consumption to take place on a weekly basis. While responses are not directly comparable with self-reported excessive alcohol consumption (see Table 4.2), a noticeable finding is that respondents substantially underestimate the level to which teammates engage in excessive drinking. As reported in Table 4.2, less than 4 per cent of respondents report never consuming the equivalent of six standard drinks on one drinking occasion. However, as reported in Figure 4.9, one in four respondents (25 per cent) consider teammates never to engage in excessive alcohol consumption.

**FIGURE 4.9** 'DO YOU BELIEVE THAT YOUR INTER-COUNTY TEAMMATES ENGAGE IN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES?'



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

## CHAPTER 5

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### Diet, supplement usage and anti-doping testing

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter various dimensions of senior inter-county players' diet/nutrition and supplement usage/environment, including anti-doping, are examined. These are important areas for playing performance. However, decisions surrounding each, in particular supplement usage, have potentially important consequences for players' welfare outside of Gaelic games and in the future. As there are interrelations between diet, supplement use and drug testing, we also analyse, where appropriate, relationships across these areas.

#### 5.2 DIET AND NUTRITION

Diet and nutrition are key aspects of athletic and sports performance. The type, quality and quantity of players' nutrition, as well as the ability to access food post-training/matches, are important information required to allow for efficient nutrition decisions to be made by athletes and their management teams.

In general, evidence from the literature shows relatively poor nutrition knowledge among sports people and athletes (Torres-McGehee et al., 2012). Due to the importance of nutrition for training, game performance and recovery, organisations such as the American College of Sports Medicine, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, and Dietitians of Canada now recommend that athletes receive personalised nutrition plans from a dietitian or nutritionist (Thomas et al., 2016).

A small recent literature has examined the dietary knowledge and intake of Irish athletes and inter-county Gaelic games players (Reeves and Collins 2003; Magee et al., 2017; Cassidy et al., 2018; O'Brien et al., 2019). Evidence from a broad base of Irish university club-level athletes, which included Gaelic games players, found a poor knowledge of nutrition, with dehydration particularly prevalent (Magee et al., 2017). There is also evidence that the nutritional practices of Gaelic players may not be sufficient to meet the energy demands of inter-county play (O'Brien et al., 2019). Findings from O'Brien et al. (2019) suggest that poor nutrition on training days is of particular concern, with insufficient caloric and carbohydrate-specific intake among senior inter-county players.

Analysis in this chapter builds upon the recent evidence on inter-county players' nutrition and, in addition, examines players' own satisfaction with aspects of their

access to nutrition in an inter-county set-up. In the SSICP-2016 questionnaire, players were asked the following questions on their diet/nutrition intake and post-training/match nutrition:

- Is your diet/nutrition intake monitored within the county set-up?
- How satisfied are you with the following? Meals that are provided after training and matches?

We examined responses to these questions to assess the monitoring of nutrition within a county set-up, and also to determine the level of satisfaction with post-training/match meals. This latter question is especially important to examine in the context of the insufficient caloric intake on training days found among Gaelic players previously (O'Brien et al., 2019).

Table 5.1 shows that on average, in 2016, 60 per cent of players' diet/nutrition intake was monitored within their inter-county set-up. Football players, at 65 per cent, were considerably more likely to have their diet/nutrition monitored within their team than hurlers (54 per cent).

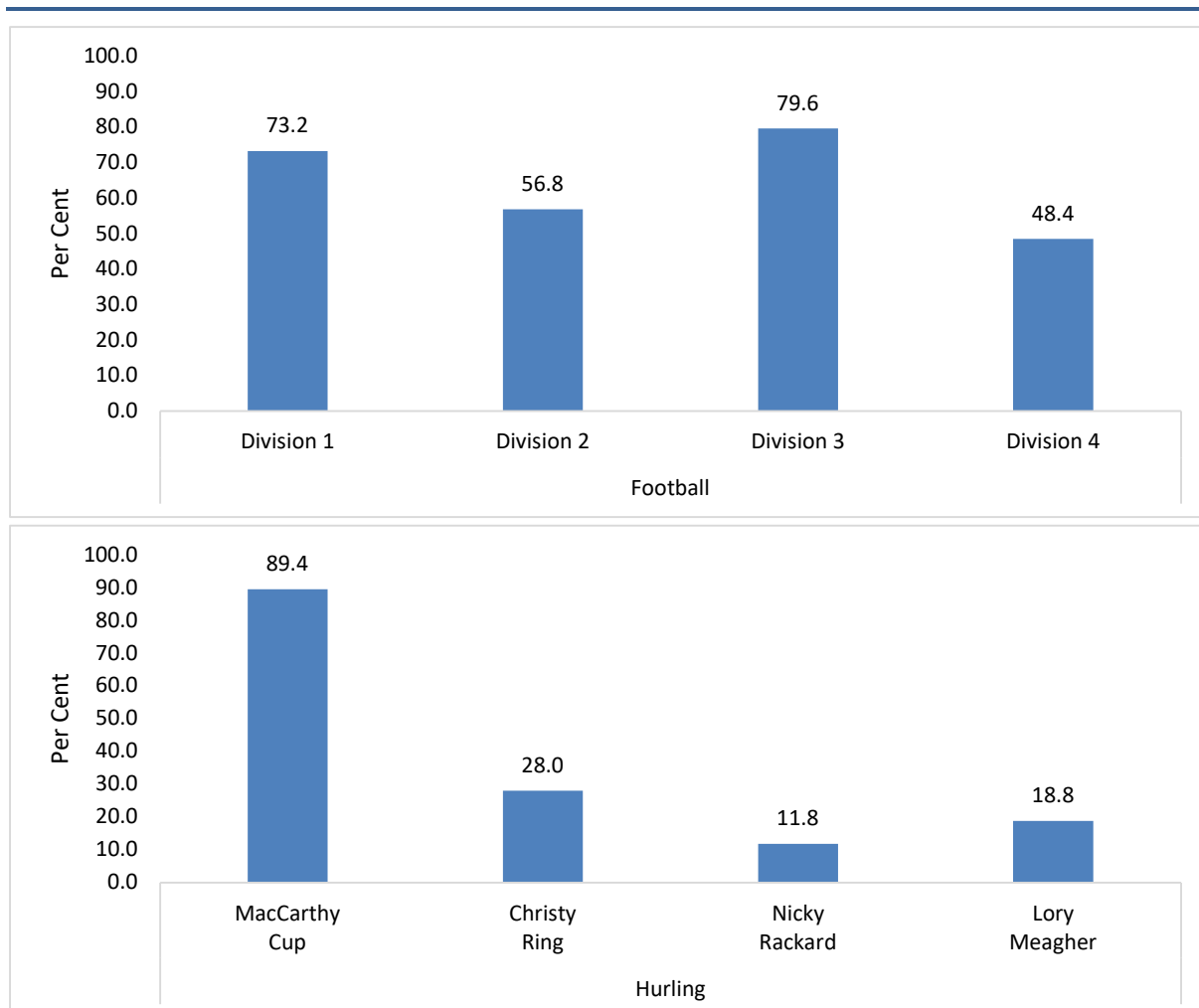
TABLE 5.1 DIET/NUTRITION INTAKE MONITORED WITHIN INTER-COUNTY SET-UP: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE (PER CENT)

	Diet/nutrition monitored
All players	59.9
Football	65.1
Hurling	54.4

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

There were also notable differences across playing levels in both football and hurling (Figure 5.1). For football, players in Division 1 were more likely to have their diet/nutrition intake monitored compared to Division 2 and 4 players. Interestingly, the largest percentage of diet/nutrition intake monitoring among footballers was in Division 3, at 80 per cent.

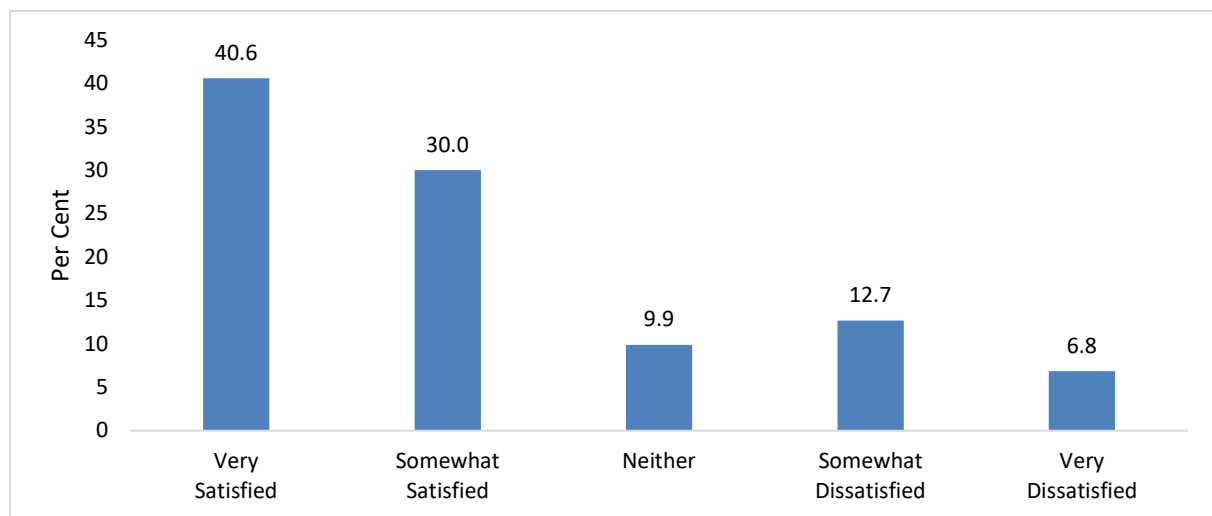
For hurling, there was a stark distinction across the playing levels, with 89 per cent of MacCarthy Cup players having their diet/nutrition intake monitored compared to only 12 and 19 per cent of Nicky Rackard and Lory Meagher players respectively (Figure 5.1).

**FIGURE 5.1 DIET/NUTRITION INTAKE MONITORED WITHIN INTER-COUNTY SET-UP: 2016 PLAYERS – CODE AND PLAYING LEVEL**

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

In addition to differences in monitoring of nutrition within inter-county set-ups, there are also large differences in the extent to which players are satisfied with the provision of meals following training and matches (Figure 5.2). This question may be seen as a proxy for the adequacy of the players' nutrition. However, it does not cover satisfaction with the broader nutrition environment, and may also suggest satisfaction with the contents of the meal more generally.

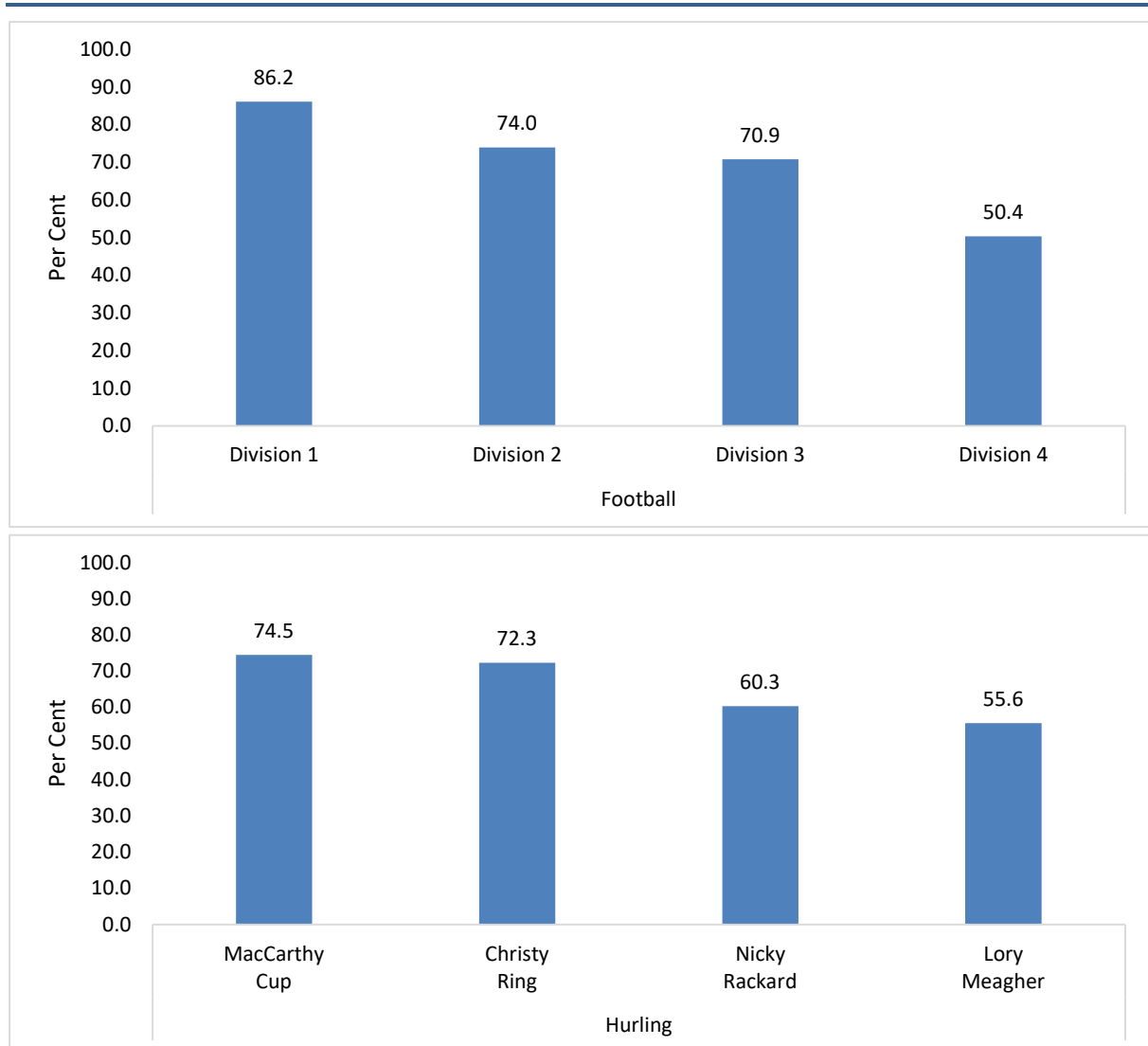
Most players were very satisfied (41 per cent) or somewhat satisfied (30 per cent) with their post-training meals. However, 10 per cent were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, with a small proportion of players somewhat (13 per cent) or very (7 per cent) dissatisfied.

**FIGURE 5.2 SATISFACTION WITH POST-TRAINING/MATCH MEALS: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL**

Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

There were notable differences across code and playing levels with regard to satisfaction with the provision of meals following training and matches (Figure 5.3). For football, players in Division 1 were more satisfied with their post-training/match meals (86 per cent were very/somewhat satisfied) compared with footballers in the other playing divisions. Only half of Division 4 footballers were very/somewhat satisfied with their post-training/match meals.

For hurlers, while 75 per cent of MacCarthy players were very/somewhat satisfied with their post training/match meals, this was the case for only 55 per cent of Lory Meagher players.

**FIGURE 5.3 VERY/SOMEWHAT SATISFIED WITH POST-TRAINING/MATCH MEALS: 2016 PLAYERS – CODE AND PLAYING LEVEL**

Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

In Table 5.2 there is a clear relationship between satisfaction with post-training/match meals and the monitoring of players diet/nutrition intake, with 78 per cent of players who are monitored reporting satisfaction with post-training/match meals as compared to 60 per cent of players who are not monitored.

TABLE 5.2 PLAYERS' DIET/NUTRITION MONITORED AND VERY/SOMEWHAT SATISFIED WITH POST-TRAINING/MATCH MEALS: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL (PER CENT)

	Satisfied with post-training meals
Diet/nutrition monitored	77.6
Diet/nutrition not monitored	59.6

Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

### 5.3 SUPPLEMENTS

Supplement use is an increasing component of both athletes' and the general population's dietary intake. Evidence from the US shows that half of the general population regularly use dietary and nutritional supplements (Bailey et al., 2011; Kantor et al., 2016) with the most common supplements used by the general population being vitamins/multivitamins.

Rates of supplement use are very high among all levels of athletes and across countries, and are higher compared to the general population. In a study of US collegiate athletes, 89 per cent reported supplement use (Froiland et al., 2004), with similar rates found in other countries (Jovanov et al., 2019). In a study of Dutch competitive athletes, 85 per cent had used supplements in the previous four weeks (Wardenaar et al., 2017), with teenage athletes in Germany using supplements from a young age (Braun, Koehler et al. 2009). Among younger athletes, most of those that use supplements consumed at least two types of supplement regularly (Jovanov et al., 2019). Among athletes included in the Jovanov et al. (2019) study, protein supplements were the most commonly used (55 per cent), followed by carbohydrates (20 per cent), creatine (25 per cent) and caffeine (19 per cent).

There is little evidence to date on supplement use by Gaelic games players, though some exists on other Irish athletes. In a 2011 study of 203 senior schoolboy rugby players in Ireland aged 15–18, there was evidence of poor 'knowledge of the foods required for refuelling, appropriate use of sports drinks, and the role of protein in muscle formation' (Walsh et al., 2011). The study by Walsh et al. (2011) also showed that nutritional advice was sought from a range of sources including coaches (67 per cent), magazines (42 per cent), websites (39 per cent) and peers (36 per cent), with only 8 per cent sourcing information from health professionals. This corresponds to international evidence showing that athletes receive advice on supplement use from not only coaches and trainers but also friends and family (Denham, 2017).

There has been extensive research examining the short-term and longer-term benefits and harms of supplements on athletic performance and overall health and

wellbeing. Overall, the results are favourable for both athletes and the general population, though they depend on the supplements examined.

Often, there has been some worry about the use, or excessive use, of creatine among athletes, especially with regard to renal (kidney) problems. Some recent work has found creatine to have some positive effects in terms of injury, rehab performance and ageing (Kreider et al., 2017; Avgerinos et al., 2018); two studies found no negative health effects using information from urine and blood markers (Cancela et al., 2008; Schröder et al., 2005). A recent large systematic review and meta-analysis on long-term effects of creatine in team sports athletes found that creatine supplementation did not induce renal damage (de Souza e Silva et al, 2019). However, there is less research on nutrition supplements for pre-adults and on illicit, tainted or unregulated supplements.

Given that supplements are an increasing component of athletes' dietary intake, evidence on the supplement environment within inter-county set-ups is important and should be judged within the broader nutrition and training environment. Given this, we build on the research outlined above by examining supplement use among senior inter-county players in 2016.

In the SSICP-2016 questionnaire, players were asked:

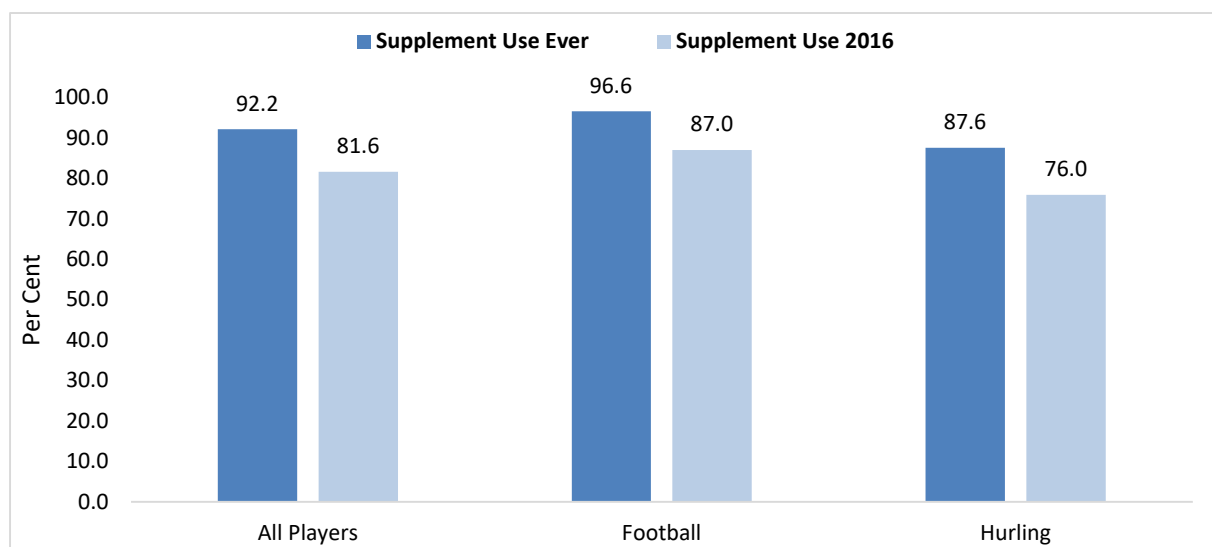
- Have you ever taken supplements?
- Were you taking supplements during the 2016 season?
- What age did you start taking supplements?

We examined responses to these questions to assess the prevalence of supplement use among senior inter-county players in their career and in the 2016 season.

Overall, 92 per cent of players had ever taken supplements. Footballers (97 per cent) were more likely to have taken supplements than hurlers (88 per cent).

Most inter-county players who had ever taken supplements took them during the 2016 season. Overall, 82 per cent of players took supplements in the 2016 season. Once more, footballers (87 per cent) were more likely to have taken supplements during the 2016 season than hurlers (76 per cent).

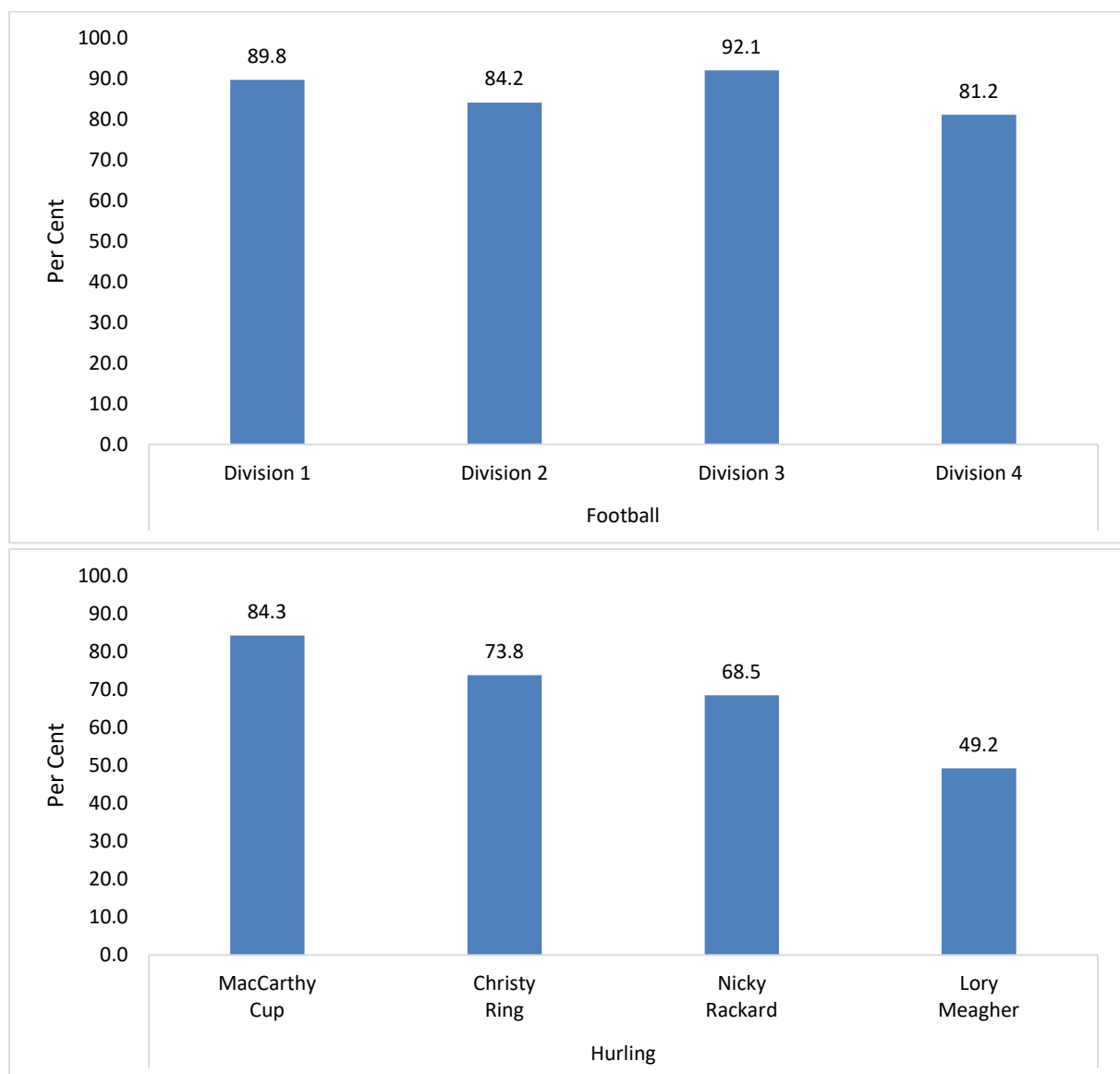


**FIGURE 5.4 SUPPLEMENT USAGE EVER AND IN 2016 SEASON: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE**

Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

There were notable differences in supplement use in the 2016 season across playing levels. For football, supplement use was common across all divisions in 2016, with over 80 per cent of players across each division taking supplements during this season. Division 4 footballers had the lowest supplement use (81 per cent) and Divisions 3 and 1 the highest (92 and 90 per cent respectively).

There were large differences across hurling competitions. Only 49 per cent of Lory Meagher players took supplements in 2016; 84 per cent of MacCarthy Cup players took supplements during this season.

**FIGURE 5.5 SUPPLEMENT USAGE IN 2016 SEASON: 2016 PLAYERS – CODE AND PLAYING LEVEL**

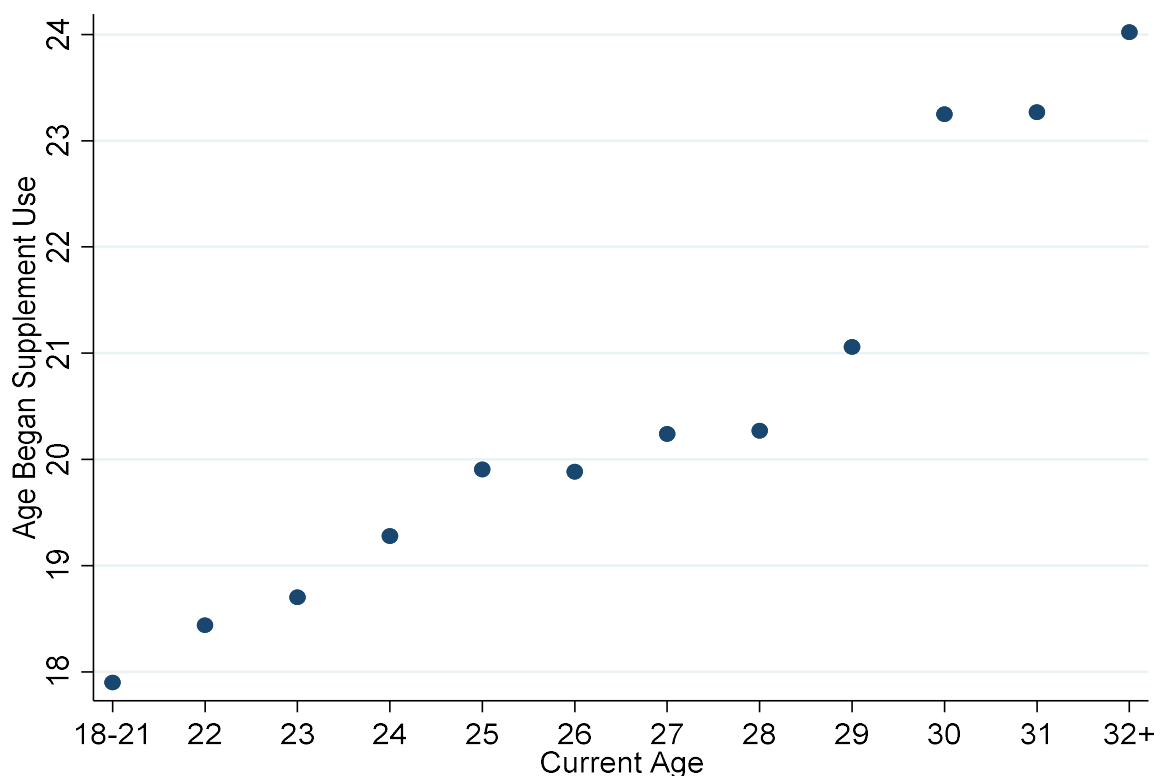
Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

Findings in Figure 5.4 show that most 2016 senior inter-county players took supplements at some stage, with the majority taking supplements in 2016, and usage rates were similar across all age groups. It is also possible to discern how long players were taking supplements as the SSICP-2016 gathered information on the age they started. With these data, we examined whether current younger senior inter-county players began taking supplements at an earlier age than current older players.

Figure 5.6 shows a clear linear trend between players' current age and the age that supplement use began. On average, younger players (those aged 23 years or younger) began taking supplements in their teenage years. On average, players

aged 30 and above began taking supplements when they were 23 years and older. One reason for this difference could be that supplement use for Gaelic players was not as prevalent when older players began their inter-county careers. Given these findings, it is likely that in the future players will have been taking supplements for a longer duration than current senior inter-county players as younger cohorts of players begin taking supplements at younger ages. Consideration should be given to monitoring players' supplement usage in greater detail.

**FIGURE 5.6 AVERAGE AGE SUPPLEMENT USE BEGAN BY CURRENT AGE: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL**



Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).*

From a player welfare perspective, it is important to understand who recommends players' use of supplements, whether inter-county set-ups are monitoring and providing supplements, and where players are sourcing their supplements. Studies have shown that athletes do not always fully understand the possible risks that may arise from consumption of certain supplements (Braun et al., 2009; Dascombe et al., 2010).

In the SSICP-2016 questionnaire, players were asked:

- Who recommended that you take supplements?
- During the 2016 season, where did you source your supplements from?

- During the 2016 season, was your supplement intake monitored within the county set-up?
- Did you feel pressure from any of the following<sup>71</sup> to take supplements?

Responses from 2016 players to these questions were used to assess the environment of supplement use in senior inter-county set-ups for the players who took supplements in 2016.

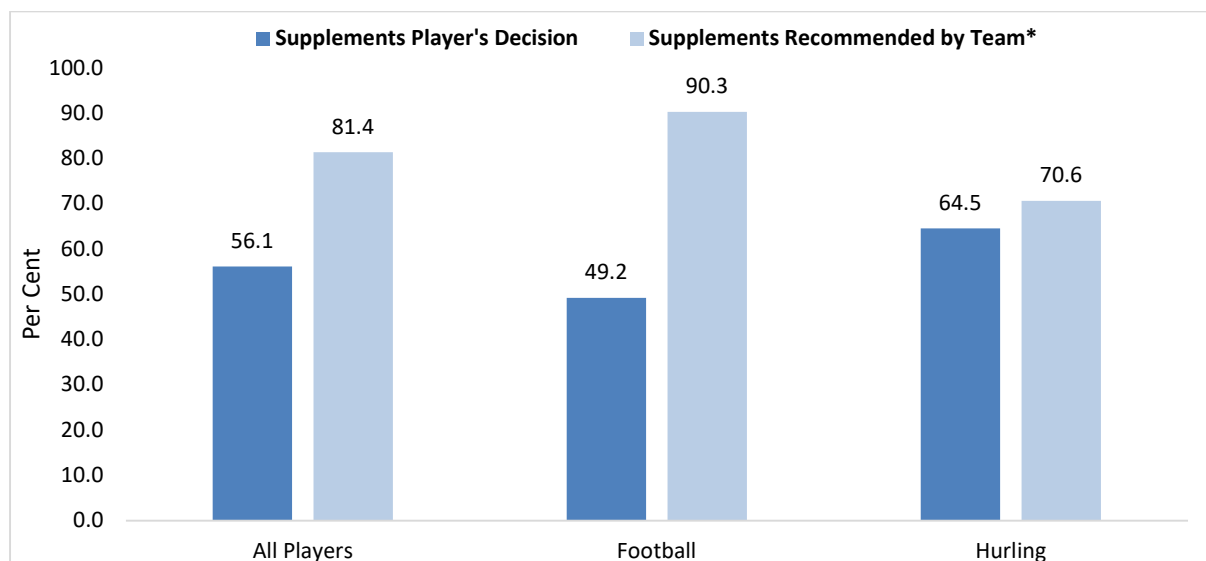
First, we examined who recommended that players take supplements (Figure 5.7). Players were given a number of options for this survey and could pick more than one. In Figure 5.7 results are presented for 'supplements player's decision' and 'supplements recommended by team' with options for 'team' being Team S&C coach, team doctor, team manager, team nutritionist/dietician.

Overall, 56 per cent of players stated that the decision to take supplements was, in part, their decision. Hurlers (65 per cent) were more likely to state that the decision to take supplements was, in part, their decision compared with 49 per cent of footballers.

The results indicate that for most supplement users in 2016, the decision to take supplements was based in part on a recommendation by a member of the inter-county set-up (81 per cent), such as the S&C coach. Footballers (90 per cent) were more likely than hurlers (71 per cent) to state that the decision to take supplements was, in part, based on a recommendation by a member of the inter-county set-up.

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<sup>71</sup> Teammates; S&C coach; team doctor; team manager; my decision, no pressure from anyone; other, please specify.

**FIGURE 5.7 'WHO RECOMMENDED THAT YOU TAKE SUPPLEMENTS?': 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL**

Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

Notes: \* Team includes: team S&C coach; team doctor; team manager; team nutritionist/dietician.

A small percentage also answered that teammates or others recommended that they take supplements.

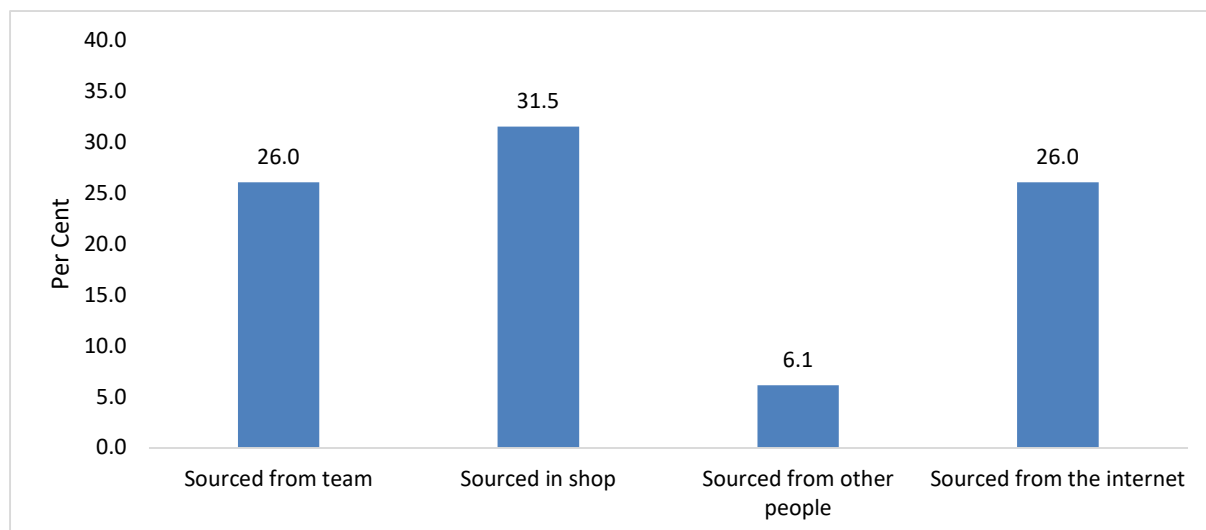
An important issue in inter-county players' supplement use is where supplements are being sourced. In the context of international evidence on the problem of 'tainted' supplements, and also for players' safety, it is important that supplements are sourced from reputable sources. In a 2004 study of 634 common over-the-counter dietary supplements from 13 countries, for 66 supplements tested (10 per cent), anabolic androgenic steroids were found though not declared on the label (Geyer et al., 2004). In a similar study undertaken prior to the Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games in 2016, the Australian Sports Anti-Doping Agency (ASADA) found that of 67 common supplements it tested, 13 (19 per cent) contained 'traces of anabolic agents or stimulants' (Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority, 2016).

In the SSICP-2016 question on supplement sourcing, players were provided with a number of options: sports shop, health food store, internet, backroom team member (e.g. S&C coach), teammates, friends, people training at my gym, other. Players could choose a number of different sources. To aid interpretation of results, we combined players' responses into four categories: (i) supplements sourced from within inter-county team set-up; (ii) supplements sourced from shop (sports shop, health food store); (iii) supplements sourced from people outside of team set-up (teammates, friends, people in gym); and (iv) supplements sourced from the internet.

Figure 5.8 shows that that players mostly sourced their supplements themselves

from a shop (32 per cent) or from the internet (26 per cent). A large percentage also sourced supplements from a member of the inter-county team set-up (26 per cent). A small percentage of players, 6 per cent, sourced their supplements from other people such as friends, teammates or people in their gym.

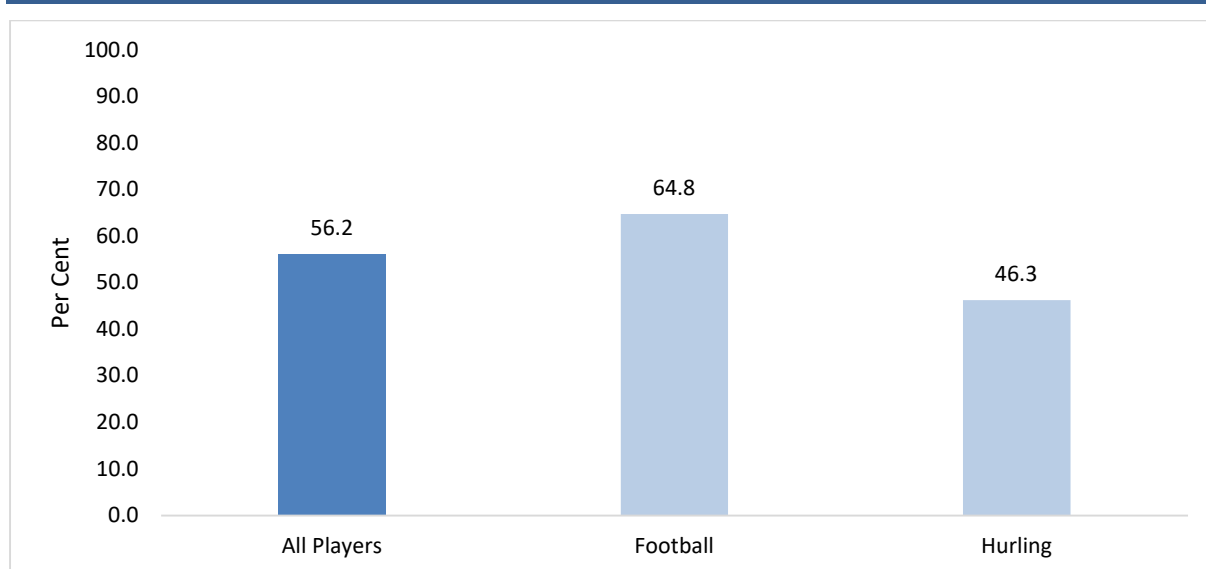
**FIGURE 5.8 'DURING THE 2016 SEASON, WHERE DID YOU SOURCE YOUR SUPPLEMENTS FROM?': 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL**



Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).*

Notes: *'Team' includes: team S&C coach. 'Shop' includes: sports shop and health food store. 'Other people' includes: teammates, friends, and people at their gym.*

An important finding presented in Figure 5.8 is that players are mainly sourcing their supplements from outside of the inter-county set-up, with a large proportion sourcing from the internet. Figure 5.7 highlighted that most players who take supplements were recommended to do so by their inter-county management. In this context, while supplements may not be sourced directly from the team, it is important to examine whether the team is monitoring inter-county players' supplement use. In Figure 5.9 we show the percentage of players taking supplements in 2016, where the supplement intake was monitored within the inter-county set-up. Overall, only 56 per cent of players who took supplements during the 2016 season were monitored by their inter-county management. Supplement monitoring was more common in football (65 per cent) than in hurling (46 per cent).

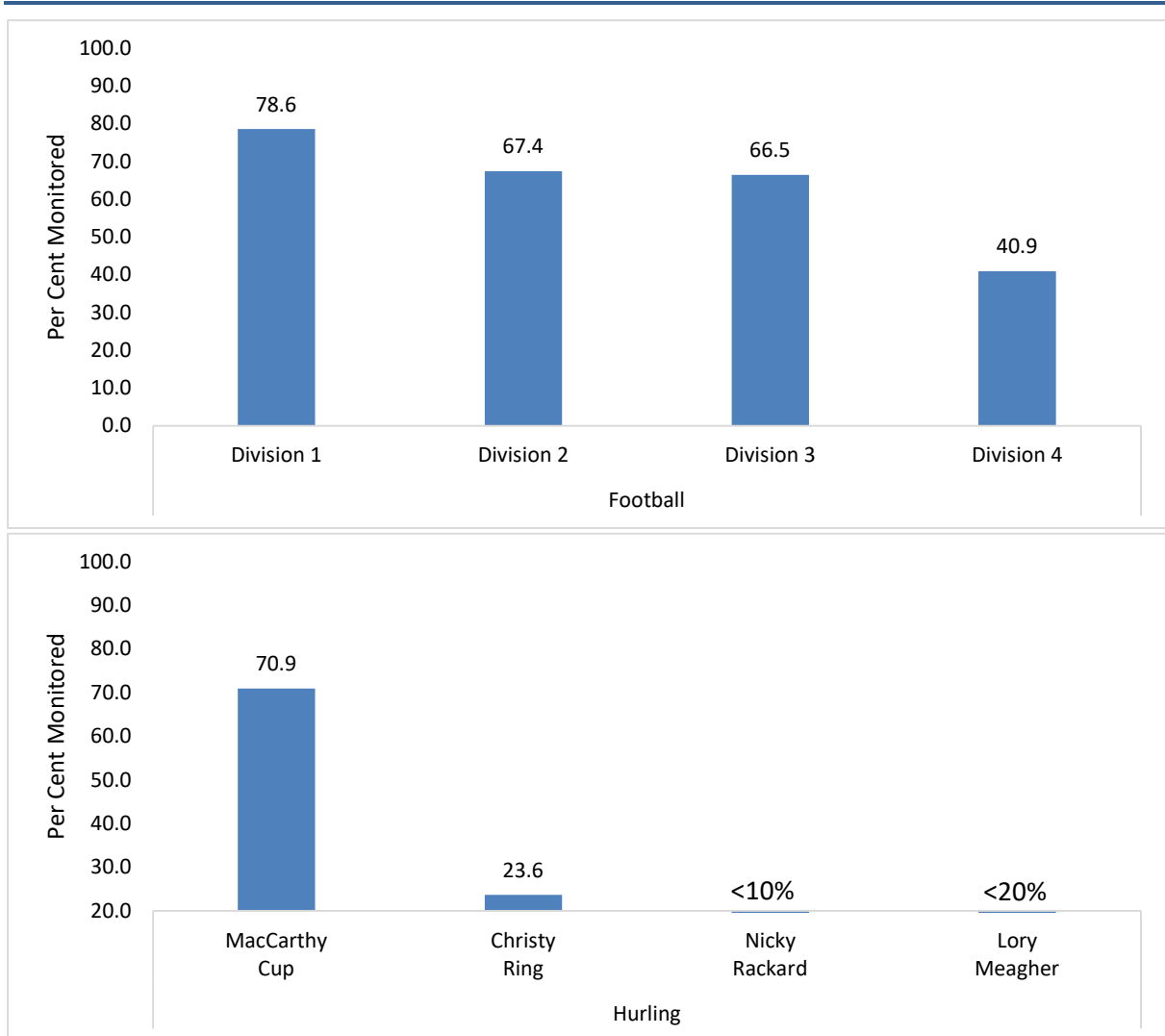
**FIGURE 5.9 'DURING THE 2016 SEASON, WAS YOUR SUPPLEMENT INTAKE MONITORED WITHIN THE COUNTY SET-UP?': 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE**

Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

There were notable differences in supplement intake monitoring in 2016 across playing levels (Figure 5.10). For football, 79 per cent of Division 1 footballers who took supplements, and approximately 67 per cent in Division 2 and Division 3, were monitored by their inter-county management set-up. However, in Division 4 this figure was only 41 per cent.

Larger differences in supplement monitoring were observed in hurling. Seventy-one per cent of MacCarthy Cup players who took supplements in 2016 were monitored by their inter-county management. However, supplement monitoring dropped dramatically in the other hurling levels: only 24 per cent, 10 per cent, and 16 per cent of Christy Ring, Nicky Rackard, and Lory Meagher players who took supplements in 2016 were monitored by their inter-county management set-up.

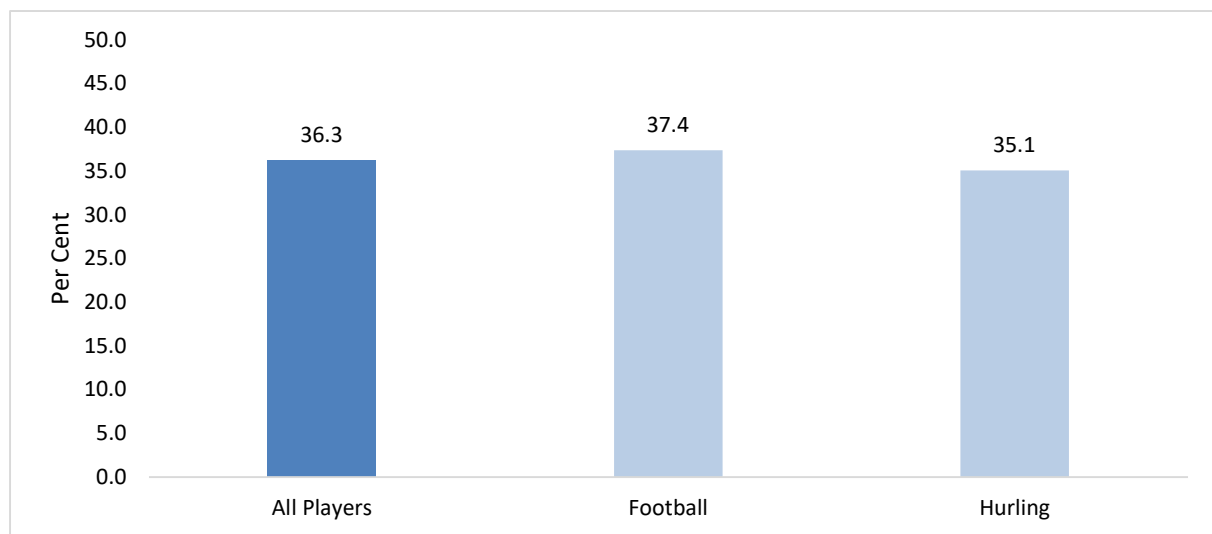
**FIGURE 5.10 'DURING THE 2016 SEASON, WAS YOUR SUPPLEMENT INTAKE MONITORED WITHIN THE COUNTY SET-UP?': 2016 PLAYERS – CODE AND PLAYING LEVEL**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Players who take supplements may feel pressure to do so from other players or from within the inter-county set-up (e.g., S&C coach, team doctor, team manager). Overall, 64 per cent of players stated that the decision to take supplements was their own, and that they did not feel pressure from anyone. On the other hand, 36 per cent of players felt pressure to take supplements (Figure 5.11). Division 2 and Division 3 footballers and Christy Ring hurlers were slightly more likely to report that they felt pressure to take supplements (Appendix E, Figure E.1).



**FIGURE 5.11 FELT PRESSURE TO TAKE SUPPLEMENTS: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE**

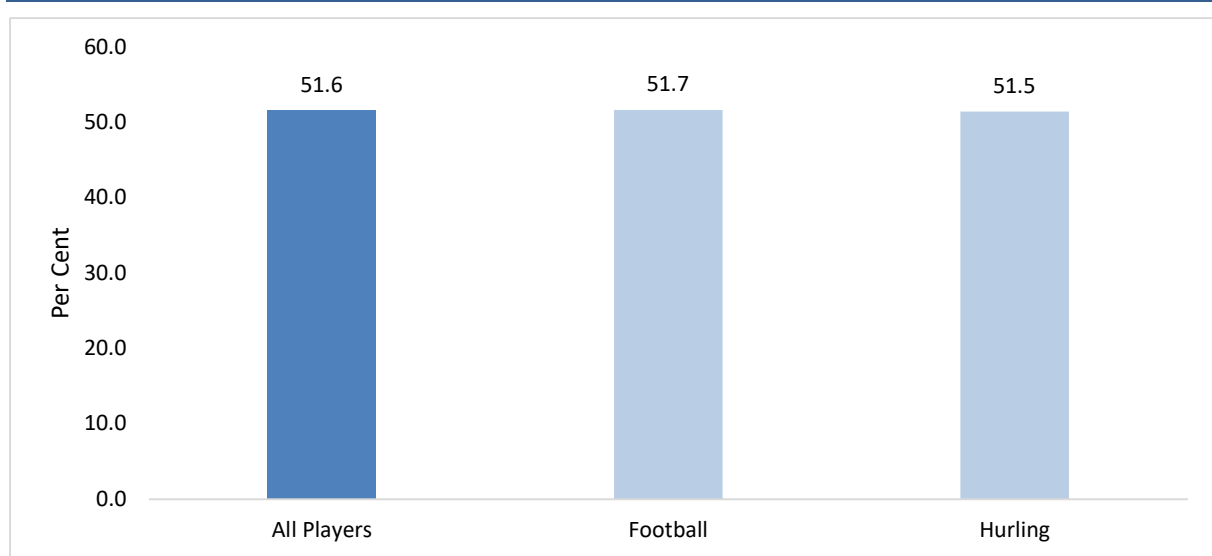
Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

We show above that supplement use is common among inter-county players, but that supplements are more likely to be sourced from outside of the inter-county set-up and that monitoring of players' supplements within inter-county set-ups is low. While the most likely reasons why players are taking supplements are to improve their performance and/or aid recovery, in the SSICP-2016 players were also questioned on their knowledge of the long-term consequences of supplement intake:

- Do you feel that you have enough knowledge about any long-term consequences of taking supplements?

Only 52 per cent of players felt that they had enough knowledge of the long-term consequences of supplement intake (Figure 5.12). This result was similar for footballers and hurlers, and across playing levels.<sup>72</sup> It suggests that greater education is warranted on supplement use. This may be especially important for newer/younger inter-county players who, we have found, are more likely to begin taking supplements at any earlier age.

<sup>72</sup> Results available from the authors on request.

**FIGURE 5.12 FELT THEY HAD ENOUGH KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ANY LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF TAKING SUPPLEMENTS: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND CODE**

Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

#### 5.4 DRUG TESTING

In Section 5.3 we showed that a majority of senior inter-county players in 2016 took supplements. It was clear that many players were sourcing these supplements themselves from shops or the internet. In many cases inter-county set-ups were not sufficiently monitoring players' supplement intake. While this can lead to inefficient supplement use (too little, too much, incorrect supplements), it may also be leading to unsafe practices and potentially the sourcing of supplements from disreputable sources. For example, some sporting organisations, such as Rugby Australia, explicitly state that supplements should not be sourced from the internet,<sup>73</sup> though a large proportion of inter-county players do so.

The potential of unintentionally using contaminated supplements is significant. As indicated already, previous evidence shows that 10 per cent of over-the-counter dietary supplements contained anabolic androgenic steroids that were not declared on the label (Geyer et al. 2004), and recent evidence from Australia found that 19.4 per cent of common supplements contained traces of anabolic agents or stimulants (Australian Sports Anti-Doping Agency, 2016). It is in this context that the sourcing of supplements from less reputable sources may open up inter-county players to significant dangers in terms of consuming potentially unsafe or prohibited substances, while also potentially placing players at risk of a failed drug test.

<sup>73</sup> See: <https://australia.rugby/-/media/rugbyau/documents/rugbyausportssupplementspolicy.pdf?la=en&hash=4A965451F33893422D10725B879CE3D5>

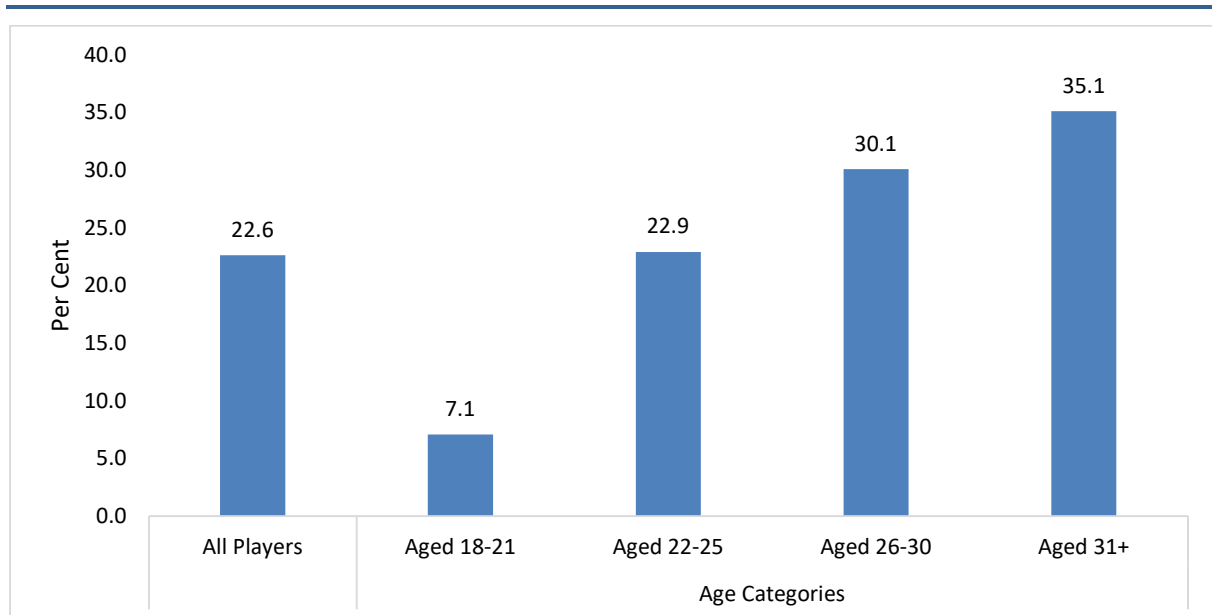
Since 2001, senior inter-county Gaelic players have been drug-tested as part of an agreement with Sport Ireland (GAA, 2019). Gaelic players are among the most tested sport people in Ireland. In 2018, 1,112 tests were undertaken as part of Sport Ireland’s national testing programme (Sport Ireland, 2019). Sport Ireland tested 139 (male) senior inter-county players as part of the national testing programme, with Gaelic games the fourth most tested sport (Sport Ireland, 2019). No positive test was reported for the senior inter-county players tested in 2018. In the SSICP-2016, players were asked about doping testing for prohibited substances:

- Have you ever been tested for doping during the inter-county season?

Of the 2016 players surveyed, less than one in four (23 per cent) have been tested for doping during their inter-county career (Figure 5.13).

The probability of ever being tested increased with age, with older players having a greater likelihood of having been drugs tested. While only 7 per cent of players aged 18–21 years were ever tested, 35 per cent of players aged 31 and above had been tested (Figure 5.13).

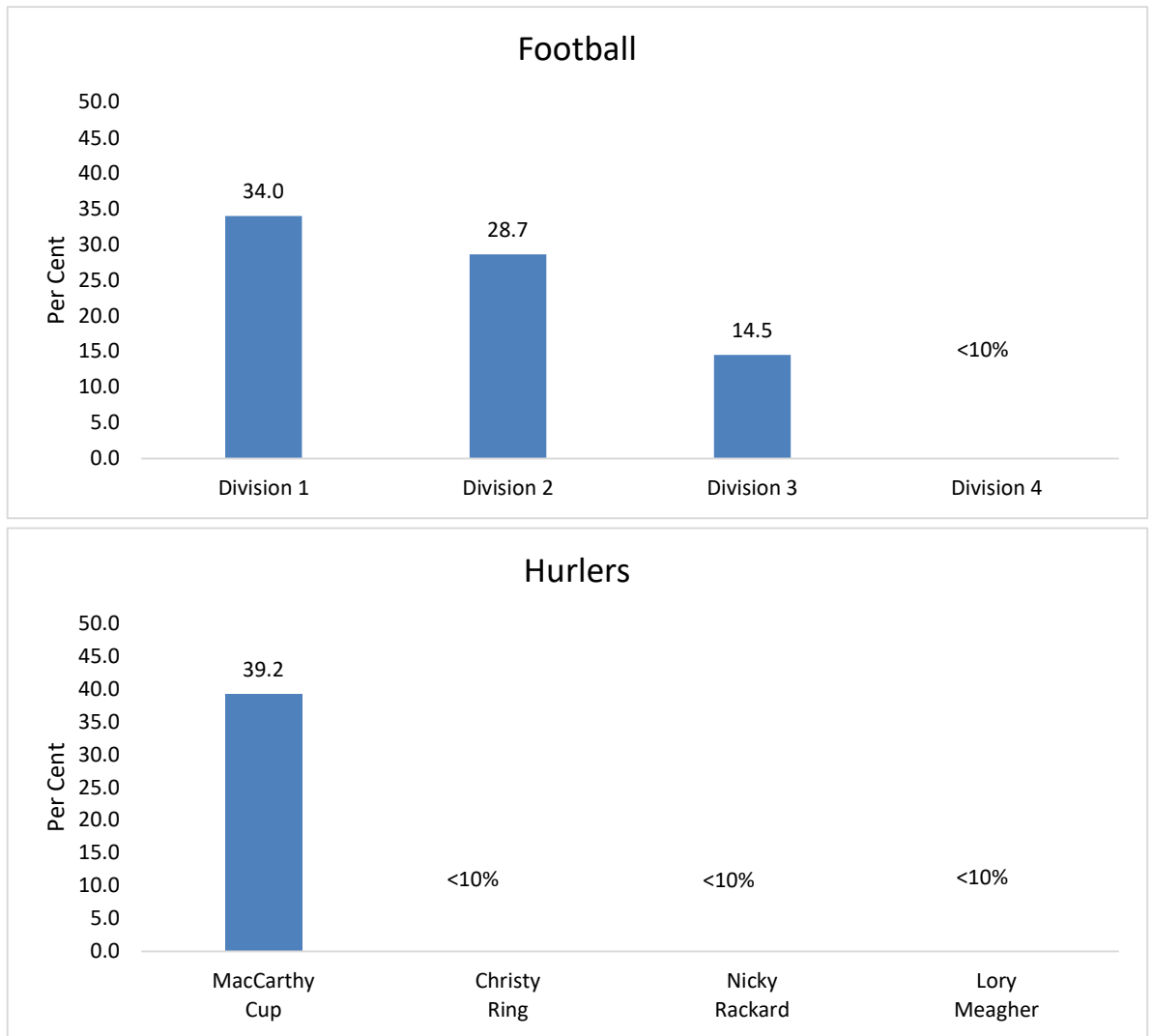
**FIGURE 5.13 EVER TESTED FOR DOPING DURING THE INTER-COUNTY SEASON: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND AGE GROUP**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Division 1 footballers (34 per cent) and MacCarthy Cup hurlers (39 per cent) were also more likely to have been tested than players in the other playing levels. The finding that supplement use is high across all football divisions (Figure 5.5) would suggest that drug testing should not be confined to top-tier players, if this is current doping testing policy with regard to Gaelic games players.

**FIGURE 5.14 TESTED FOR DOPING DURING THE INTER-COUNTY SEASON: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND AGE GROUP**

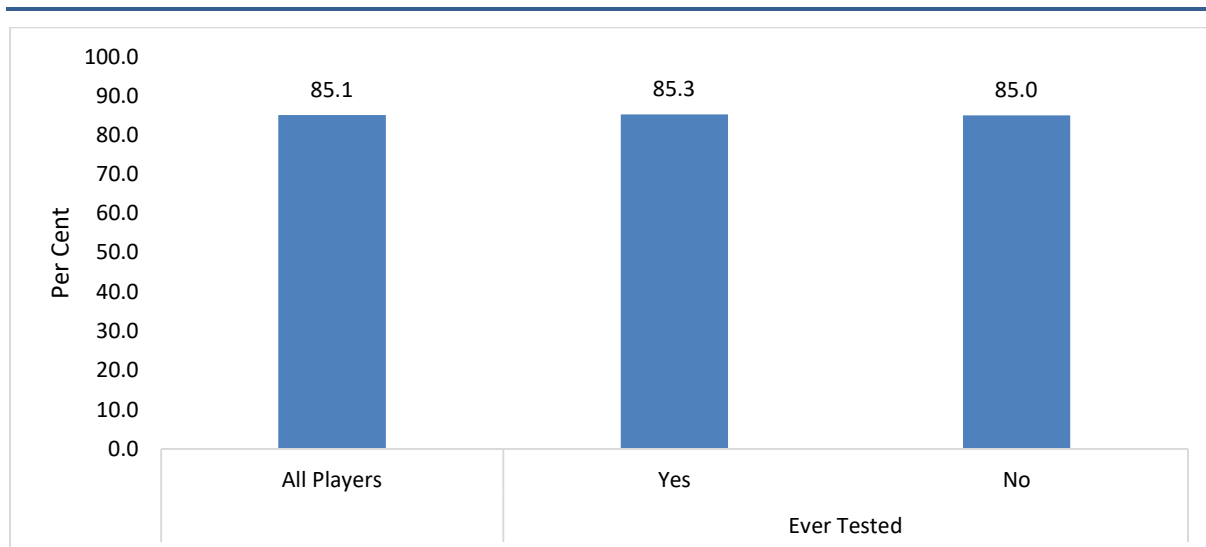


Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

In the SSICP-2016, players were also asked if they saw anti-doping testing and compliance as important to protecting the integrity of Gaelic games. Eighty-five per cent of players indicated that they did (Figure 5.14); this percentage was consistent across football and hurling, and also age group and playing level.<sup>74</sup>

As is also shown in Figure 5.15, the importance of anti-doping was high for both players who were ever tested and for players who were not.

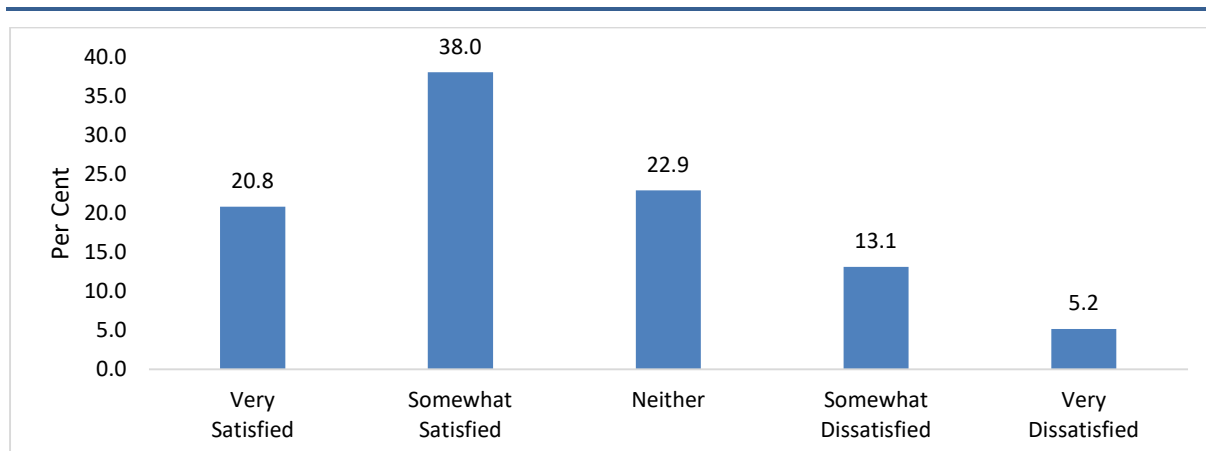
<sup>74</sup> Additional results available from the authors on request.

**FIGURE 5.15 ANTI-DOPING TESTING AND COMPLIANCE IMPORTANT TO PROTECTING THE INTEGRITY OF GAELIC GAMES: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND EVER TESTED**

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

While 2016 players saw the importance of anti-doping testing, they were also asked about how satisfied they were with ‘information provided about anti-doping testing and compliance’. This is especially important in the context of potentially inadvertently taking supplements or medicines that may include banned substances.

Overall, just over a fifth (21 per cent) of players were very satisfied with the information provided to them about anti-doping and compliance, with just over a third (38 per cent) somewhat satisfied (Figure 5.16). However, 13 and 5 per cent respectively were somewhat or very dissatisfied with the information provided on this issue.

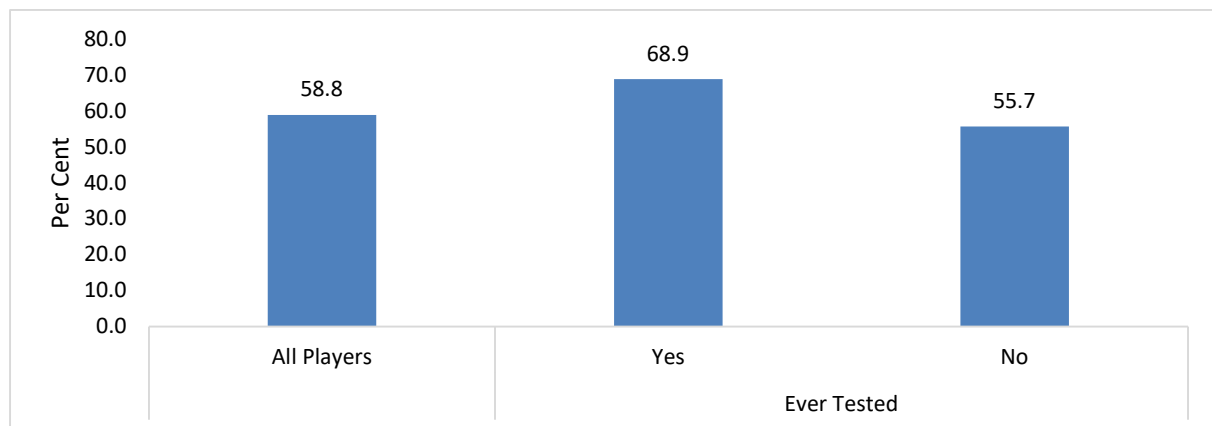
**FIGURE 5.16 SATISFACTION WITH INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOUT ANTI-DOPING TESTING AND COMPLIANCE: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL**

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Almost 70 per cent of players who were previously drug tested were very/somewhat satisfied with the information provided about anti-doping testing and compliance, compared to 56 per cent of players who were not tested (Figure 5.17). This may suggest that going through the testing itself increases the information provided on anti-doping testing and compliance.

Differences were observed across competitions, with Division 4 footballers and non-MacCarthy Cup hurlers being less likely to be very/somewhat satisfied with the information provided about anti-doping testing and compliance. Division 4 footballers and non-MacCarthy Cup hurlers were less likely to be very/somewhat satisfied with the information provided about anti-doping testing and compliance (Appendix E, Figure E.2).

**FIGURE 5.17 VERY/SOMEWHAT SATISFIED WITH INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOUT ANTI-DOPING TESTING AND COMPLIANCE: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL AND EVER TESTED**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).



## CHAPTER 6

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### Players' views on provided and required supports

#### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

The importance of providing supports to those that play Gaelic games can be traced back to a 1997 GAA taskforce that examined amateurism within the sport. On the back of that group's work,<sup>75</sup> the GAA's Central Council<sup>76</sup> adopted minimum provisions on the supports that should be provided to inter-county players in the areas of expenses, training and leisure gear, ticket allocations, etc. Now these supports are officially laid out in the annual Player Charter. This charter, which was established by the GAA and GPA in 2008, put in place a structure in which County Boards and senior inter-county panels could engage on matters of mutual interest. The Player Charter must be agreed by both sides and submitted to Central Council at the start of each year.<sup>77</sup> Central Council then needs to approve it before any funding is provided to County Boards towards the running of their senior inter-county teams.

In this chapter, we begin by examining players' satisfaction levels with the supports that they receive under the Player Charter, along with the timing of receipt of those supports. We also analyse players' satisfaction levels with their inter-county field-based training and gym facilities.

In addition, we investigate how players feel about how their code (hurling/football) is treated by their County Board, in terms of access to pitches, meals, gear, etc., in comparison with the other code in their county. We also examine players' views on the support that they receive from their County Manager.

Finally, we identify what players believe that they need to support them in playing senior inter-county.

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<sup>75</sup> The 1997 GAA Amateur Status Report.

<sup>76</sup> For an overview of the GAA's organisational structure, including Central Council and its role within the Association, see Kelly et al. (2018).

<sup>77</sup> The charter needs to be agreed no later than 15 December annually, and submitted to Central Council no later than the following 31 January.

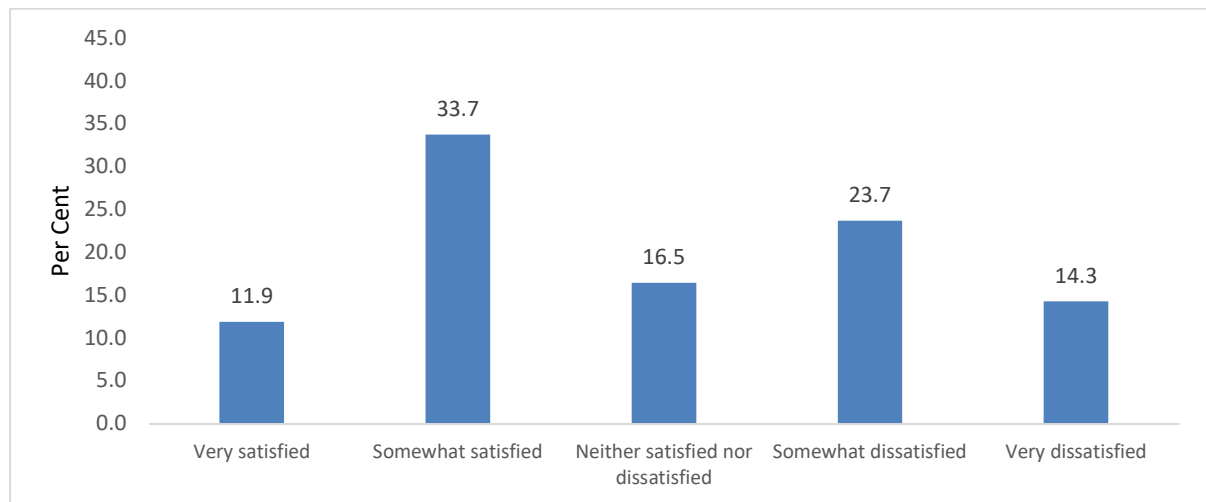


## 6.2 PLAYER CHARTER SUPPORTS

### 6.2.1 Expenses

Twelve per cent of players were very satisfied with the level of expenses that they receive (Figure 6.1): a slightly larger proportion were very dissatisfied (14 per cent). Just over a third (34 per cent) said that they were somewhat satisfied, with almost a quarter somewhat dissatisfied (24 per cent).

**FIGURE 6.1 SATISFACTION WITH LEVEL OF EXPENSES: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL**

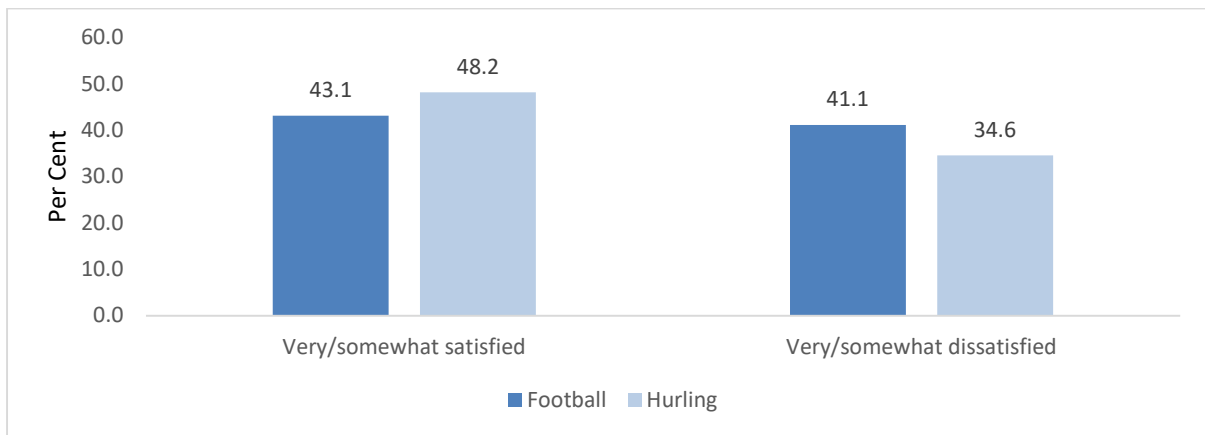


Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

A slightly larger percentage of hurlers were very/somewhat satisfied with the level of expenses that players receive: 48 per cent compared to 43 per cent of footballers (Figure 6.2). While satisfaction levels did not vary much by playing level among footballers, there was variation among the hurling grades.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>78</sup> See Appendix F for a breakdown by playing level.

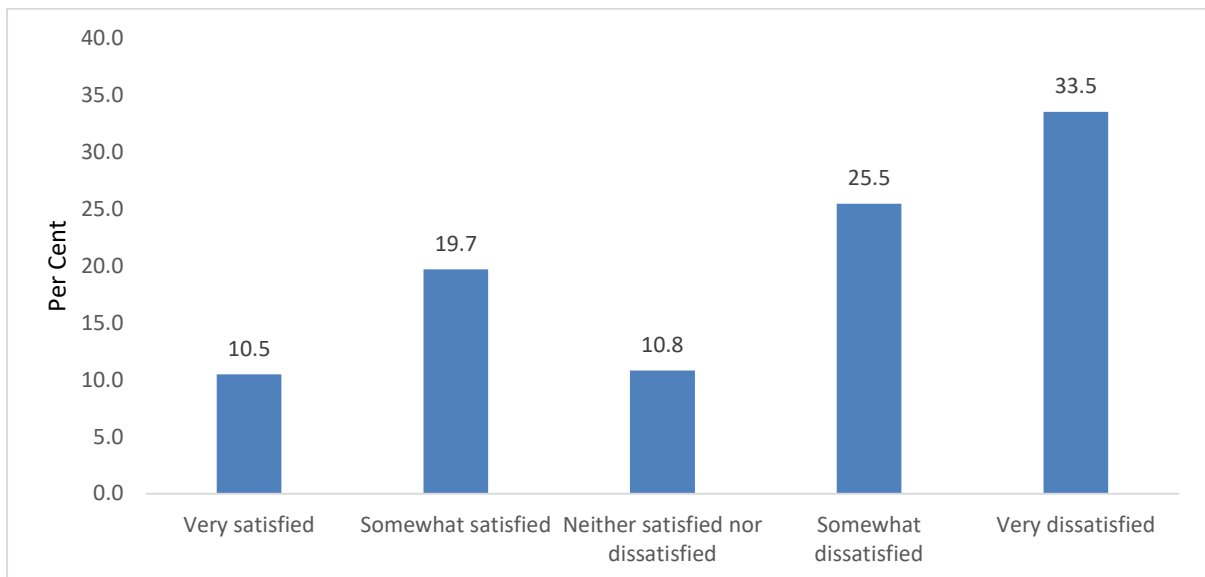
**FIGURE 6.2 SATISFACTION WITH LEVEL OF EXPENSES: 2016 PLAYERS – CODE**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

With regard to the timing of when expenses are paid, 59 per cent of players indicated that they were very/somewhat dissatisfied with this (Figure 6.3). This is a sizeable percentage of players that are not happy with this component of the Player Charter supports.

**FIGURE 6.3 SATISFACTION WITH TIMING OF WHEN EXPENSES PAID: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL**

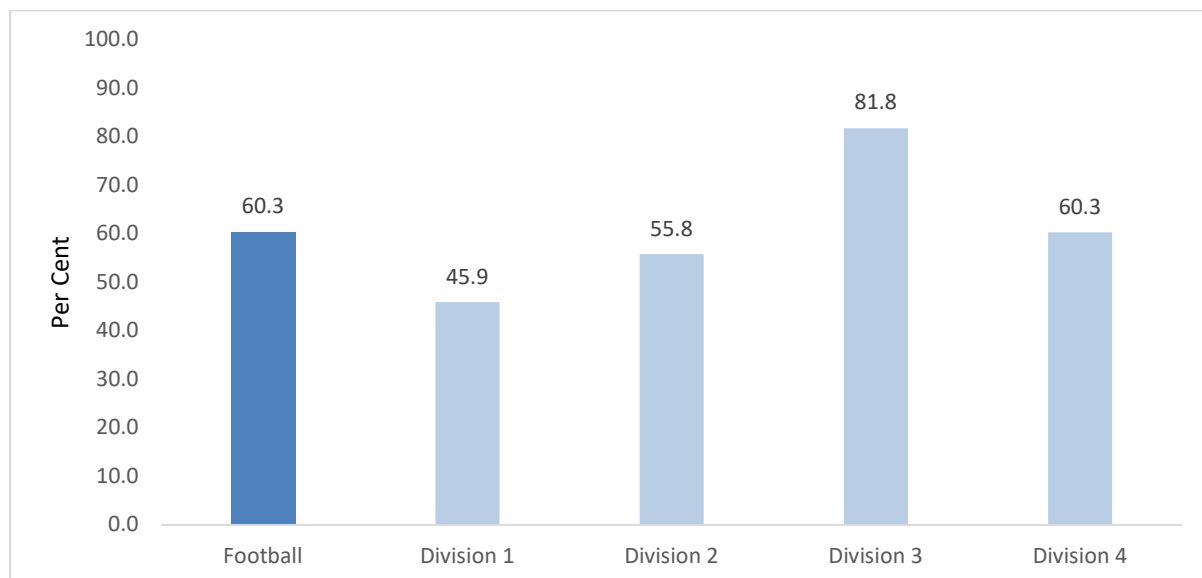


Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Dissatisfaction varied by playing level, with a larger percentage of Division 3 and 4 footballers very/somewhat dissatisfied (82 and 60 per cent respectively; Figure 6.4) and also Nicky Rackard and Lory Meagher hurlers (77 and 72 per cent respectively; Figure 6.5). Given that the present study relates to the situation for 2016 players, consideration should be given to examining this issue with more recent data to

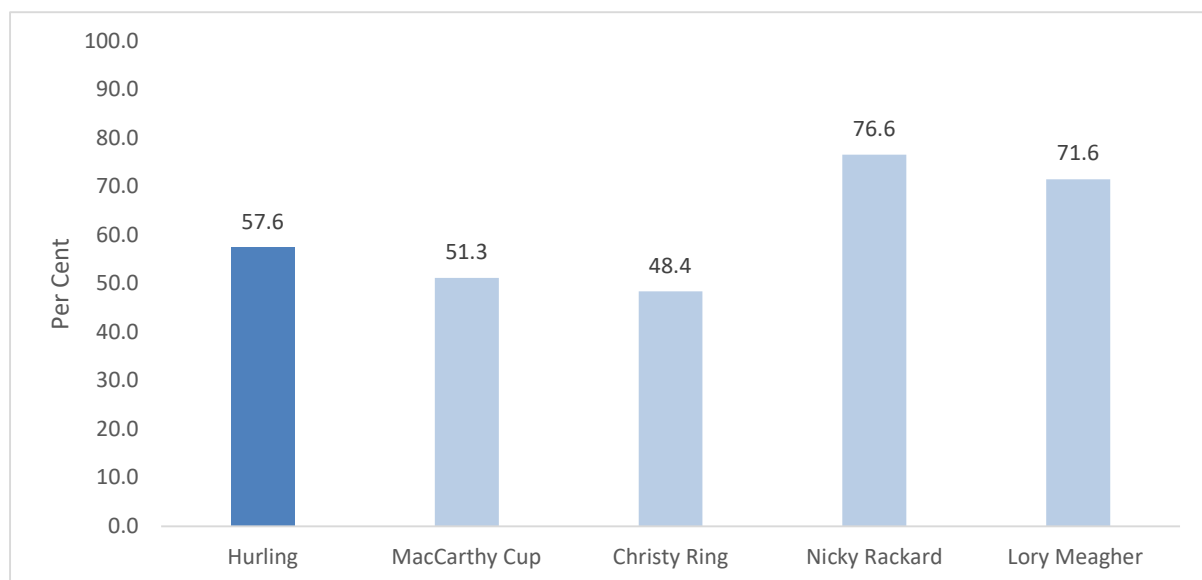
identify if there has been an improvement in the timing of when expenses are paid by County Boards in the lower football and hurling divisions.

**FIGURE 6.4 VERY/SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED WITH TIMING OF WHEN EXPENSES PAID: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS – CODE**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

**FIGURE 6.5 VERY/SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED WITH TIMING OF WHEN EXPENSES PAID: 2016 HURLERS – CODE**

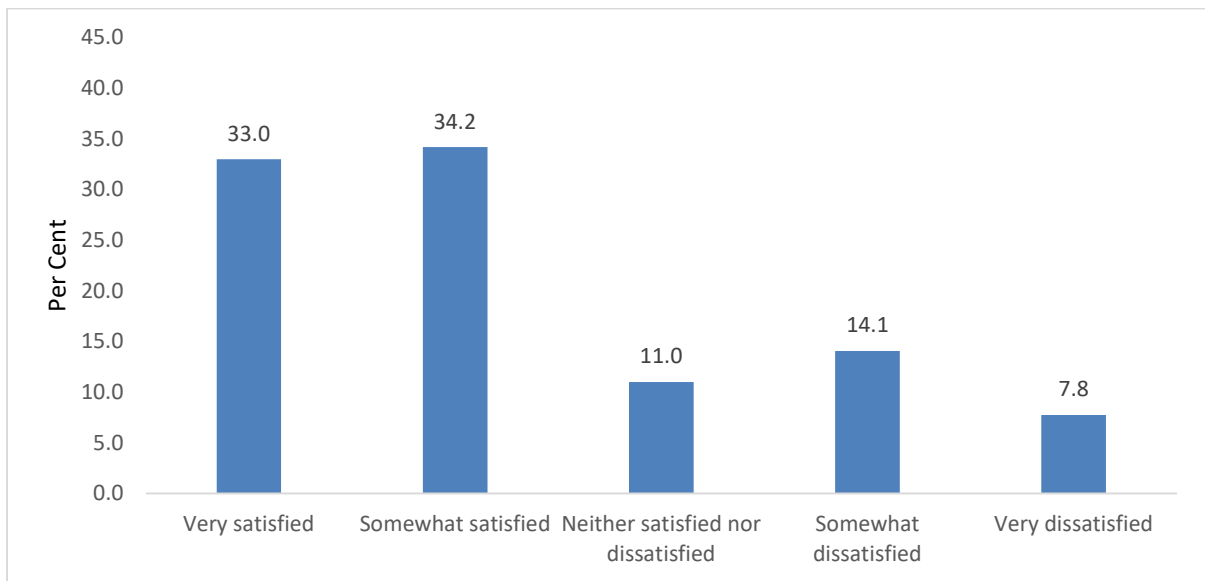


Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

### 6.2.2 Gear

A third of players indicated that they were very satisfied with the gear that is provided to them, with another third somewhat satisfied (Figure 6.6).

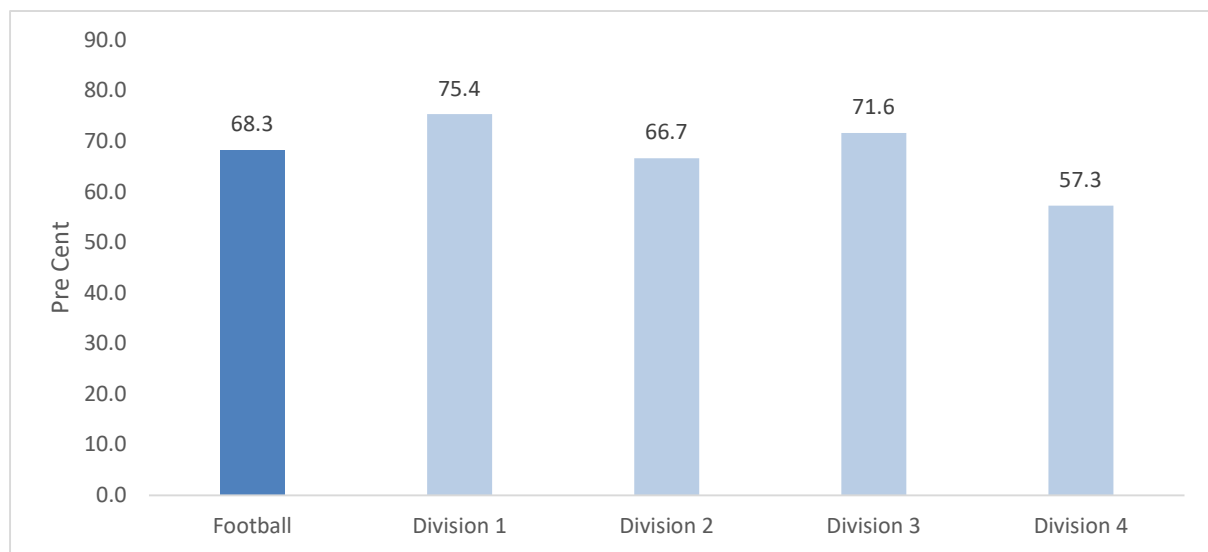
**FIGURE 6.6 SATISFACTION WITH GEAR PROVIDED: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

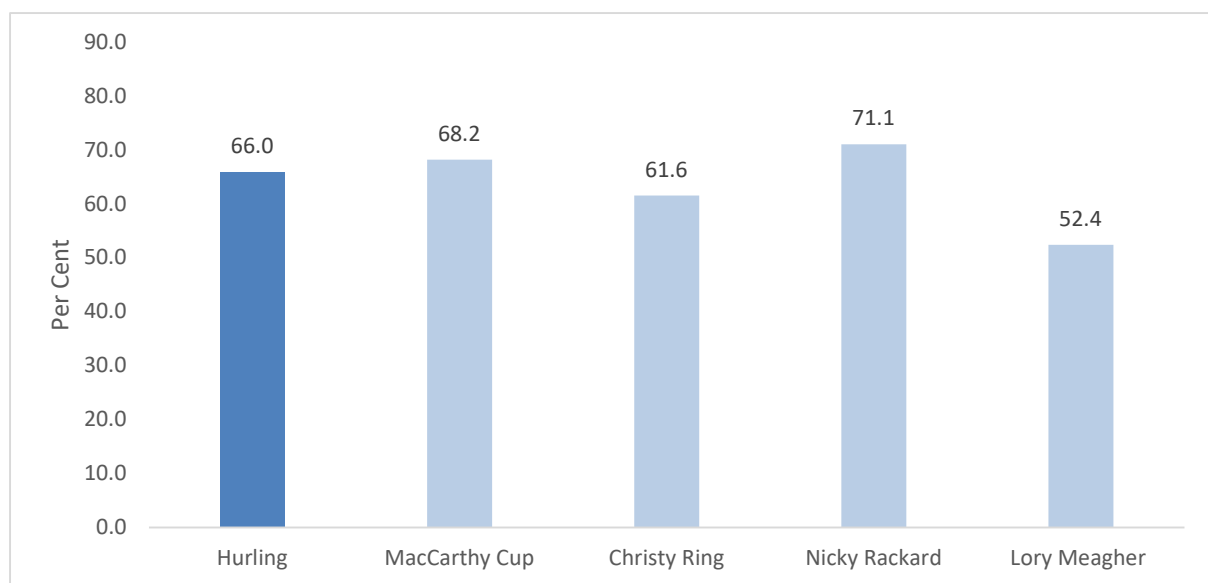
Satisfaction levels with the gear provided were higher among Division 1 and 3 footballers (Figure 6.7), and also Nicky Rackard and MacCarthy Cup hurlers (Figure 6.8).

**FIGURE 6.7 VERY/SOMEWHAT SATISFIED WITH GEAR PROVIDED: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS – CODE**



Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).*

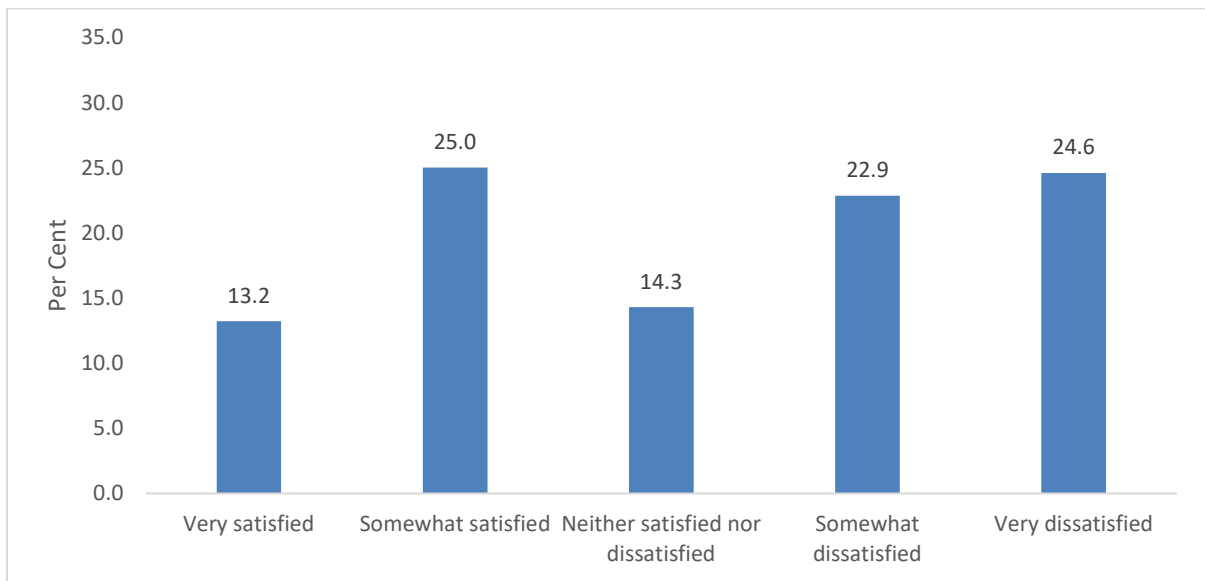
**FIGURE 6.8 VERY/SOMEWHAT SATISFIED WITH GEAR PROVIDED: 2016 HURLERS – CODE**



Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).*

Almost half of players (48 per cent) were very/somewhat dissatisfied with the timing of when gear is provided (Figure 6.9): 38 per cent were very/somewhat satisfied.

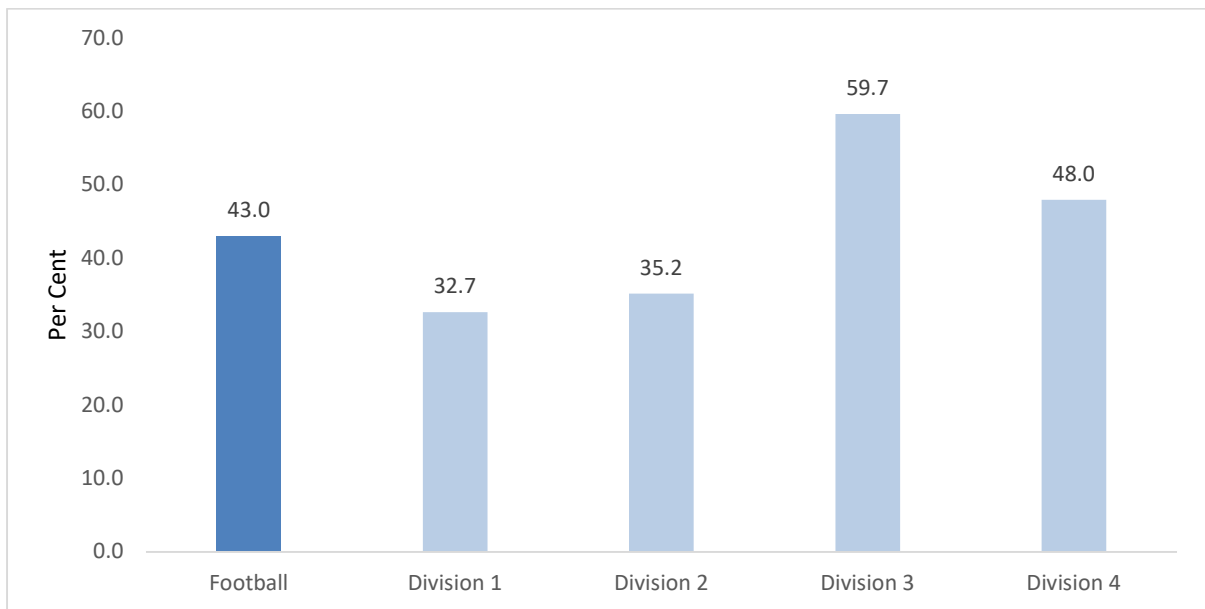
**FIGURE 6.9 SATISFACTION WITH TIMING OF WHEN GEAR PROVIDED: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL**



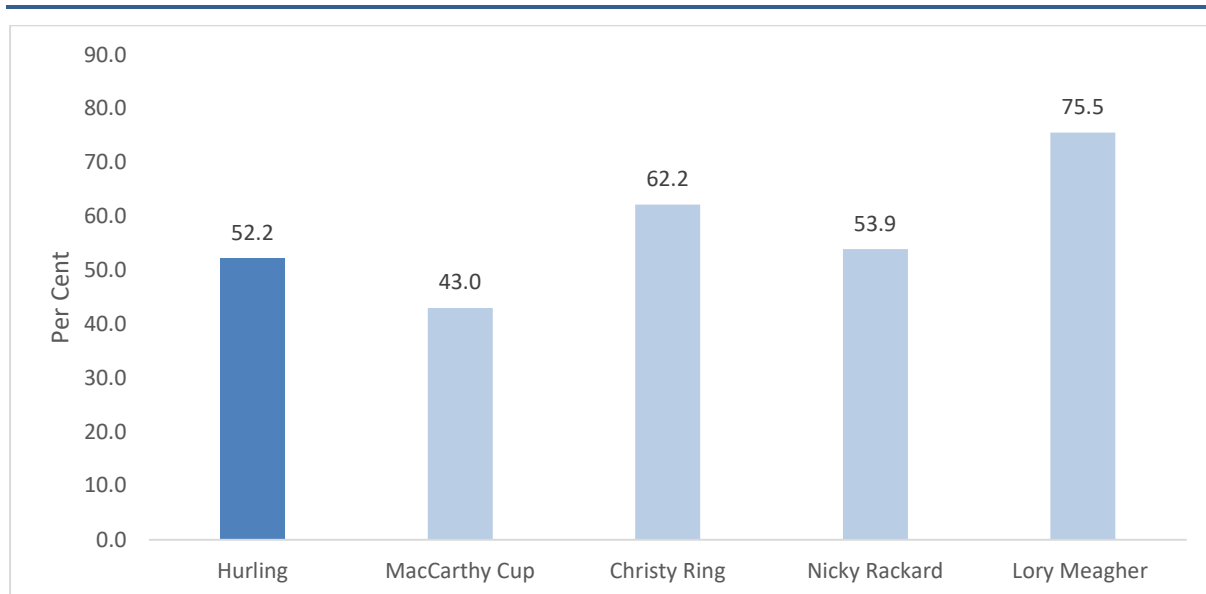
Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Division 3 and 4 footballers (Figure 6.10) were more dissatisfied with the timing of when gear is provided, as were Lory Meagher and Christy Ring hurlers (Figure 6.11).

**FIGURE 6.10 VERY/SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED WITH TIMING OF WHEN GEAR PROVIDED: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS – CODE**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

**FIGURE 6.11 VERY/SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED WITH TIMING OF WHEN GEAR PROVIDED: 2016 HURLERS – CODE**

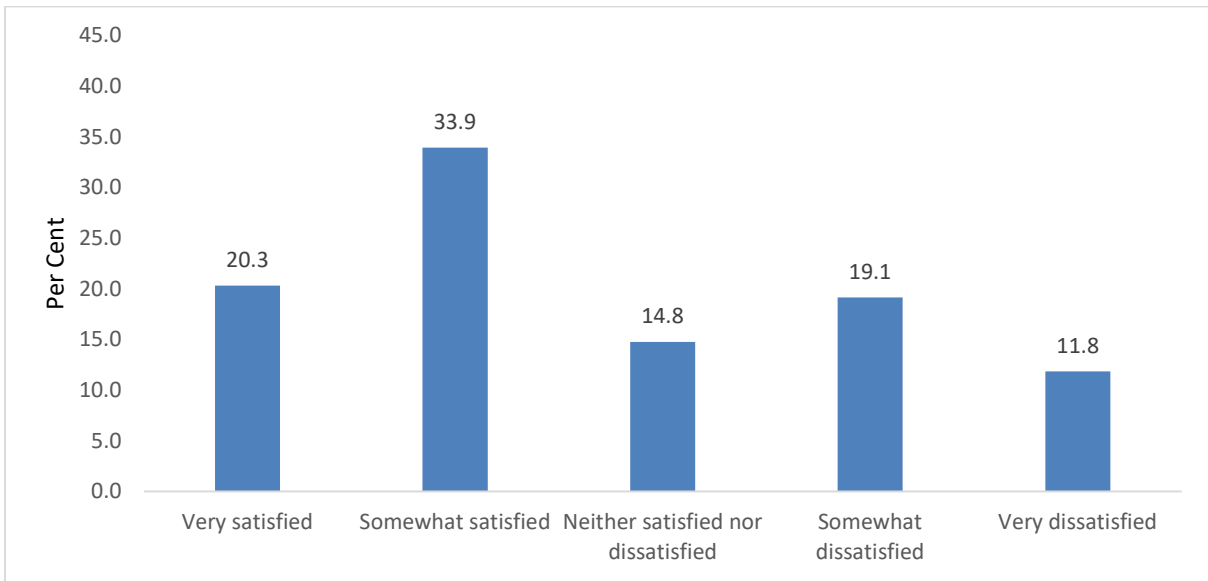
Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

### 6.2.3 Tickets

With regard to ticket allocations,<sup>79</sup> a fifth of players indicated that they were very satisfied with this component of the Player Charter, with just over a third somewhat satisfied (Figure 6.12).

<sup>79</sup> For National League games, the passes that players get can be used to go to any of the league games. In relation to the Championship, the tickets that players get are specific to the matches that they are playing in.

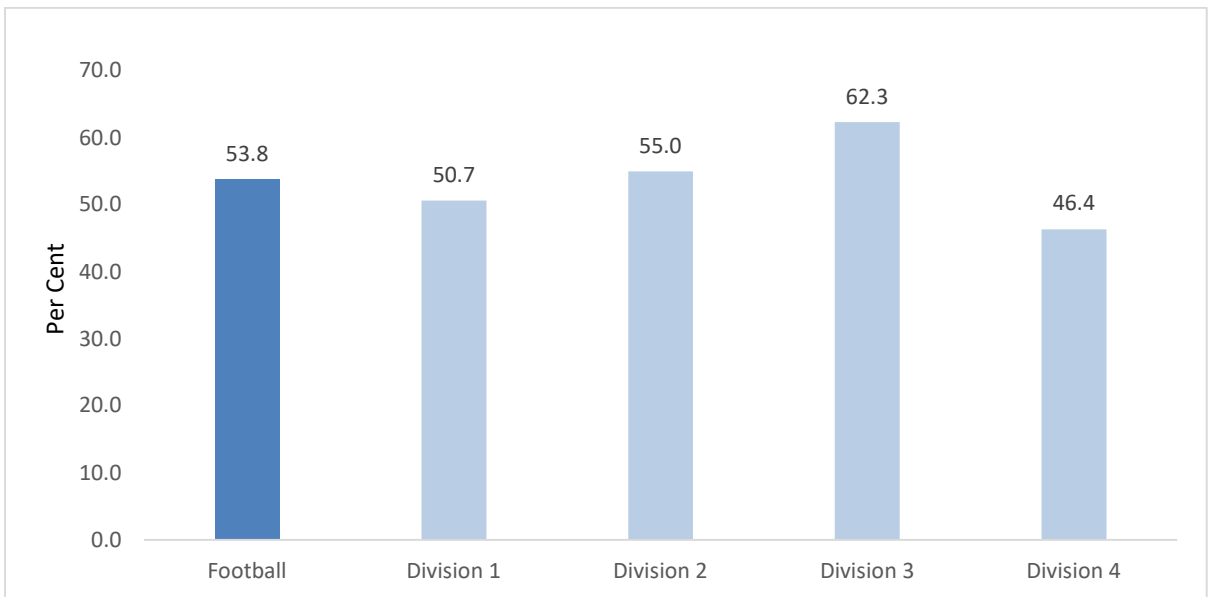
**FIGURE 6.12 SATISFACTION WITH TICKET ALLOCATION: 2016 PLAYERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

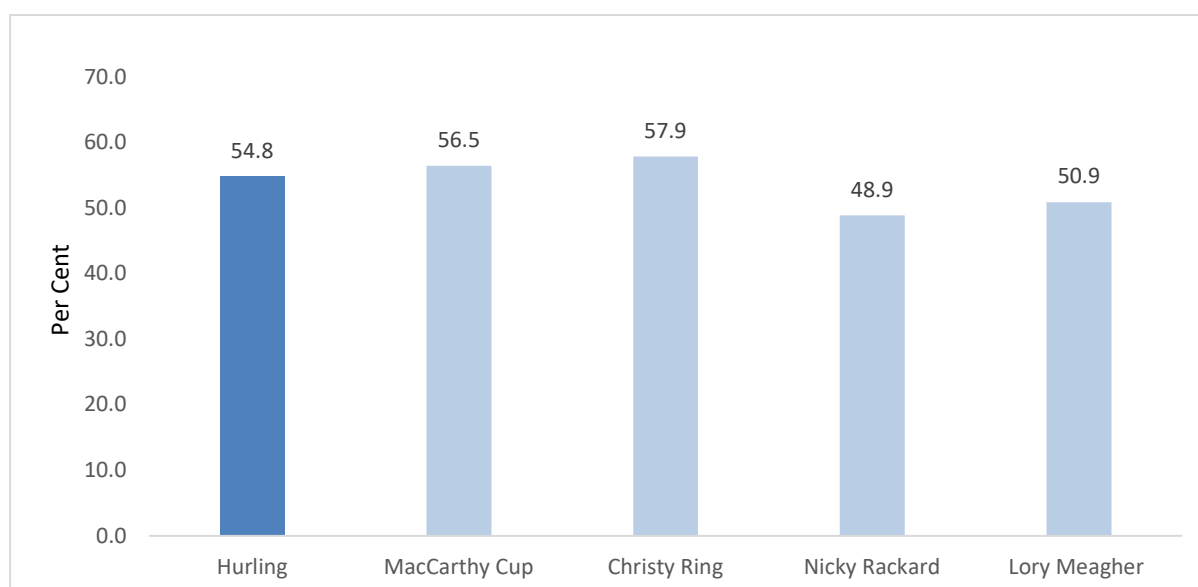
Among footballers, a greater percentage of Division 3 and Division 2 players were very/somewhat satisfied with the amount of tickets that they received (Figure 6.13). Among hurlers, this was the case for Christy Ring and MacCarthy Cup players (Figure 6.14).

**FIGURE 6.13 VERY/SOMEWHAT SATISFIED WITH TICKET ALLOCATION: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS**



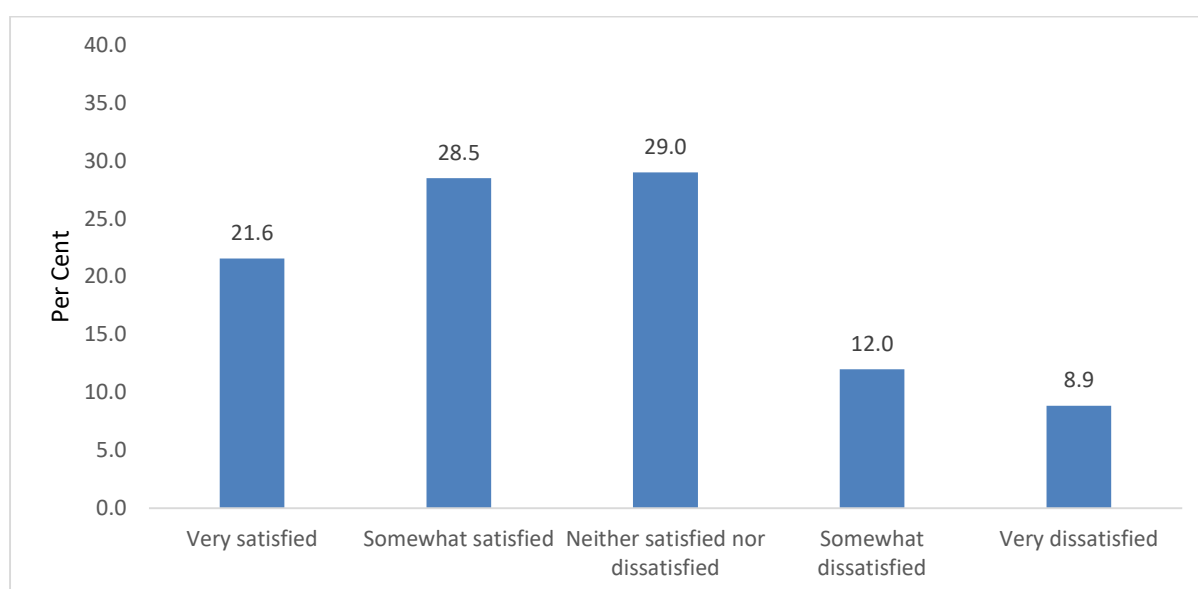
Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).



**FIGURE 6.14 VERY/SOMEWHAT SATISFIED WITH TICKET ALLOCATION: 2016 HURLERS**

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

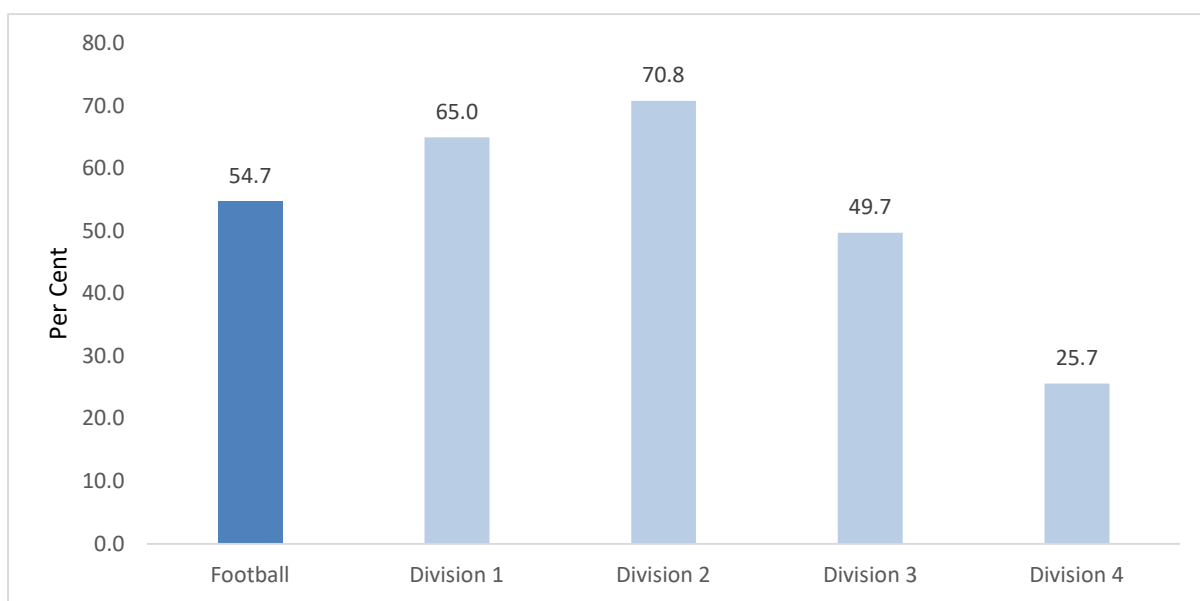
Fifty per cent of players indicated that they were very/somewhat satisfied with their ability to purchase additional tickets if they needed to, with 21 per cent very/somewhat dissatisfied (Figure 6.15).

**FIGURE 6.15 SATISFACTION WITH ABILITY TO PURCHASE ADDITIONAL TICKETS IF REQUIRED: 2016 PLAYERS**

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

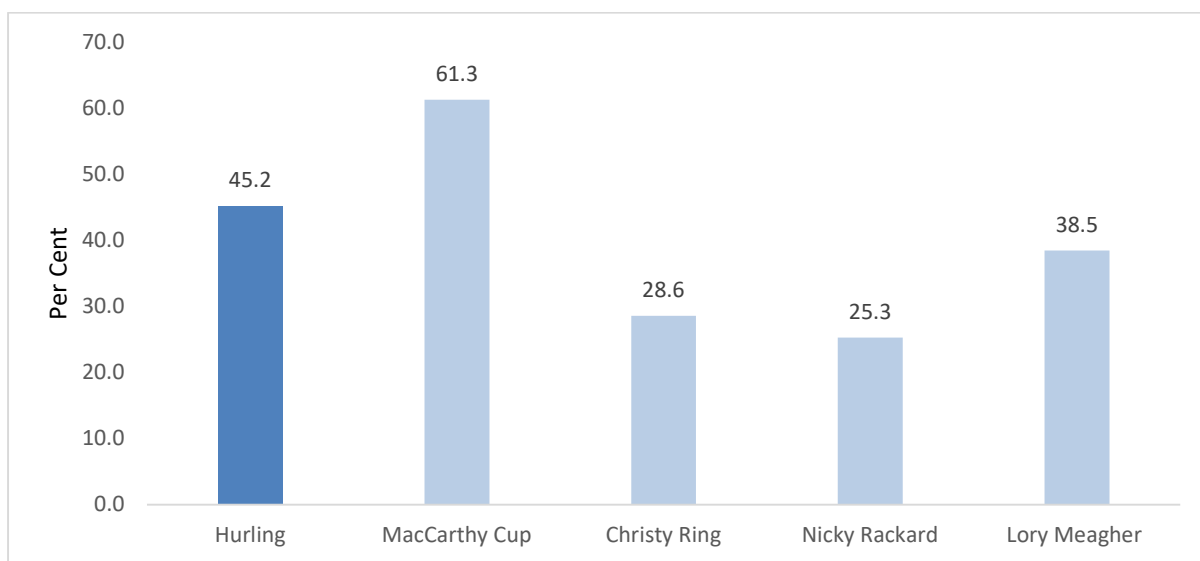
A larger percentage of Division 2 and 1 footballers (Figure 6.16) and MacCarthy Cup hurlers (Figure 6.17) were very/somewhat satisfied with their ability to purchase extra tickets if required compared to players in the other playing levels.

**FIGURE 6.16 VERY/SOMEWHAT SATISFIED WITH ABILITY TO PURCHASE ADDITIONAL TICKETS IF REQUIRED: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

**FIGURE 6.17 VERY/SOMEWHAT SATISFIED WITH ABILITY TO PURCHASE ADDITIONAL TICKETS IF REQUIRED: 2016 HURLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

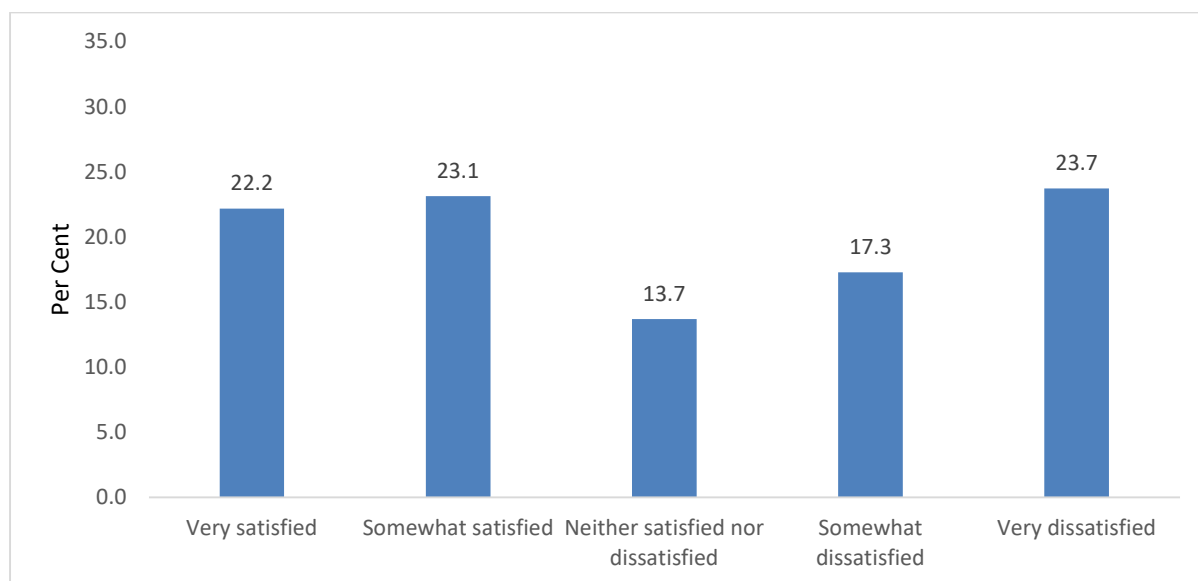
### 6.3 COUNTY BOARD SUPPORTS

#### 6.3.1 Treatment of hurling and football codes

Players were asked how satisfied they were with the way that their code (i.e. hurling/football) is treated by the County Board, in terms of access to pitches, meals, gear, etc., in comparison with the other code in the county.

Overall, 45 per cent of players indicated that they were very/somewhat satisfied with the support that their code received from the County Board in comparison to the other code in the county (Figure 6.18). The percentage that was very/somewhat dissatisfied was only marginally less than this (41 per cent): a sizeable level of dissatisfaction, especially given the potential implications for players' wellbeing.

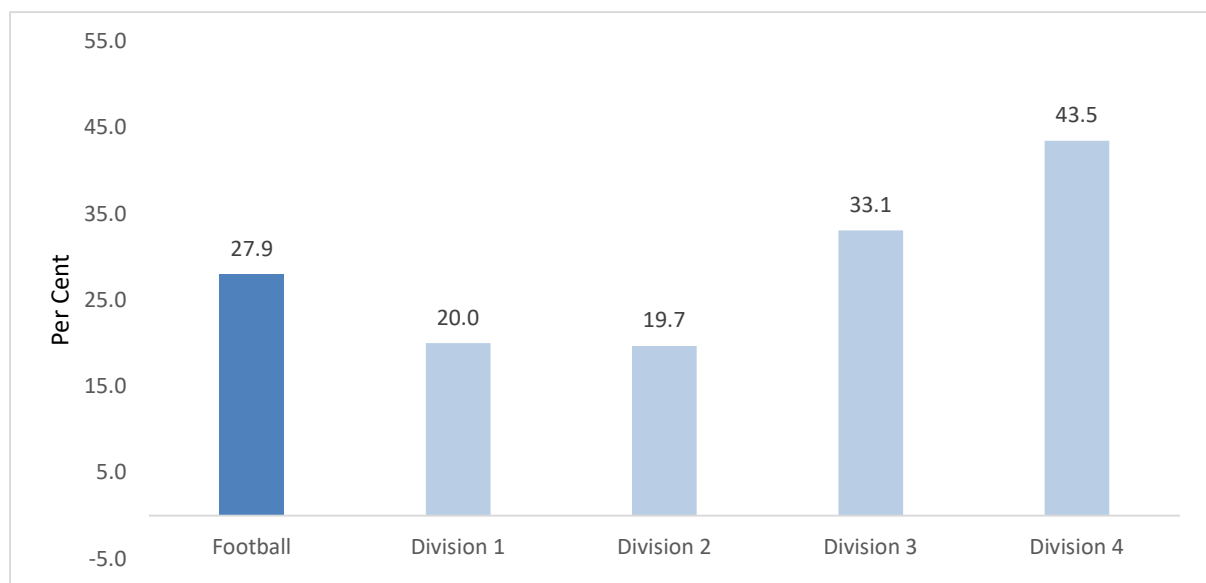
**FIGURE 6.18 SATISFACTION WITH HOW CODE (HURLING/FOOTBALL) IS TREATED BY COUNTY BOARD IN COMPARISON TO OTHER CODE IN THE COUNTY: 2016 PLAYERS**



Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

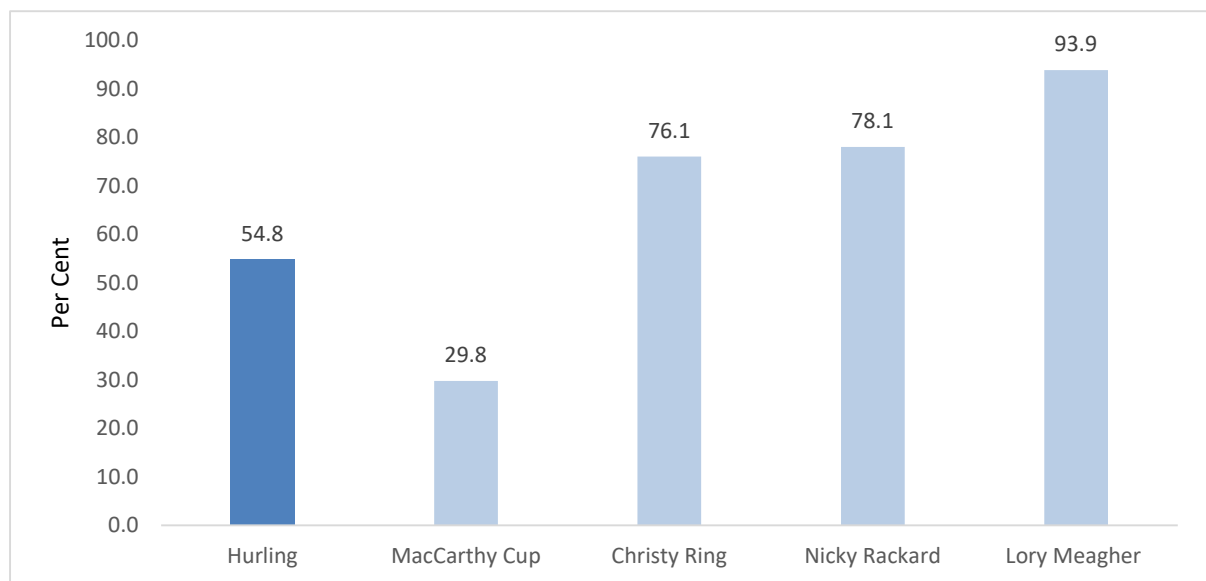
Satisfaction levels varied by playing level, with the percentage of players that were very/somewhat dissatisfied much higher among Division 4 and 3 footballers (Figure 6.19) and Lory Meagher, Nicky Rackard and Christy Ring hurlers (Figure 6.20).

**FIGURE 6.19 VERY/SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED WITH HOW CODE (FOOTBALL) IS TREATED BY COUNTY BOARD IN COMPARISON TO OTHER CODE (HURLING) IN THE COUNTY: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

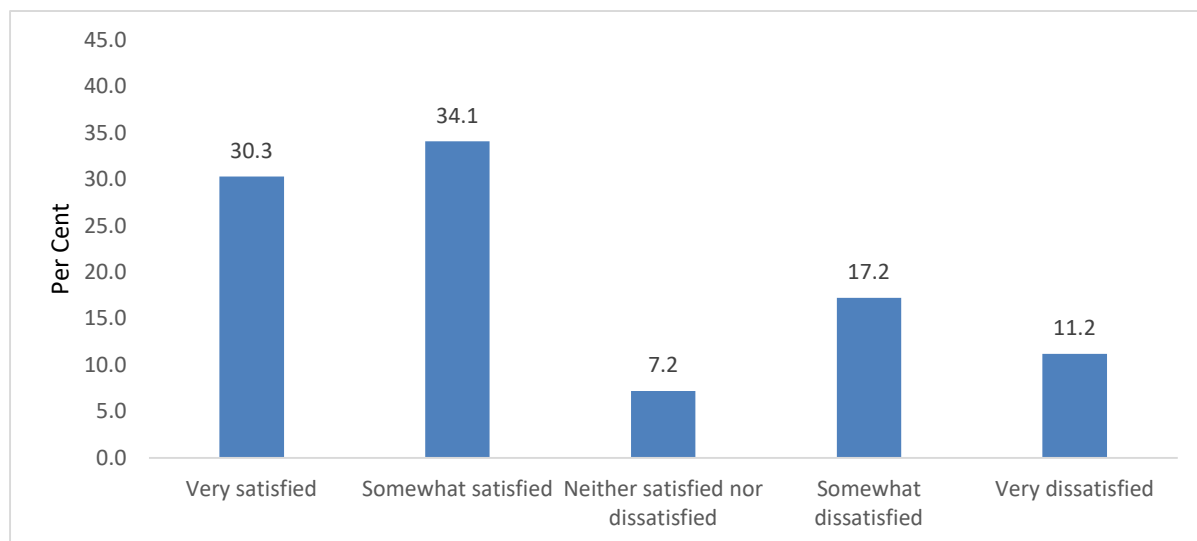
**FIGURE 6.20 VERY/SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED WITH HOW CODE (HURLING) IS TREATED BY COUNTY BOARD IN COMPARISON TO OTHER CODE (FOOTBALL) IN THE COUNTY: 2016 HURLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

### 6.3.2 Inter-county field-based training facilities

Sixty-four per cent of players indicated that they were very/somewhat satisfied with their inter-county field-based training facilities, with 28 per cent very/somewhat dissatisfied (Figure 6.21).

**FIGURE 6.21 SATISFACTION WITH INTER-COUNTY FIELD-BASED TRAINING FACILITIES: 2016 PLAYERS**

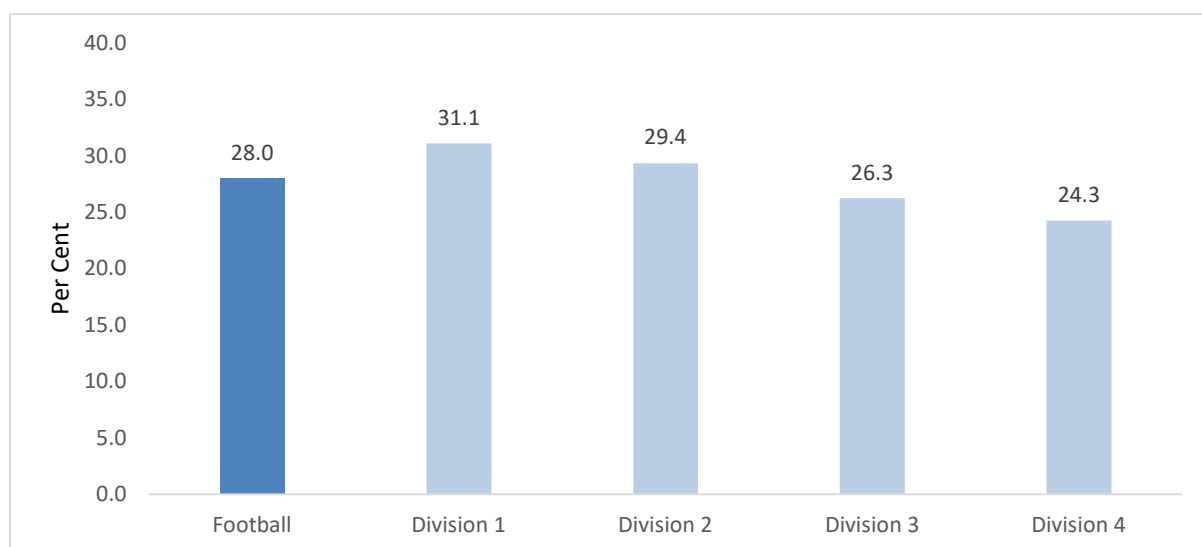
Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

Among footballers, levels of dissatisfaction were somewhat higher among Division 1 and 2 players (Figure 6.22), while among hurlers dissatisfaction was much higher among the lower tier (i.e., Nicky Rackard, Christy Ring and Lory Meagher) players (Figure 6.23).

It is important to note that since these data capturing 2016 player's views on their inter-county field-based training facilities were captured,<sup>80</sup> playing facilities in a number of counties have been upgraded with, for example, the opening of various centres of excellence.

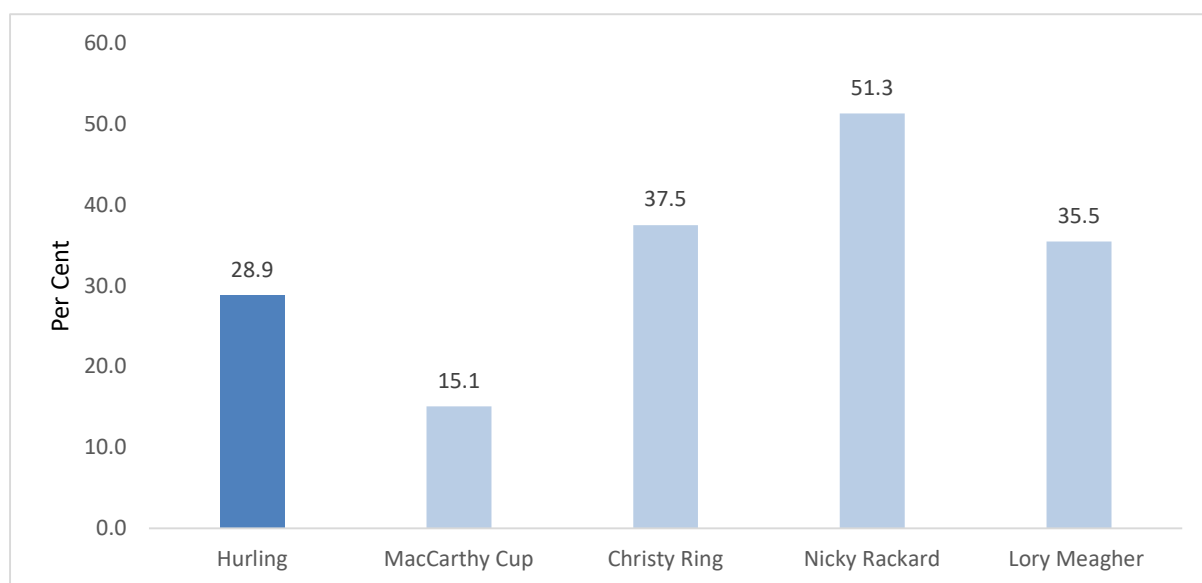
<sup>80</sup> Data captured between May and August 2017.

**FIGURE 6.22 VERY/SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED WITH INTER-COUNTY FIELD-BASED TRAINING FACILITIES: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

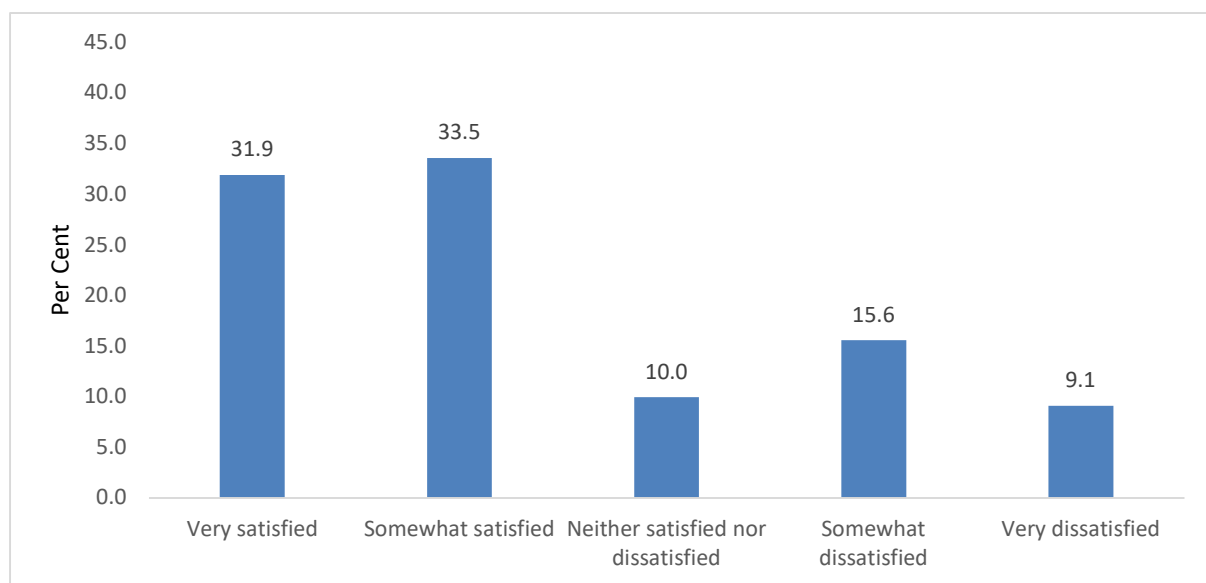
**FIGURE 6.23 VERY/SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED WITH INTER-COUNTY FIELD-BASED TRAINING FACILITIES: 2016 HURLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

### 6.3.3 Inter-county gym training facilities

Almost two-thirds of players were very/somewhat satisfied with their inter-county gym training facilities, while a quarter were very/somewhat dissatisfied (Figure 6.24).

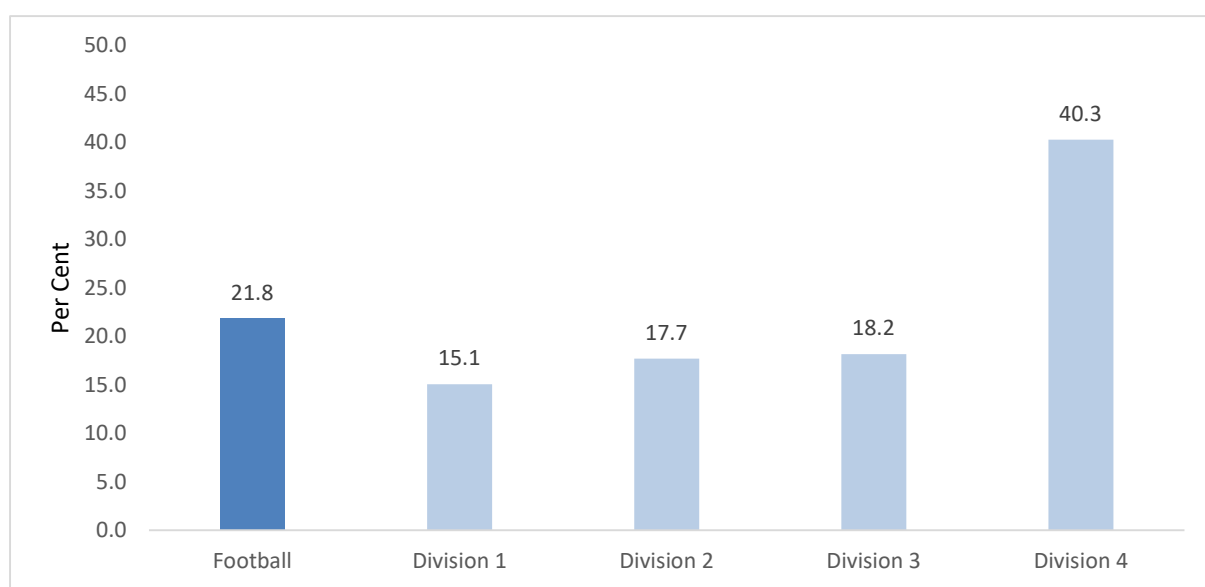
**FIGURE 6.24 SATISFACTION WITH INTER-COUNTY GYM TRAINING FACILITIES: 2016 PLAYERS**

Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

Dissatisfaction was particularly high among Division 4 footballers (Figure 6.25) and Lory Meagher, Nicky Rackard and Christy Ring hurlers (Figure 6.26).

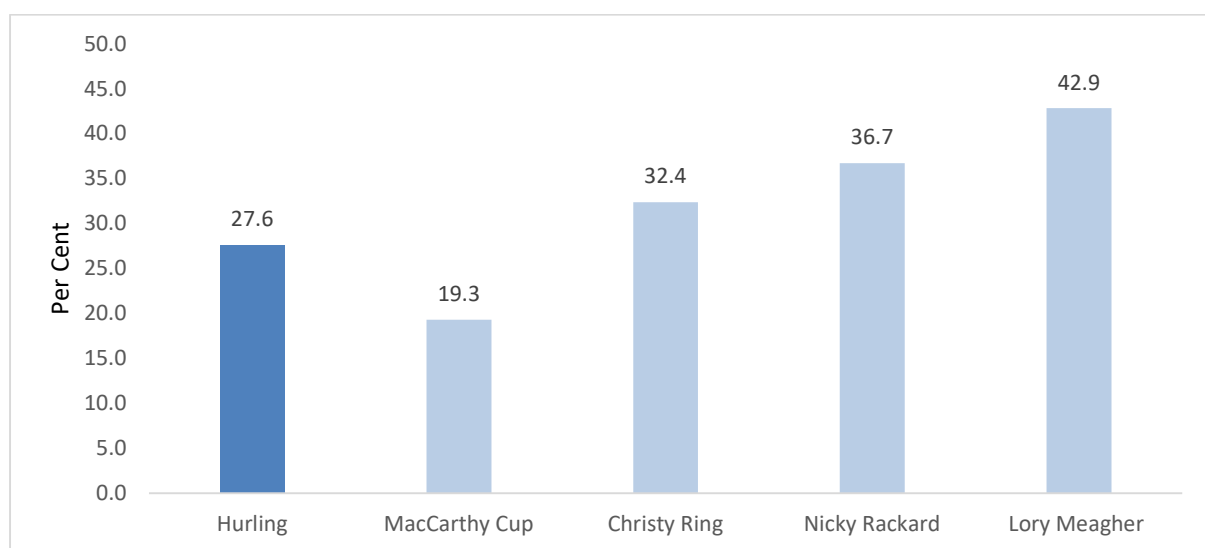
Again, as was mentioned when examining 2016 players' views on their inter-county field-based training facilities, inter-county gym training facilities will have improved in a number of counties since the SSICP-2016 data were captured because of the opening of various centres of excellence in the past few years.

**FIGURE 6.25 VERY/SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED WITH INTER-COUNTY GYM TRAINING FACILITIES: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

**FIGURE 6.26 VERY/SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED WITH INTER-COUNTY GYM TRAINING FACILITIES: 2016 HURLERS**



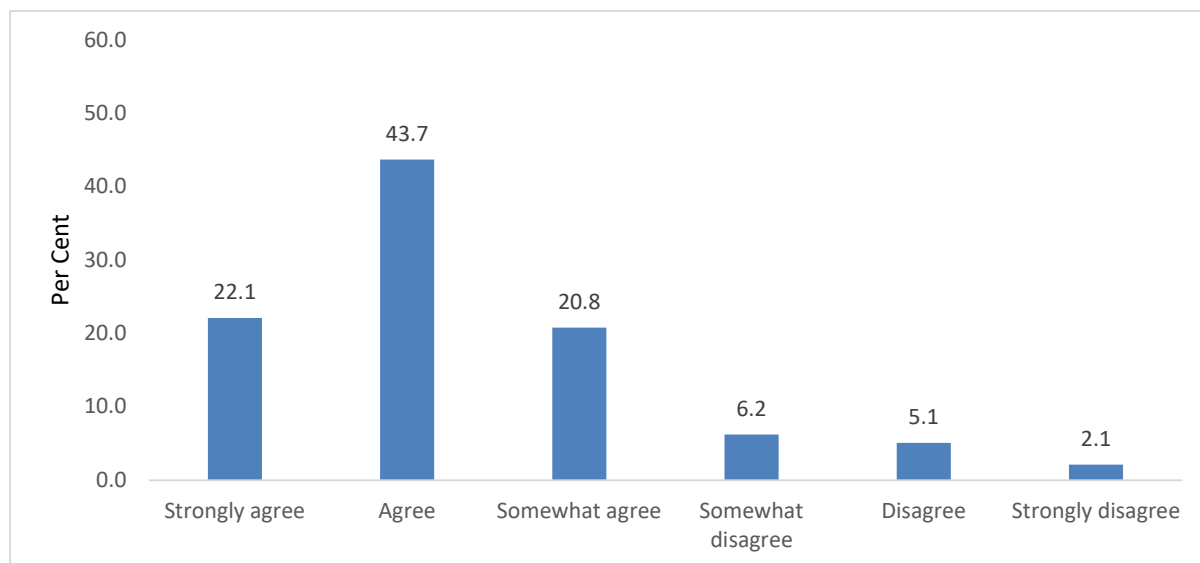
Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

## 6.4 COUNTY MANAGER SUPPORT

### 6.4.1 Actively promoted the best interests of the team

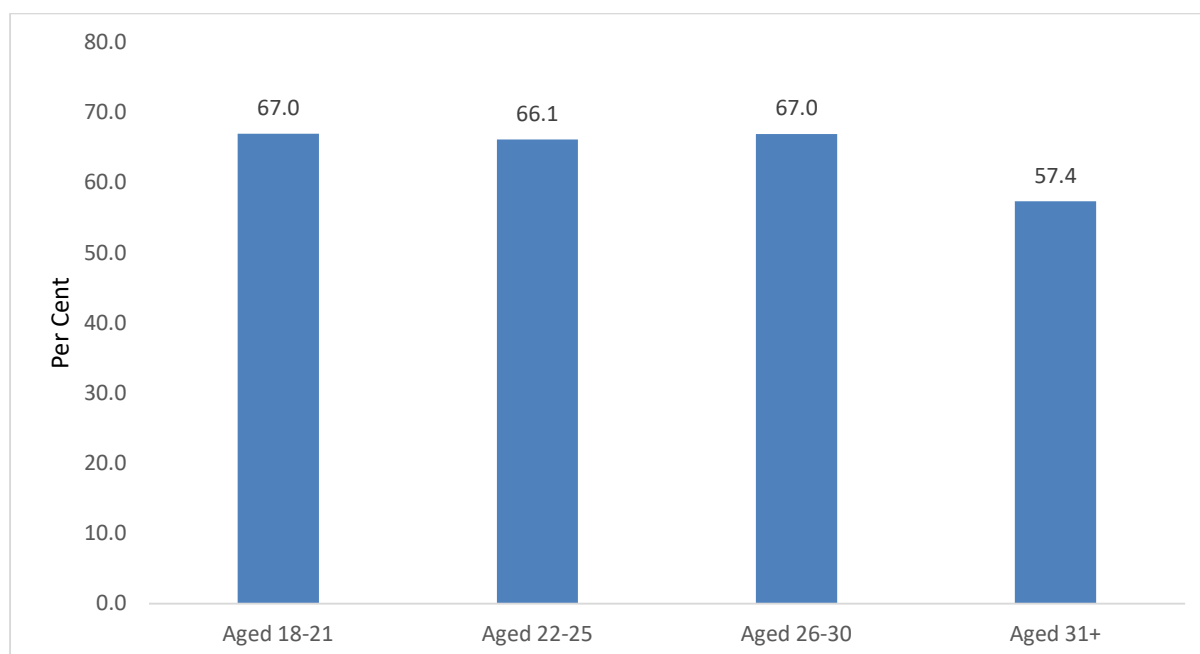
Two-thirds of 2016 players strongly agreed/agreed that their inter-county manager actively promoted the best interests of the team, with only 7 per cent strongly disagreeing/disagreeing (Figure 6.27).



**FIGURE 6.27 COUNTY MANAGER ACTIVELY PROMOTED THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE TEAM: 2016 PLAYERS**

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

The percentage of players that strongly agreed/agreed that their manager actively promoted the best interests of the team was somewhat lower among players aged 31 and above: 57 per cent compared to 66/67 per cent for the other age cohorts (Figure 6.28).

**FIGURE 6.28 STRONGLY AGREED/AGREED COUNTY MANAGER ACTIVELY PROMOTED THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE TEAM: 2016 PLAYERS – AGE GROUP**

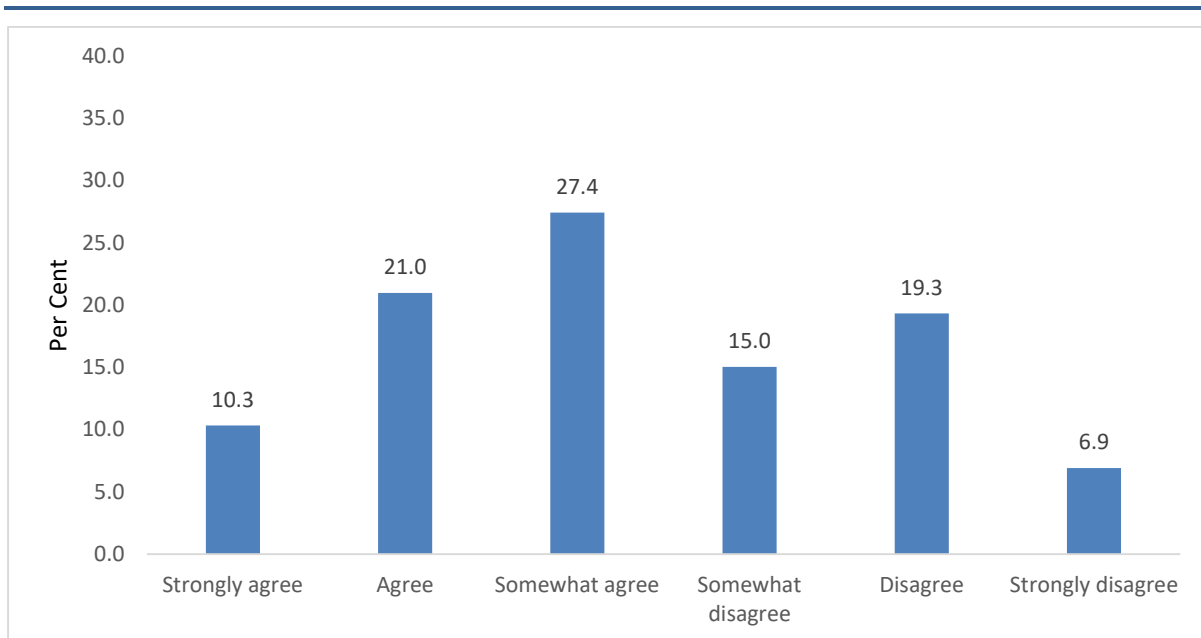
Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

### 6.4.2 Only concerned about players' ability to perform on the pitch

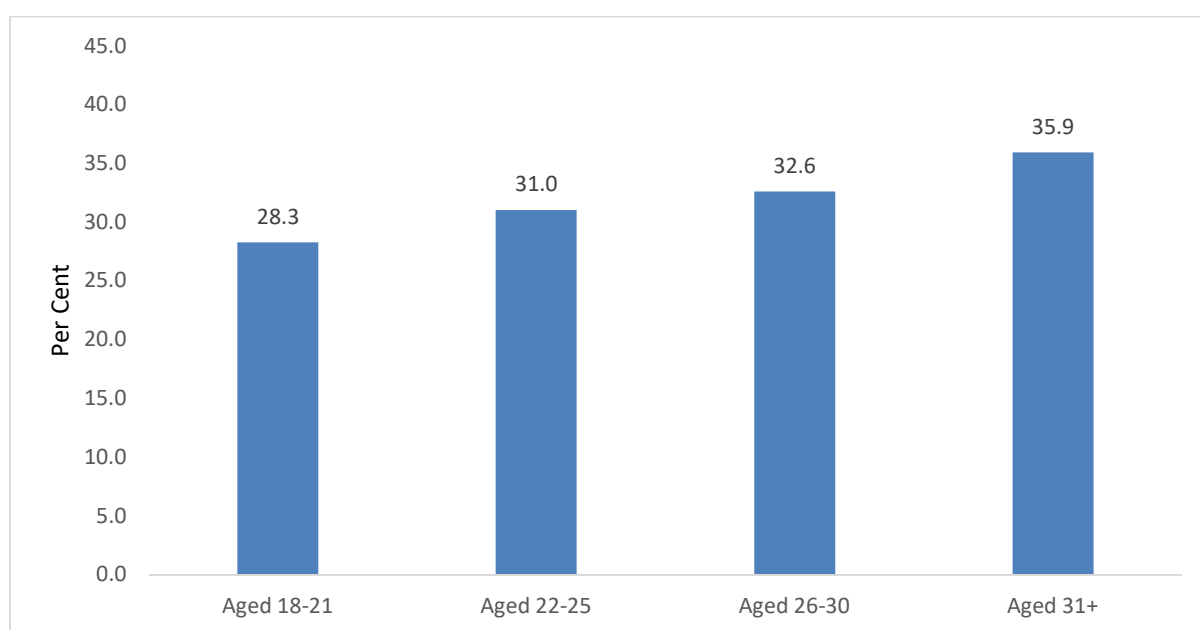
Quite a large percentage of players felt that their manager was only concerned about their ability to perform on the pitch. Specifically, 31 per cent strongly agreed/agreed with this point and 27 per cent somewhat agreed (Figure 6.29). From a player welfare perspective, consideration should be given to monitoring this matter.

A larger percentage of players aged 31 and above strongly agreed/agreed with this view of their manager only being concerned with his players' sporting abilities: 36 per cent compared to 33 per cent of players aged 26–30, 31 per cent of those aged 22–25 and 28 per cent of players aged 18–21 (Figure 6.30)

**FIGURE 6.29 COUNTY MANAGER ONLY INTERESTED IN PLAYERS' ABILITY TO PERFORM ON THE PITCH: 2016 PLAYERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

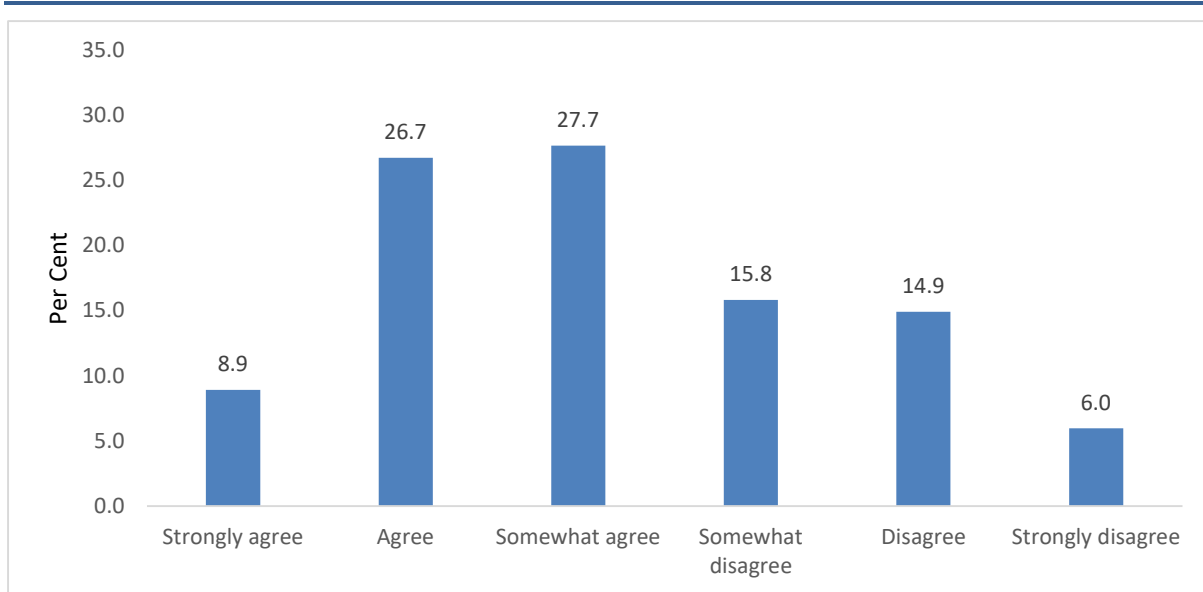
**FIGURE 6.30 STRONGLY AGREED/AGREED COUNTY MANAGER ONLY INTERESTED IN PLAYERS' ABILITY TO PERFORM ON THE PITCH: 2016 PLAYERS – AGE GROUP**

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

#### **6.4.3 Actively encouraged balance between playing inter-county and players' personal, social and professional lives**

Just over a third of players strongly agreed/agreed that their inter-county manager actively encouraged balance between playing inter-county and players' personal, social and professional lives. A fifth of players strongly disagreed/disagreed with this view of their manager (Figure 6.31).

**FIGURE 6.31 COUNTY MANAGER ACTIVELY ENCOURAGED BALANCE BETWEEN PLAYING INTER-COUNTY AND PLAYERS' PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIVES: 2016 PLAYERS**



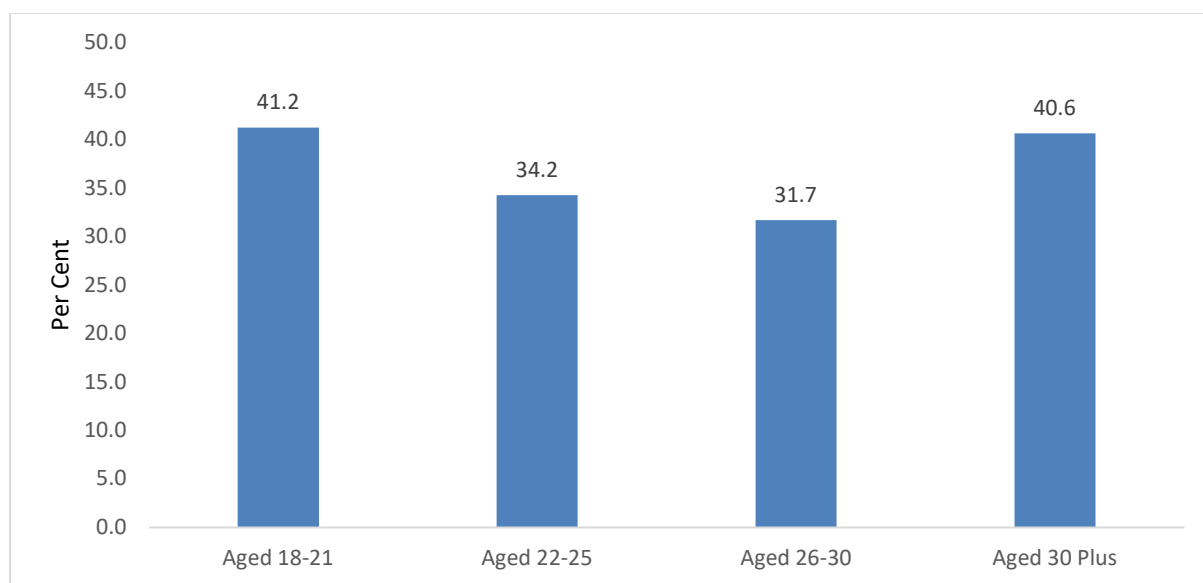
Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Larger percentages of players aged 18–21 and 31 and above strongly agreed/agreed that their manager actively encouraged balance between playing inter-county and players' personal, social and professional lives (Figure 6.32).

This is an interesting result as it does not necessarily tally with some of the findings presented in Chapters 2 and 3 on large percentages of players missing lectures/classes/labs (80 per cent) and work (60 per cent) because of their inter-county commitments. Nor does this manager result fully accord with the findings in Kelly et al. (2018) that 96 per cent of players felt that their inter-county commitments took up a large amount of their time, and players identifying their professional career and personal life as the main areas being affected by this commitment. Specifically, 48 per cent of players indicated that they wanted to be able to spend more time on their professional career but were unable to do so because of their inter-county commitments. This was followed by wanting to be able to spend more time with their family/partner (35 per cent), with friends (10 per cent), and on other hobbies/activities outside of inter-county (4 per cent).

Given these seemingly contradictory results, are managers/management teams solely responsible for what is expected of players? Are players' own sporting ambitions playing a role in driving their commitment levels and, therefore, some decisions that they are taking around their professional (study/work) and personal (family/relationships) lives? Have increases in the number of expert personnel in the players' backroom teams contributed to the increased commitments, time or otherwise, required of players? Further research is needed to identify the various sources that are driving commitment levels from players.

**FIGURE 6.32 STRONGLY AGREED/AGREED COUNTY MANAGER ACTIVELY ENCOURAGED BALANCE BETWEEN PLAYING INTER-COUNTY AND PLAYERS' PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIVES: 2016 PLAYERS – AGE GROUP**

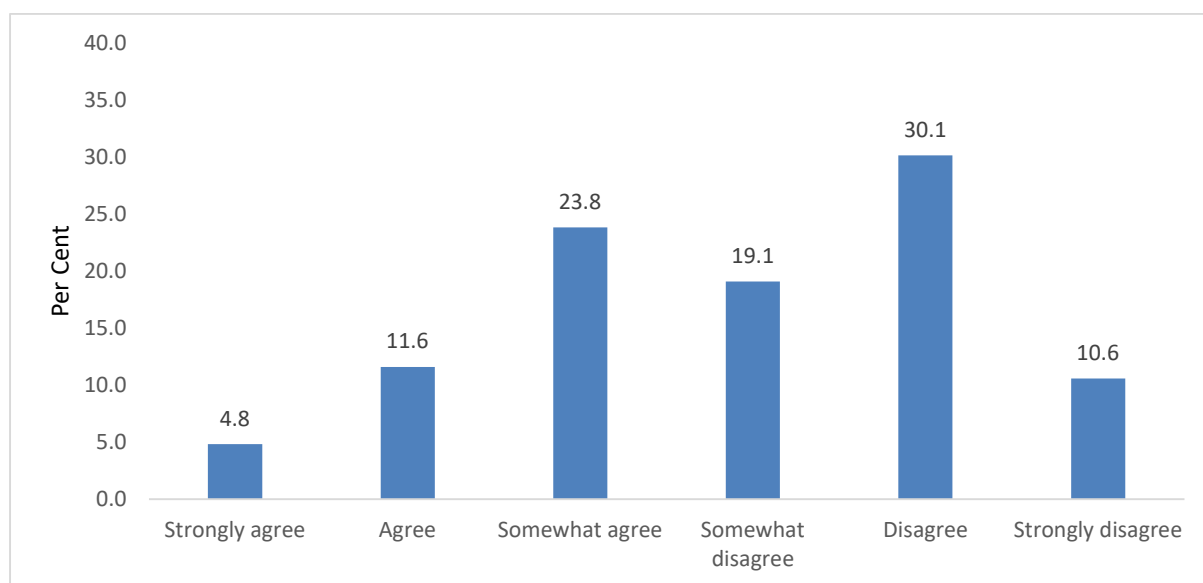


Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).*

#### 6.4.4 Dictated all aspects of players' lives, on and off the pitch

Forty-one per cent of players strongly disagreed/disagreed that their team manager dictated all aspects of their lives, on and off the pitch: only 16 per cent strongly agreed/agreed with this statement (Figure 6.33).

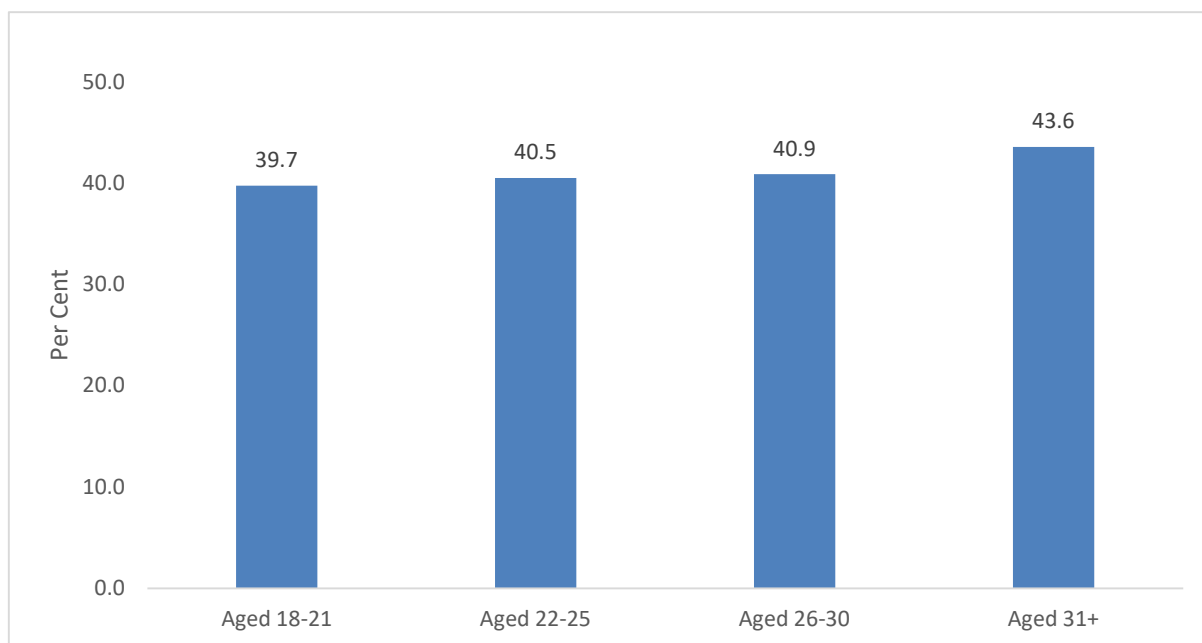
**FIGURE 6.33 COUNTY MANAGER DICTATED ALL ASPECTS OF PLAYERS' LIVES, ON AND OFF THE PITCH: 2016 PLAYERS**



Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).*

A slightly larger percentage of players aged 31 and above strongly disagreed/disagreed with this view of their manager (Figure 6.34).

**FIGURE 6.34 STRONGLY DISAGREED/DISAGREED COUNTY MANAGER DICTATED ALL ASPECTS OF PLAYERS' LIVES, ON AND OFF THE PITCH: 2016 PLAYERS – AGE GROUP**



Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016)*.

## 6.5 REQUESTED SUPPORTS

In the 2016-SSICP questionnaire, players were given a list of nine items and were asked to select the areas that they would like to see more emphasis placed on in playing senior inter-county. Players were also given the option of providing information on other supports that they would like to receive: less than two per cent of players chose to do this (Table 6.1).

The two key areas identified by players for receipt of additional support were:

- 'How to progress our professional career (work, education)' (69 per cent);
- 'Keeping our inter-county participation in perspective (i.e., there is more to life than just playing inter-county)' (69 per cent) (Table 6.1).

The other key areas were: (i) 'Emotional or mental health difficulties' (55 per cent), (ii) 'preparing for life after inter-county' (51 per cent), (iii) 'the long-term consequences of Gaelic game related injuries (including concussion)' (49 per cent), and 'how to manage our time demands' (48 per cent).

TABLE 6.1 AREAS PLAYERS WOULD LIKE TO SEE MORE EMPHASIS PLACED ON IN PLAYING SENIOR INTER-COUNTY: 2016 PLAYERS (PER CENT)

	All players
How to progress professional career (work, education)	69.4
Keeping our inter-county participation in perspective (i.e., there is more to life than just playing inter-county)	69.2
Emotional or mental health difficulties	54.7
Preparing for life after inter-county	50.9
The long-term consequences of Gaelic-game-related injuries (including concussion)	49.1
How to manage our time demands	48.0
Addiction – gambling, drink, drugs, etc.	33.7
How to handle being in the media, and our actions on and off the pitch being subject to public scrutiny 24/7	25.1
Anti-doping risks, and consequences for professional career as well as sporting career	21.6
Other, please specify	2.1

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2017.

There was some variation in the issues of importance by age (Table 6.2). For those aged 26–30, the key issue was ‘keeping our inter-county participation in perspective (i.e., there is more to life than just playing inter-county)’, while for each of the other three age categories it was ‘how to progress our professional career (work, education)’.

The second most important issue that those aged 31 and above would like to see more attention given to was ‘preparing for life after inter-county’. This was third on the list for those age 26-30, while it was not of importance to either of the two younger age groups (18-21 and 22-25).

‘Emotional and mental health difficulties’ featured for all age groups. This issue was ranked fourth among the older playing cohorts (aged 28–30 and aged 31 and above), and third for those aged 18-21 and 22-25. ‘How to manage time demands’ was also identified by the younger players (aged 18–21 and 22–25) as an issue that they would like to see more emphasis placed on in playing senior inter-county.

TABLE 6.2 AREAS PLAYERS WOULD LIKE TO SEE MORE EMPHASIS PLACED ON IN PLAYING SENIOR INTER-COUNTY: 2016 PLAYERS – AGE GROUP (PER CENT)

	All players	Aged 18–21	Aged 22–25	Aged 26–30	Aged 31+
How to progress professional career	69.4	70	71	68	69
Keeping inter-county participation in perspective	69.2	67	71	70	65
Emotional/mental health difficulties	54.7	59	54	52	58
Preparing for life after inter-county	50.9	40	51	54	67
Long-term consequences of Gaelic-game-related injuries (including concussion)	49.1	43	50	51	56
How to manage time demands	48.0	48	52	45	41
Addiction – gambling, drink, drugs, etc.	33.7	33	34	31	41
How to handle being in the media/being subject to public scrutiny 24/7	25.1	25	26	23	27
Anti-doping risks and consequences	21.6	20	22	21	26
Other	2.1	*	*	*	*

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: \* Number of players used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.





## CHAPTER 7

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### Changes players would make to inter-county experience and set-up

#### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

In addition to investigating the supports that players feel that they need to assist them in playing senior inter-county in the SSICP-2016 (Chapter 6), we asked players if there was one thing that they could change about their inter-county experience what it would be. The same question was asked in relation to the inter-county set-up. The findings from these examinations are presented in this chapter.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this information is based on two open-ended questions included at the end of the SSICP-2016 questionnaire. This qualitative information was coded and quantified in order to identify the key areas that players would change about their inter-county experience and set-up. In responding, some players identified more than one item that they would change about their inter-county experience and/or the set-up. Given the commitments now required to play senior inter-county (Kelly et al., 2018), and the SSICP-2016 being a forum for all players to give feedback on what they, as players of the games, would change, all information provided by the players in answering both questions was coded and is presented in the sections that follow. There was some overlap in players' responses to both questions. Nevertheless, each is presented separately.

We also include quotes from the players in this chapter. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the selected quotes are not representative of the views of all players, as is the case with all qualitative research (i.e. not representative of the population subgroup under study). However, the citations are informative and provide valuable insights into the issues examined in the chapter.

Given the various examinations conducted in the report, we conclude this chapter by identifying if players think that their lives are better or worse because of their status as an inter-county player and involvement in the game at this level.

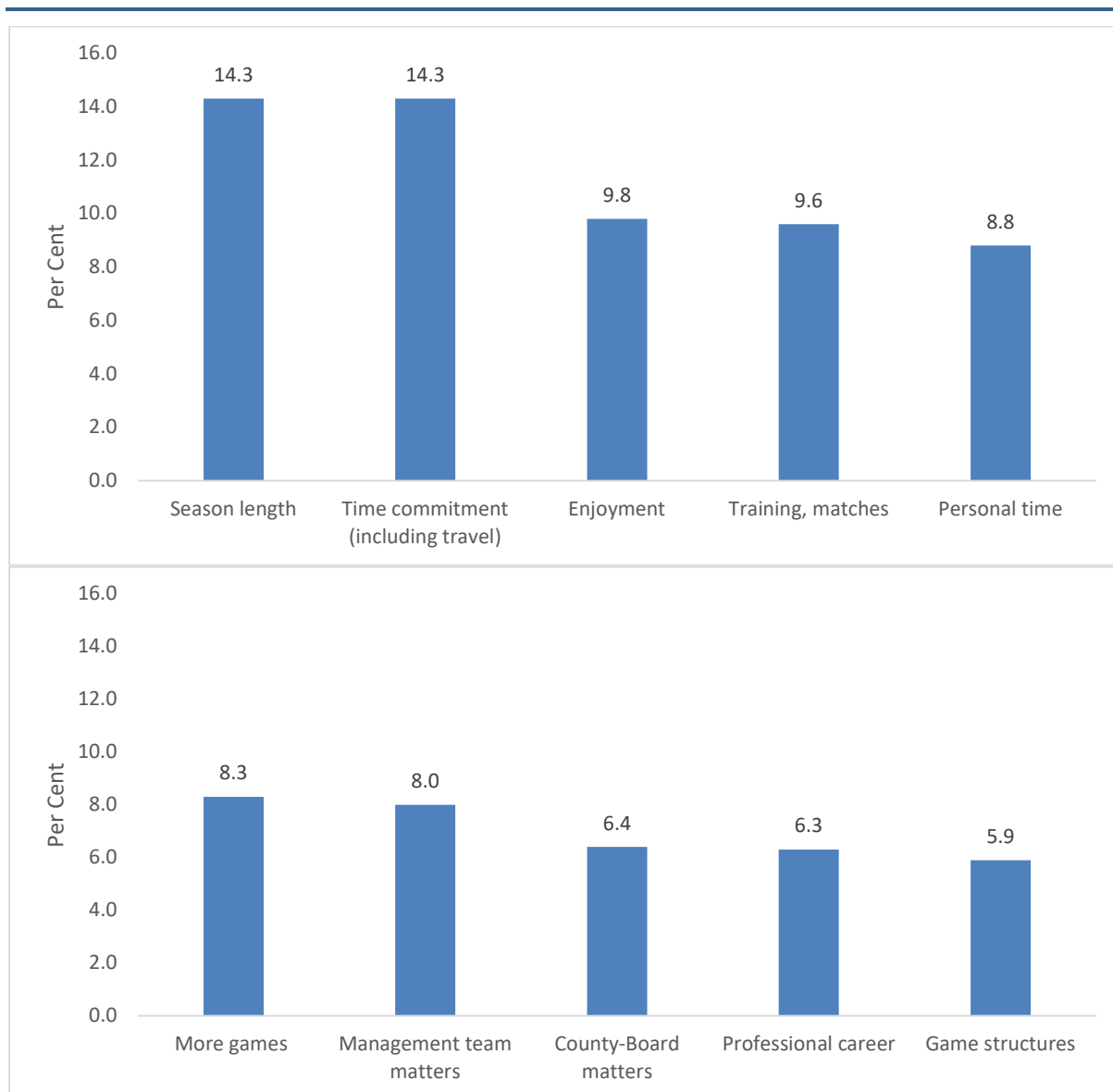
#### 7.2 CHANGES TO INTER-COUNTY EXPERIENCE

The information provided by players regarding the one thing that they would change about their inter-county experience was aggregated into 22 broadly defined categories. The top ten items are presented in Figure 7.1, with the remaining factors set out in Table 7.1.

As can be seen from Figure 7.1, the five highest ranked items that players would fundamentally change about their inter-county experience are: (i) the length of the season; (ii) the time commitment involved, including travel; (iii) the lack of enjoyment in the games at present; (iv) the amount of training and number of games; and v) personal time.

Each of these factors is discussed in more detail next.

**FIGURE 7.1 FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES PLAYERS WOULD MAKE TO THEIR INTER-COUNTY EXPERIENCE: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL**



Source: *Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).*

Note: 'County Board matters' includes provision of outlined supports (i.e. Player Charter) in a timely manner; 'personal time' includes time with partner, family, friends.

### 7.2.1 Season length

One of the main aspects of their inter-county experience that players would change is the length of the season: this issue was highlighted by 14 per cent of players.

Specifically, players indicated that the 'season was too long' and called for a 'shorter playing season'; 'more compact season'; 'a real off season'; 'an exclusive break where absolutely no football happens, club or county'.

This category also includes players that would like to see a workable 'fixed calendar' so that they can, for example, 'plan our lives'; 'organise downtime'; 'plan study, evening courses, networking, family, etc.'.

Other players indicated that they wanted a shorter/off/fixed playing season so that they could book 'holidays and time off from work'; 'give more time for clubs'.

In addition, some players pointed out that having a shorter/off-season would mean that 'there is less load in training'; more 'time to spend with friends or pursue other hobbies'; 'get a better balance between life and football'; or simply such a situation would allow the 'body to recover!'.

One player made the point that the 'season too long. I am very fit and 31 years old but will retire this year due to time and energy demands with a young family. More and more expected of players for 8–9 months of year.'

While having a shorter/fixed/off season is one of the main factors that players would change about their inter-county experience, some indicated that they are sceptical of this ever happening – 'but that will never happen unless there is someone willing to change'.

### 7.2.2 Time commitment, including travel

Another fundamental change that players would make to their inter-county experience is the 'time commitment' given (14 per cent), including the travel component and the time associated with that aspect of the game.

In providing their thoughts on this matter, players spoke about the 'time it consumes from week to week'; the 'time sacrificed to play inter-county'; the 'amount of time spent away from home/work etc.'; the 'commitment levels required: time spent away from family and friends as you cannot get that back'; 'time constraints: heading off 24 hours in advance for an away game. Being at the dressing room 4-5 hours in advance of a home game'.

If they could, they would give 'less time' or ask for the games to be made 'less time consuming'; 'reduced time allowing for additional time spent working or with family'; 'reduce the amount of commitment, it is part-time and should be treated as that'.

In giving their feedback on this issue, some players indicated that they wanted the 'option to spend more time with family, friends and work'. Others said that they wanted 'more freedom to enjoy one's life outside the game by giving more time off'; or that they 'would like more time to enjoy my life'.

One player said that 'the time pressures the older you get have a big impact on you mood'. Another player said that the 'commitment is becoming very serious, almost to a professional level. Currently it is sustainable for myself, but I feel that any increase in current commitment hours per week may lead me to drop off a squad.' Others said that 'I love the sport but based on the time we put in, its not worth the sacrifices'; and 'its getting too demanding, I am only 32 now but i have to retire as i cannot justify being away from family and friends for so much time throughout the year. Unnecessary amount of training being completed'.

Some players spoke about the impact of the time being given to their inter-county commitments on their professional career: 'I cant progress with my career as its so time consuming'; 'it's a big commitment to take on when in construction work trying to get time off'; 'I feel that the commitments are ruining work careers. I've got to the stage where I didn't miss a single session with the county team all year but this meant I have missed out on work promotion.' In this regard, one player suggested that 'there should be a fund that compensates employers of county players for hours missed at work for matches/training'. He also said 'I cut my intercounty career short as a result of not being able to get time off'.

With regard to travel, players said, 'a lot less travelling would have helped'; and would like to see, for example, 'less travel: comute killer'; 'less travel during college year'.

One player made the point that 'with more and more lads working in cities now, the travelling demands are becoming greater'; another said that 'travelling home for training midweek. It's ruining my career in the long term.'

Another player said that he would like to 'be closer to training and have more time for recovery instead of all the driving to/from trainings and games'. Another felt that 'collective gym sessions should be abandoned for experienced players as the time wasted travelling to them is infuriating. Newer players obviously need the coaching but 11 years into my S&C journey there's not much direction needed.'

### 7.2.3 Enjoyment

Another key area that players would change about their inter-county experience was their ability to 'enjoy' playing at that level (10 per cent).

For some, this was due to their own capacity to relax and enjoy the experience – 'relax a little more'; 'not take it as serious'. The majority, however, attributed their inability to enjoy the game to the current state of the senior inter-county games.

Some of the feedback in this regard was: 'I wish it could be more relaxed, the whole thing is being turned into a system infacuated on winning at all costs'; 'I would love, love, LOVE more enjoyment. I think many people have gotten lost in why we play the game and what we want to get from it. Yes, we want to win and achieve as much as possible. BUT we also want to make memories and friends.'

Some players would like to see 'making the games fun again, too many nut cases involved in set ups and players who think we are professionals'. Others said 'with the game going more in a professional direction it is becoming more difficult to enjoy. I would like to see a more fun and relaxed atmosphere'; 'its treated like a professional sport which is ridiculous. Especially in regard to medication like not being able to take certain tablets. It is an AMATEUR sport so inter county players should not be treated way differently than club players.'

Others made the point 'it is all encompassing and no balance'; 'as years went on much less time spent getting to know & bond with teammates. Became soulless at times.'

One player said 'scale it back. Commitment, time and professional standard setting has gone too far. Enjoyment is leaving the game.' Others are asking 'that it becomes more enjoyable again and less of a non-stop chase'; 'try to make it more of a shared journey between county Team, supporters, clubs, families. I felt like I was very much in a bubble and to go on a shared journey would these people would have relieved a lot of stress from relationships and club'; 'try enjoy it more rather than it being very serious all the time'; 'to enjoy it more. Playing years are short.'

Some players said that they would like 'less training and make it more fun, gone to serious for a sport that we get no money for'; 'more focus on enjoying what we do'; 'to have less pressure'; for the games to be 'more enjoyable'; 'less seriousness'; 'enjoy it more and not struggle with pressure of expectations'; 'spend less time in team meetings and in the whole set up and be allowed to enjoy life outside of the GAA more'; 'a better balance between Life and sport. Its consumes all aspects of your life'; 'less hours spent training and a more relaxed attitude to socialising'; 'less scrutiny and more enjoyment'.

Some players spoke about how the games themselves are being played and that they wanted to ‘enjoy it more, not feel as under pressure to play to a system’; ‘less pressure and tactics on players.. Let players express them selves on the pitch and dont make them always play to a sytem.. A lot of players feel like robots playing under some managers.’

A few players went as far to say that ‘I can’t change anything about my experience.. The games have taken the freedom of every player’; ‘I wouldn’t do it for as long’; ‘I would have retired 2 years earlier as I was not enjoying it enough’.

#### **7.2.4 Training, matches**

The fourth key item that players would like to see changed about their inter-county experience relates to training and matches (10 per cent).

In this regard, some players asked for ‘less training, more games’; ‘increase games to training ratio’ as ‘currently the number of training session outweighs the number of games far too much’ (8.9 per cent).

This category also includes players who said that there is ‘way too much training’; ‘too much time training, with too many consequences’; ‘there is too much training at the minute’ and asked for ‘less hours spent training’; ‘less time training – consuming too much personal life’; ‘cap on number of training sessions: to 2 per week’; ‘to not train as much’; ‘increase balance between training and recovery’; ‘less training and make it more fun’.

As can be seen from Figure 7.1, separately 7.6 per cent of players called for ‘more games’. Some specified ‘more championship games’. Others said ‘more games for lower division teams’; ‘more games club and county’; ‘more challenge games’; ‘more competitive games’.

#### **7.2.5 Personal time**

Another fundamental change that players would like to make to their inter-county experience is the amount of time that they get to allocate to themselves and pursuing interests outside of the games. This includes having more time to spend with their partner, family and friends (9 per cent).

In this regard, players spoke about wanting ‘more personal time off’; ‘more time for myself’; ‘more free time for partner & family’; ‘being able to spend more time with people close to you’; ‘more free time / for friends, family, hobbies & stuff’; a ‘better social life – missed weddings, stags, nights out, etc.’; ‘more downtime and

social time'; 'more time to enjoy other aspects such as travelling, education etc.'; 'time to travel'.

One player spoke about 'the lack of ability to have a normal social life, go on a 1 week holiday etc.'; while another said that because of playing inter-county he 'missed out on travelling the world before deciding to settle down'.

One player indicated that he 'enjoyed most of it. Just wished I looked after my body better & made more time for other things like family / friends on various occasions – not enough of a balance.'

Others said that they would 'not let it take over my life as much as it did when in the end it wasn't worth the sacrifices I was making'; 'enjoy myself more, take time away'; 'spend more time with family/friends and focus more on professional career. Relax and enjoy life by doing things i want to do'; 'not to let it affect my personal life and relationships'.

Some players said that they 'would have taken a year to travel and maybe play abroad'; 'travelled before I went into set up'; 'applied myself to other things'.

With regard to socialising, some players asked specifically for 'No drinking bans'; 'less drinking bans / more time to socialise with friends'; and said that they would like to see 'the "drink ban" culture that is sucking the life out of players' personal skills and life balance' changed.

One player made the point that 'my experience & outlook on playing inter county changed when i became a father'.

### **7.2.6 Other changes to inter-county experiences**

As can be seen from Figure 7.1, some of the other key items that players would change about their inter-county experience related to areas under the remit of their inter-county management team (8.0 per cent) and County Board (6 per cent). In addition, there are issues around their professional career (6 per cent) and game/competition structure (6 per cent) that they would change/like to see changed.

Other factors that players would change about their inter-county experience, or that they would like to see addressed by those with responsibility for the specific issues, are set out in Table 7.1



TABLE 7.1 FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES PLAYERS WOULD MAKE TO THEIR INTER-COUNTY EXPERIENCE: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL

	Per cent
Nothing	5.4
Club, county time	5.4
Individual factors	4.3
Physical health/injuries	4.2
Level playing-field	3.8
Professionalism	3.3
More perks	2.9
Win more	2.6
Central management matters	[<2.0]
Player welfare matters	[<1.0]
Respect	*
Media	*

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: The percentages in square brackets ([ ]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

\* Number used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

### 7.3 CHANGES TO INTER-COUNTY SET-UP

The information that players provided in relation to what they would change about their inter-county set-up was aggregated into 19 categories. The top ten items are presented in Figure 7.2, with the other factors reported in Table 7.2.<sup>81</sup>

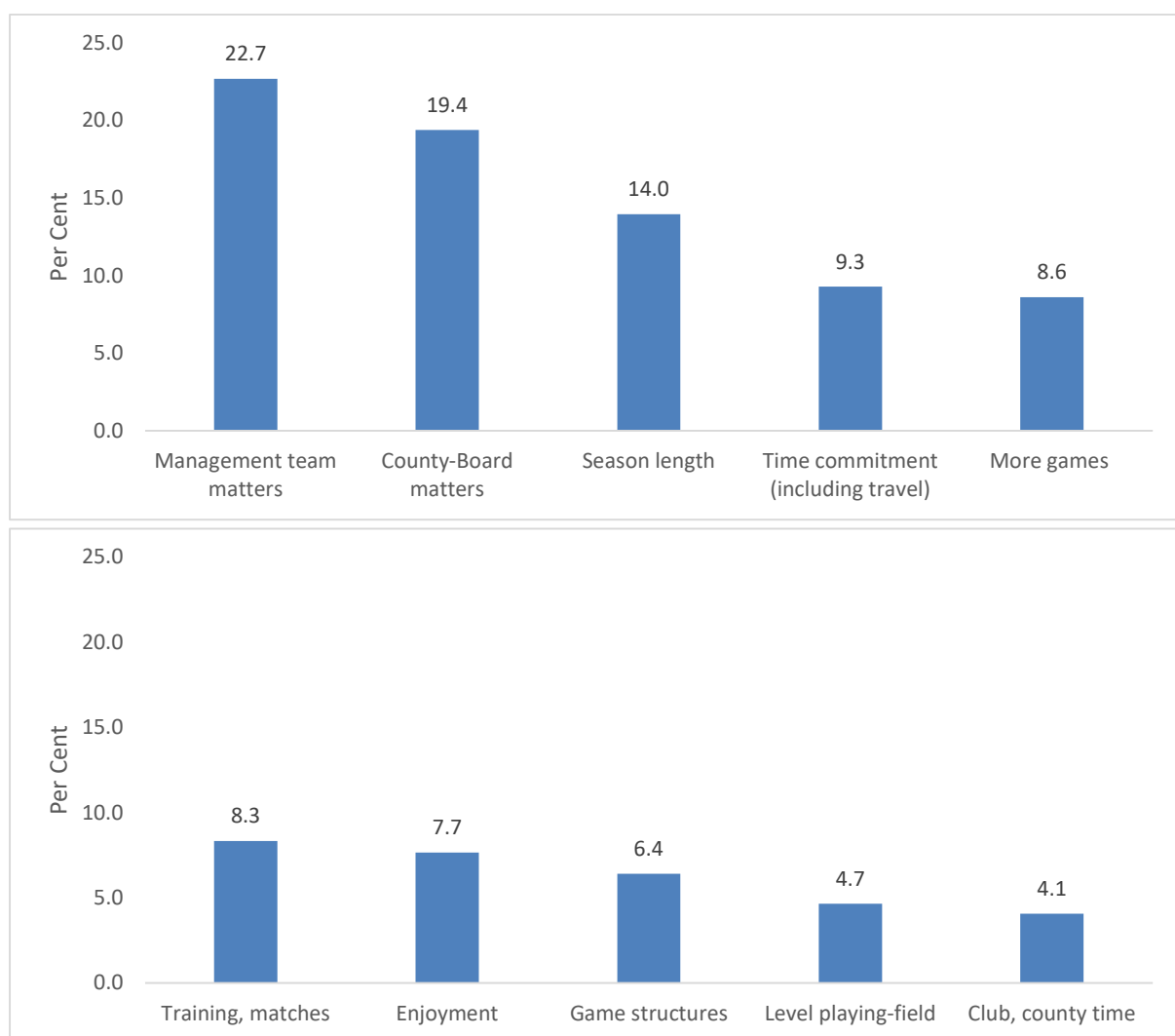
As indicated, there was some overlap in the responses that players provided with regard to what they would change about their inter-county experience and set-up. In comparing Figures 7.1 and 7.2, one can see that eight of the top ten items that players would change about their inter-county experience also emerge in the top ten factors that they would change about their inter-county set-up. However, the ranking differs. This time, the five highest placed items that players would like to see changed about their inter-county set-up can be classified as: (i) management team matters; (ii) County Board matters; (iii) the length of the season; (iv) the time commitment involved, including travel; and (v) more matches.

Given that some of the views of players with regard to the length of the season (shorten it), the time commitment involved (reduce it) and additional matches have

<sup>81</sup> The percentage of 'nothing/not applicable' cases (i.e. zeros) was 10.2. These individuals are not included in either Figure 7.2 or Table 7.2 as most were 'not applicable' cases and some of these individuals may have given this response because the answer that they provided for what they would change about their inter-county experience related to the inter-county set-up (e.g. less training) and they did not want to provide a duplicated response.

already been outlined, we will focus on the top two ranked items in the discussion that follows next: management team and County–Board matters.

**FIGURE 7.2 FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES PLAYERS WOULD MAKE TO THEIR INTER-COUNTY SET-UP: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL (PER CENT)**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

### 7.3.1 Management team matters

For the most part, the main items that players would like to see changed about their inter-county set-up fall under the remit of their management team: such issues were identified by 23 per cent of players.

Some players would like to see their inter-county set-up ‘more professionally run’; ‘a more professional approach over all areas’; ‘more organisation’; ‘make the set-up more professional based on other county’s standards’. This included a ‘higher standard of coaching’; ‘better s&c coaches’; ‘Better access to physio, scans’; ‘install

a sport psychologist'; 'more access to a nutritionist'. One player asked, 'get rid of the stupid and unqualified trainers who over train every team they are involved', and instead for there to be 'more focus aimed at recovery'. Another pointed out that 'there's never a team doctor at training or matches. This should change.'

Others spoke about issues around the training itself: 'more tactical trainings'; 'have injury prevention session or mobility exercises before training/games'; 'better emphasis on nutrition'; 'trainings be more specific to the position you play in and base conditioning training on that also'; 'all gym session done individually not collective'; 'less emphasis on gym based sessions'; 'less group sessions'; 'recovery time off and more skills sessions'; 'more wall ball work and working on touch and skills'; 'more emphasis on skills and enjoyment'; 'doing more training on your own, not in the team setting/because of my shift work'; 'spend less hours in the week collectively'; 'more time devoted to skills'.

Some players talked about time issues and asked for 'shorter intense sessions , only 1 hour max spent on the pitch'; 'gym sessions to be done individually and would mean less nights out of the house to do so'; 'less hours in the gym'; 'less time at meetings and training more time playing matches'; 'better use of time'; 'less meetings and time spent at training. Much preferred when you arrived at training 20 mins before hand and trained hard and went home. Recently it's meetings before training, assessments with physios etc. which means it could be after 10pm before you are finished'; 'reduce training times. You could be there for 4 hours and only spend a hour and a half on the pitch'; 'less long training spells'; 'Less analysis more playing'.

Players also talked about the 'location of training'; 'training base' and asked for 'players travelling from Dublin during off season to take training sessions in Dublin rather than travelling home'; 'train in Dublin for the bulk of the year or closer to Dublin for the Dublin based players'; 'less travel more homebase collective sessions'; 'local training'; 'have training sessions organised closer to location where living during the week'; 'move training to more accessible locations for those not living in the county'; 'change the location of training to accommodate people travelling'.

Player welfare issues were also raised by some players, such as, 'managers should care about the players outside of [named Gaelic game] ... they have a moral responsibility to do so ... but this is always ignored in the quest for success'; 'constant communication on how players are feeling'; 'better aware of players wellness and their bodies'; 'manager having no accountability in terms of demands placed on players'; 'more training doesn't always equal better results – listen to players – a rest is needed both mentally and physically'; 'the county managers have

too much power and basically can mess with your private and social life and professional life'; 'ensuring burnout of younger players is avoided to prevent serious injuries. Having modified training regimes and more injury screening protocols would greatly help this.'

Players also called for 'equal opportunities'; for the team environment to be 'more inclusive'; to 'look after fringe players better'; 'more respect for players'; 'a degree of perspective applied to it. Asked to put your life on hold for the team's benefit but you could be instantly be dropped'; 'better communication from management to all squad members; 'less demand, nothing else, help is becoming non-existent'; 'better understanding'; 'more understanding of family time'; 'more bonding'; 'more understanding management teams & more coordination between club & county set-ups particularly from the point of view where success is less likely being involved with county than club'; 'more allowance for players personal lives, and managed in a warmer, more humane manner'; 'getting to know each other off the pitch'; 'let players have more of an input into set up, more interaction between players and management'.

### **7.3.2 County Board matters**

Nineteen per cent of players identified set-up issues that, by and large, are under the remit of County Boards that they would like to see changed.

For the most part, this centred around having 'better facilities'; 'better dressing room and gym facilities'; 'football pitch facilities'; 'having a training base all year round'; 'better standard, pitches, stadium, gym availability, food, gear, more professional'; 'central training facilities catering for all types of training'; 'better centre of excellence as currently my county's is a joke'; 'better fields to train on'.

Other players just called for 'more support from county board'; 'better support from county board'; 'better organisation by county board'.

One player asked for 'Co. Board affairs, expenses, logistics, etc. ran by professionals employed by Croke Park, not local unqualified volunteers'; while others called for 'more professional help goes directly to players in counties not winning All-Ireland regularly e.g. skip county boards and work with players – e.g. ensuring expenses are paid!!.'; 'centralised expenses to avoid expense payment delays'; 'the county board to be more connected with the county team set-up – specifically the players on an individual basis'; 'refreshing the individuals involved a county board level, bring in people with a new voice and new ideas'.

Some players spoke specifically about the supports that they receive under the Player Charter: 'better treatment with regard expenses and gear so as players can

focus on training and games rather than a constant struggle with the county board'; 'sort out payment of expenses and arrival of gear'; 'gear earlier'; 'expenses paid properly, in full and on time'; 'food provided after training'; 'better selection of meals provided'; 'County board be better with gear etc'.

Others talked about 'equal promotion of football compared with hurling from County board/clubs'; 'football and hurling to be treated the same'; 'lack of respect from county boards'; One player noted that 'playing hurling in a county that prioritises football can be frustrating. Resources are limited within every county so issues relating to the availability training facilities, top quality management and trainers, delay in expenses were issues'; 'County Board to support hurling'; 'more support from our county board. No time for hurling'; 'equality from the county board'; 'to get support from county board equal to that of county footballers'.

Regarding player welfare, some players asked for 'access to better medical treatment'; 'more respect to the player'; 'that there would be more support available for players and the that players knew more about the support available to them'. One player pointed out that there is 'no continuity with s and c coaches, physios changing regularly means players' welfare not been properly monitored'.

### **7.3.3 Other changes to inter-county set-up**

As can be seen from Figure 7.2, some of the other key changes that players would like to see made to the inter-county set-up are: (i) the amount of training (less) and matches (more) (8 per cent); (ii) the reintroduction of enjoyment (less pressure) to the games (8 per cent); (iii) amendments to competition structures (6 per cent); (iv) having a more level playing-field (5 per cent); and (v) distinct time for club and county (4 per cent).

Some other factors that players would like to see changed about their inter-county set-up are set out in Table 7.2.

TABLE 7.2 FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES PLAYERS WOULD MAKE TO THEIR INTER-COUNTY SET-UP: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL

	Per cent
Professionalism	3.7
Central management matters	[<3.0]
Personal time	[<2.0]
More perks	[<2.0]
Player welfare matters	[<2.0]
Professional career	[<2.0]
Other	*
Respect	*
Media	*

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: The percentages in square brackets ([ ]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

\* Number used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

#### 7.4 LIFE BETTER OR WORSE BECAUSE SENIOR INTER-COUNTY PLAYER

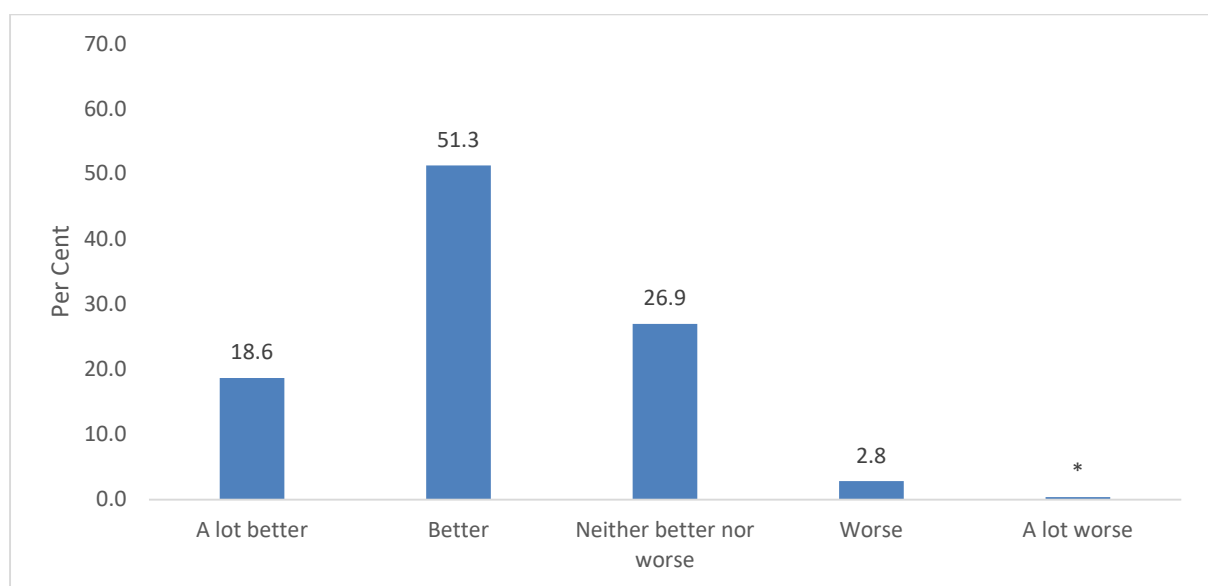
As can be seen from Figure 7.3, over half of players (51 per cent) believe that their life is better because of their status as an inter-county player and involvement in the game. A further 19 per cent indicated that their life is a lot better because of playing senior inter-county.

Just over a quarter of players (27 per cent) indicated that playing inter-county had no impact on their life, positive or negative; only around 3 per cent believed that being involved had made their life worse .

A slighter higher percentage of footballers said that their life was a lot better from playing the game: 21 per cent compared to 17 per cent of hurlers.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Results available from the authors on request.

**FIGURE 7.3 LIFE BETTER OR WORSE BECAUSE OF YOUR STATUS AS AN INTER-COUNTY PLAYER AND INVOLVEMENT IN THE GAME: 2016 PLAYERS – OVERALL (PER CENT)**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: \* Number used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

## CHAPTER 8

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### Main research findings and policy implications

#### 8.1 INTRODUCTION

The welfare of Gaelic players, both within and outside of the inter-county set-up, is of utmost importance to the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), from national level right down to the grassroots. Therefore, understanding the demands placed on players within and outside of the inter-county set up will allow the GAA, and the Gaelic Players Association (GPA), to put in place measures and structures to aid players. As players are the most integral part of Gaelic games, helping players' welfare will ultimately help to ensure the long-term sustainability and success of the games.

This report is the second study jointly commissioned by the GAA and the GPA to examine issues surrounding the welfare of senior inter-county players. Similar to other sportspeople, inter-county players need supports, structures and systems that will help them not only to succeed in their sport, but also to manage their professional and personal lives while playing so that they can achieve their goals in those aspects of their life as well.

The first report (Kelly et al., 2018) investigated the time commitments required to play senior inter-county and, in a broad sense, the knock-on effects on players' lives of playing inter-county. The current study builds on a number of issues that emerged from that original study. Specifically, it examines: (i) players' education and professional experiences and decisions, (ii) engagement in risky behaviours, (iii) nutrition and supplement use, (iv) players' views on provided and required supports, and (v) what they would change about their inter-county experience and the set-up. This research will assist not only the GAA and the GPA but also players themselves, along with inter-county management teams and County Boards, to better understand what players need and expect regarding player welfare services across a number of areas.

Data gathered in the Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016) were used to conduct the analyses undertaken in this report. The intensity and depth of players' commitments to the inter-county game may have increased since the 2016 data were gathered, and this possibility should be borne in mind when considering the findings that have emerged from the current research.

In addition to using the SSICP-2016 data, where feasible other nationally representative data sources were also used in the report for comparison or



benchmarking. These additional sources aid interpretation of players' results. For example, this report examines how players compare with the general male population of the same age with regard to decisions around their chosen career path on leaving second-level education, their earnings, and levels of alcohol consumption.

As with the first report, the issues examined in the current research are numerous and wide-ranging. The aim of this section is to outline some of the principal findings, to consider their implications for player welfare and policy in this area, and, where appropriate, to suggest follow-up work.

## **8.2 FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

### **8.2.1 Education experiences**

On average, inter-county players are highly educated compared to their peers. Over 61 per cent have at least a degree, compared to 35 per cent of the general male population of the same age. Higher education rates may be due to a number of factors: for example, players being highly driven individuals, demand/supply-side factors on the part of third-level institutions (e.g. recruiting players to assist in winning the prestigious third-level Gaelic game competitions, various scholarships), or a third-level education pathway facilitating players to meet the commitments required to play senior inter-county at that stage in their life. Alternatively, it could be because players may come from socio-economic backgrounds that are more likely to participate in higher education. The actual reason for this finding could not be identified with the available data.

It is obvious from the results that playing inter-county is having an impact on players' education experiences: over 80 per cent said that they had difficulty in balancing the demands of studying and playing during their education course; 16 per cent either dropped out of a course or had to repeat a year because of the demands of playing inter-county; and 80 per cent missed college lectures/classes/labs because of their inter-county commitments.

These findings highlight the need for further research in this area. In particular, is pursuing a further/higher education course the correct career path to take for *all* players that take one of these education routes on completion of secondary school? Is it in their best long-term interests or are they taking this route because it provides them with the flexibility needed to play inter-county that they would not necessarily get if they entered the labour market or pursued an apprenticeship course? Are players being enticed into, or pulled towards, pursuing this route by third-level institutions that want to win one of the third-level Gaelic game

competitions (e.g. Sigerson Cup or Fitzgibbon Cup), and/or the scholarships that are now offered to Gaelic players to undertake a third-level education course?

From a player welfare perspective, it is important that players are guided, as they come towards the end of their second-level education, to pursue the career path that is in their best long-term interests: not necessarily a route that will facilitate a short-term gain of being able to play senior inter-county and/or college-level football/hurling.

If it is the case that it is in the best interests of *all* players to pursue a further/higher education course on completion of secondary school, would it be feasible to place fewer inter-county playing demands on these players at this formative stage in their life? This would facilitate them to have a less stressful and more positive and productive third-level education experience, both in and outside of the lecture hall.

If the demands cannot be reduced, have the national bodies an advisory role to play? Specifically, given that Gaelic games are amateur sports, should these bodies be explicitly directing players not to sacrifice their education to meet the inter-county demands being placed on them? Is there a role for them in providing players with whatever supports are needed to facilitate them to prioritise their studies over the inter-county game? Or, at least, supports that will facilitate student-players to combine their studies and sport in a more balanced manner than the current research has found?

It was obvious from the research that for a sizeable number of players, their career path on leaving second-level education was based in part on their being able to play inter-county. While 56 per cent of players stated that taking a job or education/training course that they were interested in on leaving secondary school was the most important aspect of their career path decision at that stage of their life, just over a quarter (26 per cent) stated that taking a job or education/training course that enabled them to play inter-county was the most important factor.

The research also revealed that just over 40 per cent of players indicated that they would not select the same post second-level career pathway again. This was higher for older players. Players' levels of discontentment about their chosen post-second-level career pathway were greater when compared to their non-playing peers. From the analysis, it seems that this finding is largely driven by players that selected their post-second-level pathway to enable them to play inter-county: over half (52 per cent) of this group indicated that they would not select the same post second-level career pathway again.

With regard to the third-level education courses pursued by inter-county players, larger percentages were more likely to enter the fields of 'education' (26 per cent) and 'arts and humanities' (19 per cent) compared to their general-population male peers (4 per cent 'education', 8 per cent 'arts and humanities'). Just over a third of players who selected their post-second-level pathway to enable them to play inter-county went into 'education'.

Very few players selected STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) courses: less than 10 per cent pursued 'engineering, manufacturing and construction', and less than 9 per cent 'science, mathematics and computing'. This is despite the rise in STEM course enrolment more generally, and the demand for STEM skills in the open Irish economy. If the reason for this decision is that players perceive the jobs associated with these courses as not being compatible with the commitments required to play senior inter-county, players need to be made aware that such a career decision could have implications for their future earnings and career progressions.

### **8.2.2 Professional career**

The results from the study highlight that inter-county play impacts players' professional career. This is not in terms of players becoming self-employed or working part-time to provide them with the flexibility needed to play senior inter-county, as a lower percentage of players are self-employed (5 per cent) and work part-time (7 per cent) compared to the general male population of the same age (10 and 12 per cent respectively).

Neither are players going into lower level occupations, which might be perceived as being less demanding (physically and/or mentally) and more compatible with playing senior inter-county, as the majority of 2016 players are professionals (42 per cent) or associate professionals (24 per cent). These higher-level occupation percentages are larger than among the general male population of the same age (19 and 13 per cent respectively).

There are, however, fewer inter-county players in skilled trade (11 per cent) and sales and customer services (5 per cent) occupations compared to the general male population of the same age (18 and 11 per cent respectively). This could be due to the physical demands of the former occupations and hours of work associated with sales and customer services positions not being conducive with the demands required to play senior inter-county.

The study also reveals that some players are selecting sectors of employment with lower levels of working hours, namely public sector jobs (32 per cent of players), possibly, at least for some, because this facilitates them to give the commitments

required to play senior inter-county. The research finds that their average is 35 weekly hours of work, compared to 40 hours for their teammates in the private sector and 39 hours for the general male population of the same age in the public sector (only 9 per cent). The main public sector sub-sector that players are employed in is 'education': 23 per cent of all players, and 69 per cent of players working in the public sector, which are much greater percentages than for the general male population of the same age.

Working in the public sector – specifically, it would seem, in education – may assist players to meet the demands required to play senior inter-county, via fewer weekly hours of work (CSO, 2019), and time off over the summer months if teaching. However, players need to be made aware that there are trades-offs associated with this career decision. The main issue identified in the research is lower earnings: players working in the public sector are earning €88 less per week compared to the general male population of the same age that work in the public sector. This seems to be because a higher percentage of such players are concentrated in education, a sector with fewer weekly hours of work (CSO, 2019).

While, as indicated already, the research finds that players are more likely to have a degree qualification, compared to the general male population with a degree their average weekly net wages are considerably lower – €500 compared to €637. The pay of players working full-time is also less compared to the general male population of similar age that work full-time, but the discrepancy is not as large (€500 compared to €525).

The research reveals that 30 per cent of players believe that playing senior inter-county has a negative impact on their earnings; this percentage much higher among players aged 31 and above (44 per cent). Twenty per cent of players believe that being an inter-county player negatively impacts their promotion prospects. Again, this percentage is greater among players aged 31 and above (30 per cent).

In the qualitative data that were collected in the player workshops, players felt that their inability to work extra hours because of their inter-county commitments reduced earnings. Players were also of the view that this was the channel through which their ability to progress up the career ladder in their work organisation was being 'stalled' – their inter-county time commitments. This inability to put in the time and work required for promotion/career advancement will undoubtedly impact players' earnings.

Ultimately, players themselves will decide whether they want to give the commitments that are required to play senior inter-county. However, from a player welfare perspective, if no steps are going to be taken to reduce the commitments

that are required to play the games, or to cap the commitments at their current levels, players should, at least, be made aware of the professional career implications that this research has revealed.

It is important to note that the professional career effects identified in the study relate specifically to when the players are playing inter-county. This is because, given the data used in the research, we only observe players during their inter-county playing career period, and their longer term, post-playing professional career outcomes might be different. It is possible, for some players at least, that there might be longer term career benefits from having been an inter-county player that cannot be observed while they are still playing the game: for example, from the skills that they acquired when playing inter-county, such as leadership or the ability to work under pressure (see Kelly et al., 2018), name recognition, contacts made, etc. These factors may result in players' being better able to change careers and in higher pay overtime compared to the case where a player was not involved in the inter-county game. Further research would need to be conducted with those no longer playing inter-county to identify the post-playing professional career, and personal, effects.

### **8.2.3 Engagement in risky behaviours**

Almost all 2016 senior inter-county players (89 per cent) reported alcohol consumption, similar to a comparator group of males aged 18–35 from the general population (87 per cent).

Relative to this comparator group, frequency of alcohol consumption tended to be lower among senior inter-county players. However, the study highlighted that there was substantial variation across the season, with self-reported drinking much more likely during pre-season and, particularly, the off-season.

When alcohol consumption did take place, the findings suggest that players consumed higher quantities relative to the general male population of similar age. Again, this is particularly the case during pre-season and the off-season, which should not be too surprising given that both periods correspond to lower levels of playing commitments.

While stress and anxiety related to senior inter-county participation, along with peer influence and athletic identification, may be considered highest during National League and Championship playing periods, the findings suggest that the prevalence of higher alcohol consumption (greater than six units) is highest outside of the main competitive seasons. The research highlights that nine out of ten players consume more than six units when consuming alcohol during the off-season.

These findings are consistent with evidence from other sports that has found more frequent and heavier alcohol consumption often taking place in the off-season (Bower and Martin, 1999; Dams-O'Connor et al., 2007; Dietze et al., 2008; Du Preez et al., 2017).

These high proportions of hazardous levels of drinking are a particular concern considering the consequent harmful effects of alcohol (Health Service Executive, 2018). Players may be at particular risk of short-term effects/harms (for example, alcohol-related acute injuries or unscheduled time off work/college) at points in the season when frequency and intensity of alcohol consumption increase. Further research, however, is required to understand the underlying mechanisms driving these observed patterns of alcohol consumption, which may help identify targeted policy responses.

There is some evidence, based on players' perceptions of teammates' behaviours, that gambling among senior inter-county players may be common. Perceptions of teammates' engagement in illicit drug use appear low. Nevertheless, players believe that almost a fifth of their teammates engage in this risky behaviour on a monthly basis. How participation in senior inter-county Gaelic games may relate to risky behaviours such as these represents an important and policy-relevant area for further research.

#### **8.2.4 Nutrition and supplement usage**

Overall, 60 per cent of players said that their diet/nutrition was monitored within the inter-county set up. There were notable differences across playing levels in both football and hurling, with Division 1 (and Division 3) footballers and MacCarthy Cup hurlers more likely to have their diet/nutrition monitored.

While over 70 per cent of players were very/somewhat satisfied with post-training and post-match meals, there were clear differences across playing levels. Footballers in lower division counties and hurlers from the Nicky Rackard and Lory Meagher competitions expressed lower levels of satisfaction with post-training/match meals. There was a clear relationship between satisfaction with post-training meals and the monitoring of players' diet/nutrition.

In the 2016 season, 81 per cent of players took supplements, with rates higher for footballers (87 per cent) compared to hurlers (76 per cent), and differences across competitions seen for hurling. Younger players had begun taking supplements at a younger age on average, many before the age of 18, which the GAA and sports authorities recommend as the minimum age supplement use.

While there were a number of reasons for taking supplements, recommendation

by the team was the most common reason given. Despite this, many players sourced their supplements from outside of the inter-county set-up, with over a quarter of players sourcing supplements from the internet and 6 per cent from people such as friends or gym colleagues. Further, while teams recommended supplement use, only 56 per cent of players stated that supplement intake was monitored within the county set-up, with rates very low for lower levels of competition, especially for hurling. Only half of players felt that they had enough knowledge of the long-term consequences of supplement intake. Information, monitoring and consistent sourcing of supplements should be considered by the GAA and GPA to reduce any potential harms of supplement use.

Inter-county players are subject to drug (doping) testing from Sport Ireland. Almost a quarter of players were ever drug tested, with 35 per cent of those aged 31 years or more having ever been tested. Almost all (85 per cent) players indicated that they saw anti-doping testing and compliance as important to protecting the integrity of Gaelic games. Many players were not satisfied with the information provided about anti-doping testing and compliance, though this satisfaction rate increased for those who were subject to testing previously.

### **8.2.5 Provided and required supports**

The findings indicate that a higher percentage of players are satisfied than dissatisfied with the level of expenses that they receive (46 per cent compared to 30 per cent). However, a greater proportion are dissatisfied with the timing of when expenses are paid (59 per cent). This is particularly the case among teams in lower playing levels: Division 1 and 2 footballers and Nicky Rackard and Lory Meagher hurlers.

This unequal treatment between amateur players of different playing levels with regard to when expenses are paid is an issue that warrants attention. Given that the present study relates to the situation for 2016 players, as a first step, more up-to-date data should be gathered to identify if there has been any improvement in the timing of expenses payment by County Boards to teams in the lower football and hurling divisions.

The study also shows that while over two-thirds of both footballers and hurlers are satisfied with the gear that they receive, the percentage that is satisfied with when they receive the gear is low (43 per cent among footballers and 52 per cent for hurlers). Levels of dissatisfaction are, again, higher among players from the lower playing levels: Division 3 and 4 footballers and Lory Meagher and Christy Ring hurlers. As with when expenses are paid, this is a timing issue that consideration should be given to. Both are player welfare issues that should be relatively straightforward to address.

Satisfaction with the way a player's code (football/hurling) is treated by their County Board, in terms of access to pitches, meals, gear, etc., compared to the other code in their county is lower among Division 3 and 4 footballers, and also Nicky Rackard and Christy Ring hurlers. This will undoubtedly have an impact on the welfare of these players and, therefore, needs further attention.

Quite a large percentage of players felt that their manager was only concerned about their ability to perform on the pitch (58 per cent). From a player welfare perspective, consideration should be given to monitoring this matter.

There was agreement among 63 per cent of 2016 players that their inter-county manager actively encouraged balance between playing inter-county and players' personal, social and professional lives. This finding, however, does not necessarily tally with some of the other results in the study. In particular, large percentages of players missed lectures/classes/labs (80 per cent) and work (60 per cent) because of their inter-county commitments. Nor does this result fully accord with the findings in Kelly et al. (2018) that 96 per cent of players felt that their inter-county commitments took up a large amount of their time, and players identifying their professional career and personal life as being the main areas affected by this commitment.

Given these seemingly contradictory results, are managers/management teams solely responsible for what is expected of players? Are players' own sporting ambitions playing a role in driving their commitment levels and, therefore, some decisions that they are taking around their professional (study/work), and also personal (family/relationships), lives? Have increases in the number of expert personnel in the players' backroom teams contributed to the increased commitments, time or otherwise, required of players? Further research is needed to identify the various sources that are driving commitment levels from players so that, if it is the intention of the associations, effective policy can be developed and implemented to address the inter-county time commitment issue.

The two key areas identified by players where they would like to receive additional support to aid them in playing senior inter-county were 'ways to progress their professional career (work/study)' and 'keeping their inter-county participation in perspective (i.e. there is more to life than just playing inter-county)'. Some of the other findings from the present research could be used to assist in addressing these matters.

The other issues identified in the study that players would like to see more emphasis placed on were emotional or mental health difficulties, preparing for life



after inter-county, the long-term consequences of Gaelic game related injuries, and how to manage their time demands.

### **8.2.7 Changes players would make to inter-county experience and set-up**

The research sought to assess what players would change about both their inter-county experience and the set-up. The findings indicate that the length of the playing season and the time commitments involved in the games, including travel time, are the two main factors that players would change about their inter-county experience. From a player welfare perspective, measures to address one or both of these issues have the potential for secondary effects, tackling some of the education and professional career issues that have been identified by the research.

The study shows that some of the other main areas that players would change about their inter-county experience are the reintroduction of enjoyment and fun into the games; a reduction in the amount of training and to play more matches; and to have more personal time.

The results from the research illustrate that most of the issues that players would change about the inter-county set-up are under the remit of either the inter-county management team or the players' County Boards. Regarding the former, the areas mentioned by players ranged from backroom team matters (e.g. 'higher standard of coaching', 'more access to a nutritionist') and training (e.g. 'more tactical training', 'more time devoted to skills') to time issues ('less hours in the gym', 'less time at meetings and training more time playing matches', etc.) and player welfare matters (e.g. 'better awareness of players' wellness and their bodies').

With regard to their County Boards, some players identified 'facilities' as an issue that needed to be addressed. With the opening of many centres of excellence since the data used in this study were gathered, this may no longer be as big an issue for players.

Other players called for 'better support from County Board', for issues around the Player Charter and player welfare matters to be addressed (e.g. 'sort out payment of expenses and arrival of gear', 'access to better medical treatment'), and for equality in the treatment of codes within a county.

The other main changes to the inter-county set-up that were identified in the research include the amount of training (less) and number of matches (more), the reintroduction of enjoyment to the games, amendments to competition structures, having a more level playing-field in the games, and distinct time for club and county.

### 8.3 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Gaelic games are amateur sports. Therefore, unlike professional sports people, Gaelic players are not paid for the commitment that they give to their game.

And yet the research in this current study has shown that a sizeable number of players are allowing the games to dictate many aspects of their life. Firstly, the career path that they take on leaving second-level is often driven by their commitment to inter-county: just over a quarter of players stated that taking a job or education/training course that facilitated them to play inter-county was the most important factor that determined what they did when they left second-level education, with this percentage higher among Division 1 footballers (32 per cent) and MacCarthy Cup hurlers (34 per cent). This, at least, was the situation for 2016 players. If the commitments associated with playing the senior inter-county games have intensified for subsequent cohorts of inter-county players, what do these figures look like now? What will the percentages look like in the future if the demands continue to increase?

The study highlighted that there are knock-on effects on players' professional careers from the commitment levels required to play inter-county, mainly via lower earnings for those with high levels of educational attainment, for players that work full-time and/or those employed in the public sector. The large percentages of players studying 'education' and 'arts and humanities' in third-level, and then going on to work in the 'education' sector, is contributing to the lower levels of earnings observed among players. Based on the data used in the research, the main channel through which this is taking place is players' working fewer hours. However, for those with high levels of education not working in the public sector, and/or working full-time, there are other factors giving rise to the lower levels of pay relative to their non-playing peers. The research suggests that a lack of promotion prospects is a contributing factor, especially for players in the lower playing levels in both football and hurling: smaller percentages of these players were of the view that playing inter-county had a positive impact on their promotion prospects compared to those playing in the top tiers.

While the percentage of players reporting alcohol consumption is similar to males of similar age in the general population, when alcohol is consumed players are drinking higher quantities. This is particularly the case during the pre-season and off-season. Might the way the inter-county games are currently being played – the high commitment levels with very little downtime (Kelly et al., 2018) – be contributing to this risky behaviour among players? Given the harmful effects of overconsumption of alcohol, further research is needed to identify and understand the mechanisms driving these observed drinking patterns among players.

Supplements are now an integral part of players' nutrition, with recommendation by the team being the most common reason given by players for taking supplements. However, many players are sourcing their supplements from outside of the inter-county set-up, and only 56 per cent of player indicated that supplement use is monitored within their team. Given the implications of supplement misuse on players' lives – both their health and their professional career – this is another area that warrants further attention.

Another key issue emerging from the research is inequalities across the playing levels in both the effects of playing inter-county and the treatment of inter-county players with regard to Player Charter and County Board supports. Even though the sports are amateur and, therefore, one might expect that there should be no distinction by playing level with regard to either of these matters, lower-tier counties appear to be bearing the brunt of the issues identified in this research, especially in relation to player welfare supports coming through the Player Charter and County Boards.

The two key areas that players would like to receive support with in assisting them when playing inter-county is 'how to advance their professional career' and 'how to keep their inter-county participation in perspective'. Some of the other findings from this study could be utilised to address these two matters. In particular, the research identified the main issues that players would like to change about their inter-county experience: a reduction in the length of the playing season, fewer time commitments, and the reintroduction of enjoyment into the games. If policies were developed and implemented by the national governing bodies to address these key player welfare issues identified by the players themselves, they might prevent some of the education and professional career experience issues identified in the research from emerging for future generations of players.

Ultimately, unless the drivers of the current inter-county commitment levels required from players are identified and addressed, the knock-on education, professional career and other effects found in this study are likely to be amplified among future generations of players. At all times, one needs to bear in mind that this is in the context of Gaelic games being amateur sports.

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## APPENDIX A: 2016 NATIONAL LEAGUE FOOTBALL TEAMS AND CHAMPIONSHIP CUP HURLING TEAMS

TABLE A.1 2016 NATIONAL LEAGUE FOOTBALL TEAMS

Division 1	Division 2	Division 3	Division 4
Cork	Armagh	Clare	Antrim
Donegal	Cavan	Kildare	Carlow
Down	Derry	Limerick	Leitrim
Dublin	Fermanagh	Longford	London*
Kerry	Galway	Offaly	Louth
Mayo	Laois	Sligo	Waterford
Monaghan	Meath	Tipperary	Wexford
Roscommon	Tyrone	Westmeath	Wicklow

Note: \* Not included in the study.

TABLE A.2 2016 CHAMPIONSHIP CUP HURLING TEAMS

MacCarthy Cup	MacCarthy Cup	Christy Ring Cup	Nicky Rackard Cup	Lory Meagher Cup
Carlow	Limerick	Antrim	Armagh	Lancashire*
Clare	Offaly	Derry	Donegal	Leitrim
Cork	Tipperary	Down	Fermanagh	Louth
Dublin	Waterford	Kildare	Longford	Sligo
Galway	Westmeath	London*	Mayo	Warwickshire*
Kerry	Wexford	Meath	Monaghan	
Kilkenny		Roscommon	Tyrone	
Laois		Wicklow		

Note: \* Not included in the study.

## APPENDIX B: 2016 SENIOR INTER-COUNTY PLAYERS' VIEWS ON THEIR FURTHER/HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES

TABLE B.1 MY INTER-COUNTY AND/OR COLLEGE FOOTBALL/HURLING COMMITMENTS MEANT THAT I GOT EXTRA HELP WITH MY COURSEWORK: PLAYING LEVEL

	Football	Division 1	Division 2	Division 3	Division 4
Strongly agree/agree	16.4	20.3	[<14.0]	[<16.0]	[<17.0]
Strongly disagree/disagree	77.5	75.7	79.0	78.0	77.0
Not applicable	6.2	4.0	*	*	*
	Hurling	MacCarthy Cup	Christy Ring	Nicky Rackard	Lory Meagher
Strongly agree/agree	12.7	18.8	*	*	*
Strongly disagree/disagree	78.8	76.7	85.0	76.0	84.0
Not applicable	8.5	4.5	12.0	15.0	*

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: The percentages in square brackets ([ ]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

\* Number of players used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

TABLE B.2 MY INTER-COUNTY AND/OR COLLEGE FOOTBALL/HURLING COMMITMENTS MEANT THAT I GOT EXTRA HELP WITH MY COURSEWORK: POST-SECOND-LEVEL PATHWAY DETERMINING FACTOR

	All players	Pathway: Play inter-county	Pathway: Interested in	Pathway: Job wanted
Strongly agree/agree	14.5	19.0	13.4	[<12.0]
Strongly disagree/disagree	78.2	76.0	78.5	80.0
Not applicable	7.4	[<5.0]	8.1	[<9.0]

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: The percentages in square brackets ([ ]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

TABLE B.3 MY INTER-COUNTY AND/OR COLLEGE FOOTBALL/HURLING COMMITMENTS CONTRIBUTED TO MY FAILING ONE OR MORE OF MY EXAMS: PLAYING LEVEL

	Football	Division 1	Division 2	Division 3	Division 4
Strongly agree/agree	30.0	31.3	34.0	30.0	22.8
Strongly disagree/disagree	50.2	45.4	52.0	53.0	51.7
Not applicable	19.8	23.3	[<15.0]	[<19.0]	25.5
	Hurling	MacCarthy Cup	Christy Ring	Nicky Rackard	Lory Meagher
Strongly agree/agree	28.0	31.2	27.1	26.0	*
Strongly disagree/disagree	50.9	48.6	47.9	53.0	66.0
Not applicable	21.1	20.2	25.0	[<21.0]	*

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: The percentages in square brackets ([ ]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

\* Number of players used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

TABLE B.4 MY INTER-COUNTY AND/OR COLLEGE FOOTBALL/HURLING COMMITMENTS CONTRIBUTED TO MY FAILING ONE OR MORE OF MY EXAMS: POST-SECOND-LEVEL PATHWAY DETERMINING FACTOR

	All players	Pathway: Play inter-county	Pathway: Interested in	Pathway: Job wanted
Strongly agree/agree	29.0	37.8	25.4	28.2
Strongly disagree/disagree	50.6	46.9	52.6	49.3
Not applicable	20.4	15.3	22.0	22.4

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

TABLE B.5 MY INTER-COUNTY AND/OR COLLEGE FOOTBALL/HURLING COMMITMENTS CONTRIBUTED TO MY PERFORMING POORLY IN MY COURSE: PLAYING LEVEL

	Football	Division 1	Division 2	Division 3	Division 4
Strongly agree/agree	38.2	37.0	42.0	36.0	37.0
Strongly disagree/disagree	54.2	57.0	51.0	55.0	54.0
Not applicable	7.7	*	*	*	*
	Hurling	MacCarthy Cup	Christy Ring	Nicky Rackard	Lory Meagher
Strongly agree/agree	34.9	39.7	29.0	32.0	[<27.0]
Strongly disagree/disagree	55.5	54.3	60.0	51.0	63.0
Not applicable	9.7	6.0	[<12.0]	[<18.0]	*

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: The percentages in square brackets ([ ]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

\* Number of players used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

TABLE B.6 MY INTER-COUNTY AND/OR COLLEGE FOOTBALL/HURLING COMMITMENTS CONTRIBUTED TO MY PERFORMING POORLY IN MY COURSE: POST-SECOND-LEVEL PATHWAY DETERMINING FACTOR

	All players	Pathway: Play inter-county	Pathway: Interested in	Pathway: Job wanted
Strongly agree/agree	36.6	47.0	32.6	34.0
Strongly disagree/disagree	54.8	48.0	57.6	56.0
Not applicable	8.6	[<6.0]	9.8	[<11.0]

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: The percentages in square brackets ([]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

## APPENDIX C: 2016 SENIOR INTER-COUNTY PLAYERS' SECTOR OF EMPLOYMENT

TABLE C.1 SECTOR OF EMPLOYMENT: ALL PLAYERS AND EMPLOYEE ONLY PLAYERS (PER CENT)

	All players	Employee only players
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	[<3.0]	*
Manufacturing	12.0	12.5
Electricity, gas, steam, air conditioning supply	*	*
Water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation	*	*
Construction	12.0	10.3
Wholesale and retail trade	10.0	10.4
Transportation and storage	*	*
Accommodation and food services	*	*
Information and communication	4.0	3.7
Financial and insurance activities	7.0	7.7
Real estate activities	*	*
Professional, scientific and technical activities	9.0	9.8
Administrative and support service activities	[<3.0]	[<3.0]
Public administration and defence	5.0	5.6
Education	22.0	23.3
Human health and social work	4.0	3.7
Arts, entertainment and recreation	5.0	4.3
Other service activities	*	-

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

Note: The percentages in square brackets ([]) are based on smaller numbers of players and should be treated with caution.

\* Number used to calculate this percentage is too small for the results to be reliable.

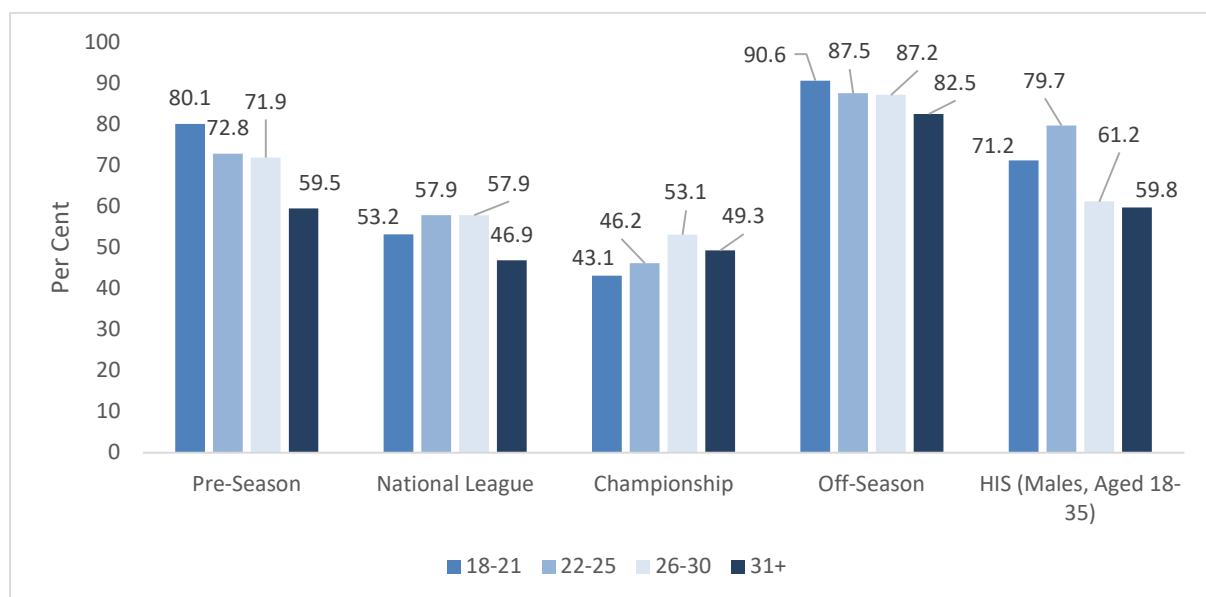
## APPENDIX D: ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

TABLE D.1 COMPARISON OF SELF-REPORTED ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION RATES BETWEEN ALL SENIOR INTER-COUNTY PLAYERS AND THOSE ONLY FROM THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND – AGE GROUP (PER CENT)

	All players	Republic of Ireland Gaelic players
18–21	88.3	88.2
22–25	88.9	91.1
26–30	89.1	89.5
31+	89.7	87.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>88.9</b>	<b>89.6</b>

Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

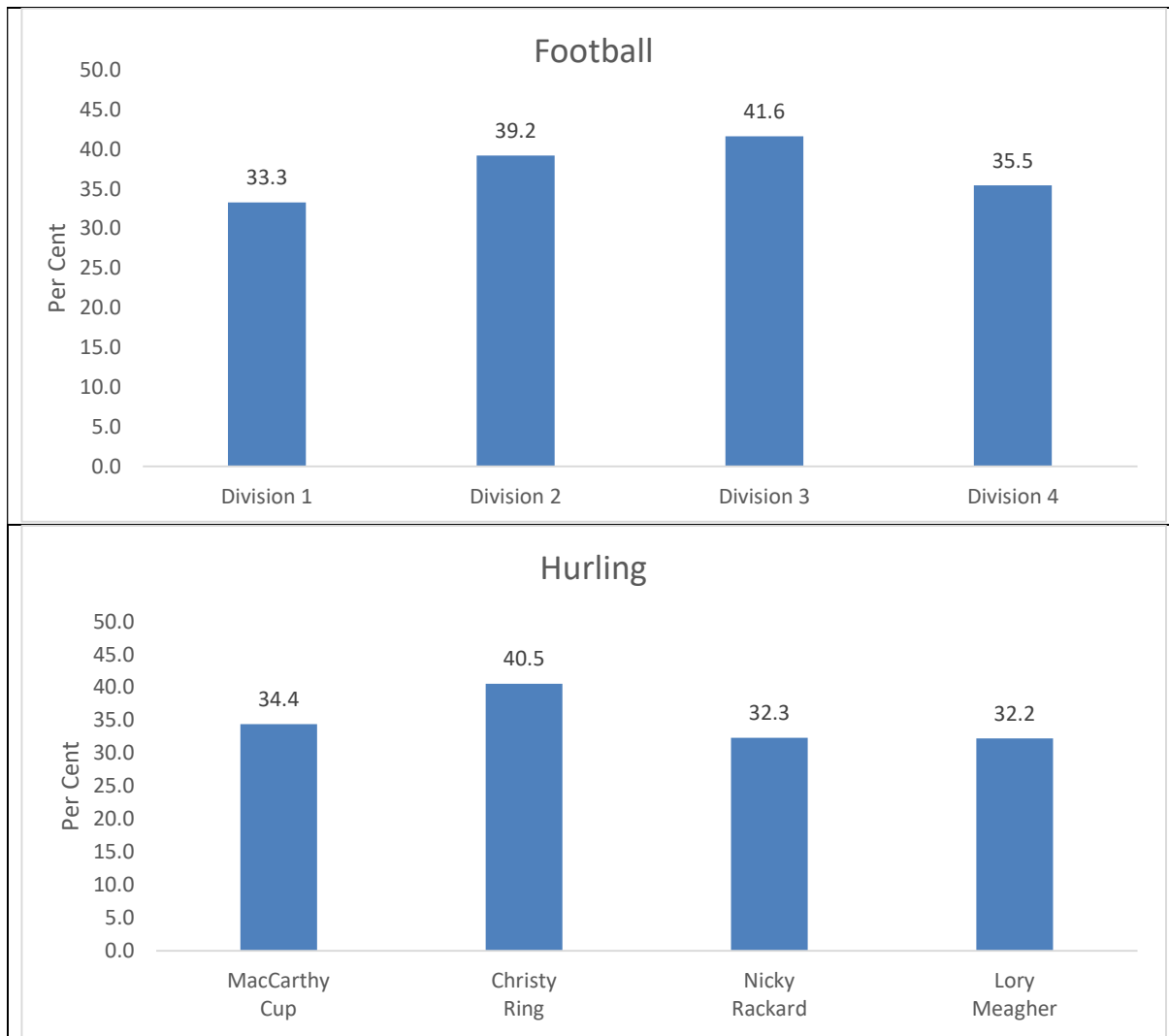
FIGURE D.1 PROPORTION OF RESPONDENTS CONSUMING SIX OR MORE STANDARD DRINKS ON A TYPICAL DAY WHEN DRINKING: 2016 PLAYERS COMPARED TO GENERAL MALE POPULATION OF SAME AGE, BY AGE



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016); Wave 2 Health Ireland Survey (HIS - 2016).

## APPENDIX E: 2016 SENIOR INTER-COUNTY PLAYERS' SUPPLEMENT USE

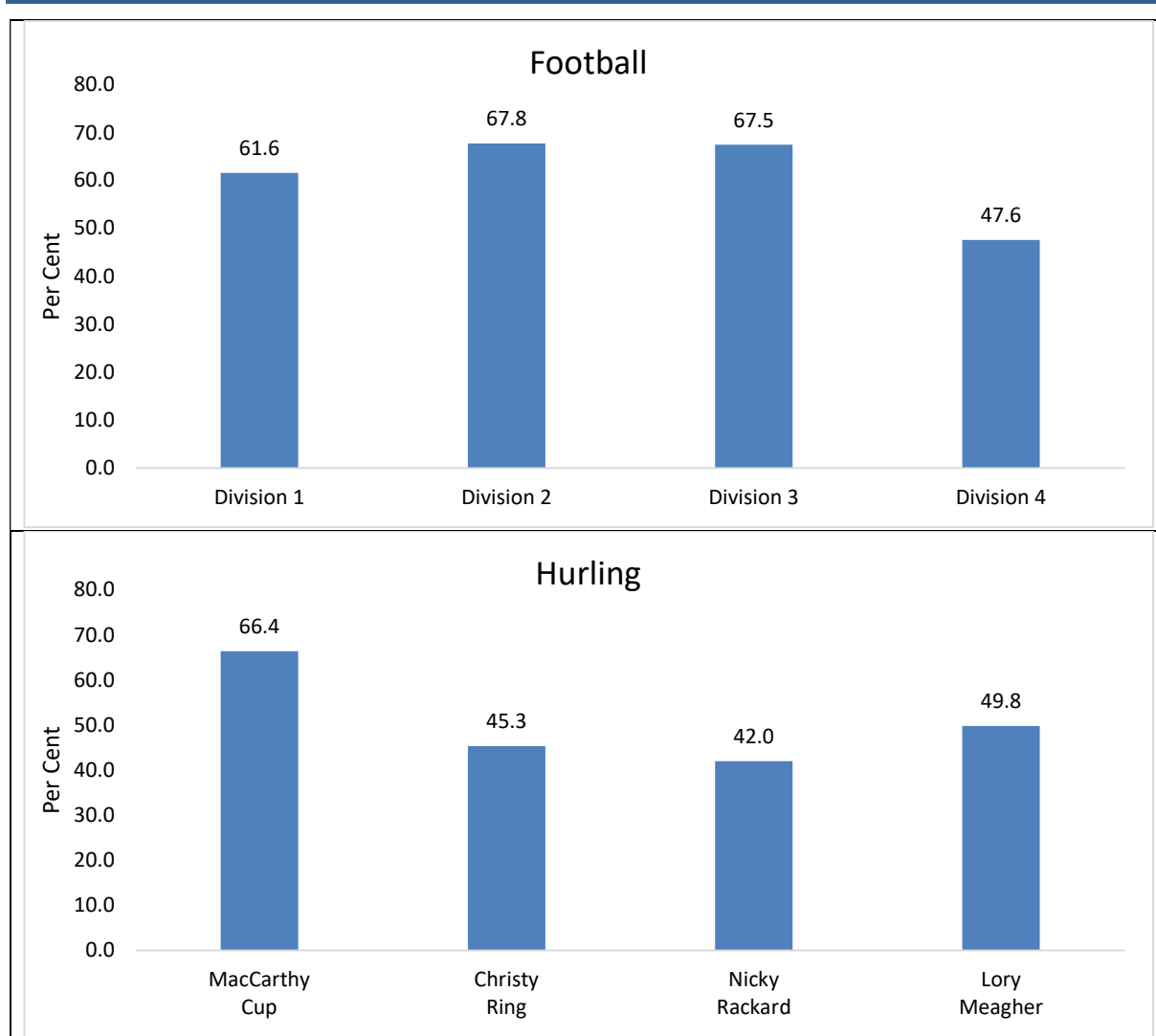
FIGURE E.1 FELT PRESSURE TO TAKE SUPPLEMENTS: 2016 PLAYERS – CODE



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).



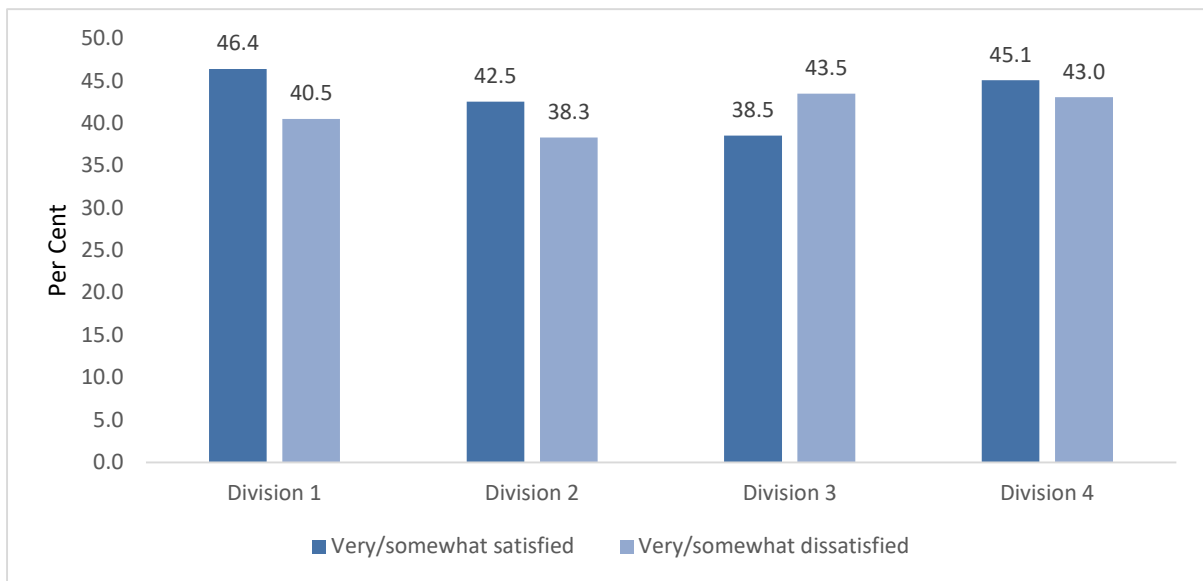
**FIGURE E.2 VERY/SOMEWHAT SATISFIED WITH INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOUT ANTI-DOPING TESTING AND COMPLIANCE: 2016 PLAYERS – CODE**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

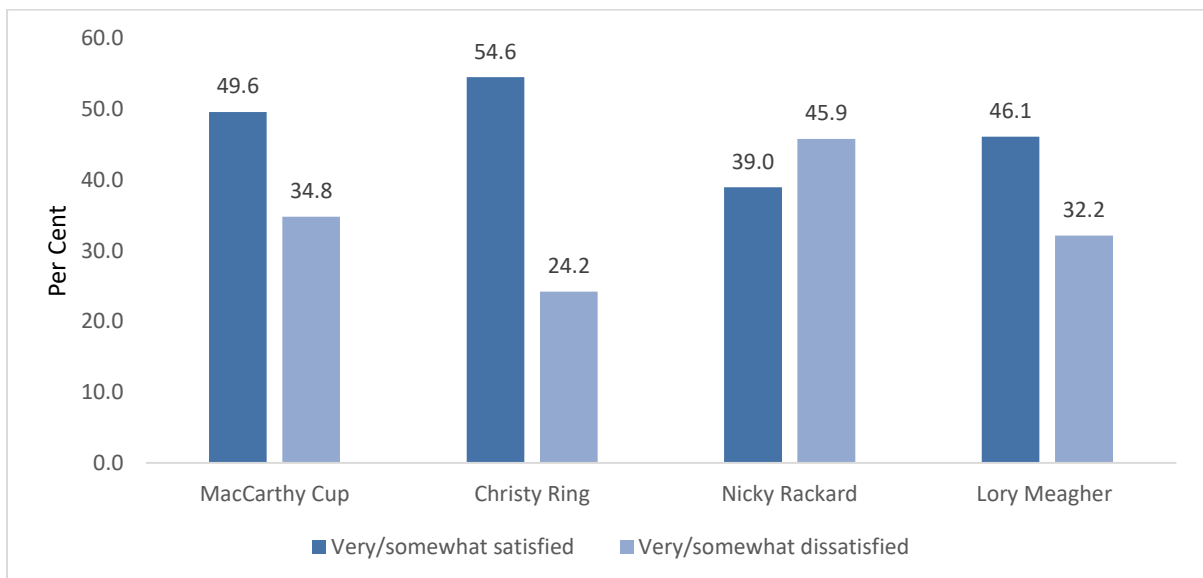
## APPENDIX F: PLAYER CHARTER SUPPORTS

**FIGURE F.1 SATISFACTION WITH LEVEL OF EXPENSES: 2016 GAELIC FOOTBALLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

**FIGURE F.2 SATISFACTION WITH LEVEL OF EXPENSES: 2016 HURLERS**



Source: Survey of Senior Inter-County Players 2016 (SSICP-2016).

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