

‘We weren’t allowed to just exist together’: Emotional labour and encounters with pandemic controlwork in physical recreation spaces

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Based on interviews with recreational athletes and community sport organizers, we document how volunteers, coaches, administrators and office staff became temporary pandemic control workers tasked with interpreting and implementing public health guidelines and restricting access to physical recreation under the pretext of ensuring a safe return to play. These recreation spaces ceased to be primarily sites of leisure and instead also became sites of social control and regulation. In this article, we are attuned to the emotional, affective and sensory experiences that characterize these pandemic encounters. Specifically, we detail how these control workers were often required to substitute affective force in the form of emotional labour to achieve compliance as well as how their directives changed the recreation atmosphere for some athletes and fitness enthusiasts—practice, play and off-field/court interactions routinely *felt* different.

Keywords emotional labour; controlwork; COVID-19; sport; physical recreation

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the biopolitical imperative to ‘make live’ by optimizing the health, hygiene and movement of the citizenry (Foucault 2003; Rabinow and Rose 2006) manifested as a decentralized network of health protocols—vaccine passports, masking mandates and density limits—designed to filter the population and minimize the statistical probability of viral transmission. We consider the seepage of pandemic public health governance into a prominent part of everyday life (see also Young 2021), namely physical recreation practices and spaces. The recreation centre, gym and dance studio ceased to be primarily arenas of leisure and became critical nodes in this security apparatus; they were sites of social control and regulation. As Young *et al.* (2023: 11) observe, our encounters with social control ‘are intensely sensory affairs which are also shot-through with affective richness and the negotiation of meaning’. In this article, we are attuned to the emotional, affective and sensory experiences that characterize these pandemic encounters. In spotlighting the same, we contribute to the emerging criminological scholarship that illuminates the process of meaning-making in carceral (e.g. Umamaheswar 2021) and quasi-carceral spaces (e.g. Antojado 2025).

Specifically, we chronicle the experiences of ordinary folks thrust into recreational sport controlwork and delegated responsibility for screening, contact tracing and ensuring compliance with physical distancing and/or masking requirements. Because these community sport organizers, volunteers, administrators and coaches lacked legal force (they are not the police), they were routinely required to substitute affective force in the form of emotional labour controlwork to achieve compliance (Foucault 2007; Koskela 2011a). Notably, participants expressed discomfort assuming the role of mediator or enforcer, navigated difficult conversations with disappointed, anxious and angry recreation-seekers and families, and lamented the abuse and harassment they endured from those frustrated with public health restrictions. Without the affective capacity of these ad-hoc control workers, the biopolitical objectives (i.e. masking, vaccine checks, physical distancing, etc.) fail. What is more, the directives of these ad-hoc pandemic control workers changed the recreation atmosphere for some athletes and fitness enthusiasts—practice, play and off-field/court interactions all *felt* different (see also Young 2021).

Controlwork in pandemic times

Over the last several decades, the state has developed and employed new ways of governing crime. Acknowledging that crime is to be expected, but unwilling to be seen as weak or deficient for letting it run amok, the state has ramped up criminalization and incarceration. Recognizing—at least informally—that it is incapable of controlling crime on its own, the state has sought to galvanize individuals and organizations to prevent crime, identify lawbreakers and partner with police (Garland 1996; Shearing and Stenning 1985). Garland (1996: 454) reminds us that this does not mean the state has withdrawn, but rather that it is governing ‘at a distance’, exercising coercive power in less noticeable ways. In Britain, for instance, ‘ordinary’ citizens have been encouraged to participate in counter-terrorism as they have been trained to identify concerning behaviours while existing in a culture of perpetual suspicion (Jusué 2022). In Australia and the United States, meanwhile, civilians monitor borders virtually and report irregular migrants to authorities (Koskela 2011a; 2011b; Walsh 2020). Along these lines, the Citizen app empowers users to monitor others, report and map crime and find safety (Turner and Milburn 2025). In various domains, then, we have been called upon to engage in what Koskela (2011a) calls controlwork and to ‘supplement state power by providing an additional set of human and digital resources that support state control’ (Brayne *et al.* 2023: 477).

These trends continued amidst and were sped up by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the focus on regulating population-level health. In some places, for instance, the government

required those returning from foreign travel to download applications on their mobile device for use during quarantine periods. Here, users entered their personal information, logged self-reported symptoms and shared location data to facilitate contact tracing (Lee 2021; Lee and Ahn 2024). In addition to compelling individuals to download smartphone apps and enable GPS tracking, the state used CCTV cameras, drones, facial recognition software, thermal cameras, smart helmets that scan body temperature, and biometric bracelets that monitor heart rates as well as body temperatures to understand population movement and enforce public health restrictions (Haberfeld *et al.* 2023; Kitchin 2020; Racine 2023). As critics observe, data collection and monitoring are essential for these and other governance initiatives that regulate our use of space (Kitchin 2020; Lee 2021; 2023). Lin and Frégnigny (2026: 76, 78) use Singapore as an illustrative case study to demonstrate how the state ‘drew emphatically on people’s heartstrings’ to ensure they got vaccinated and used their digital health passes. In this way, they highlight the ‘heavy reliance’ of pandemic biopolitics on ‘affective consent’. In the United Kingdom, police issued Fixed Penalty Notices—an out-of-court monetary penalty—to those violating health regulations like gathering in groups (Murray *et al.* 2024). Meanwhile, Young (2021: 985) explores how lockdowns and the concomitant ‘criminalization of everyday activities’ changed the look, feel, sounds and smells of Melbourne, Australia. In short, the COVID-19 pandemic lent itself to the expansion of social control under the guise of protecting public health and this impacted various life domains (e.g. Trottier *et al.* 2021).

One component of this expansion was increased citizen-to-citizen monitoring (often known as ‘sousveillance’; see Mann and Ferenbok 2013). In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, definitions of antisocial behaviour broadened to encompass those who continued to gather in groups or chose not to comply with masking requirements (Trottier *et al.* 2021). Morality imbued the regular advice that we should surveil others and ensure that they were living up to the social contract (Lee and Ahn 2024). This sort of ‘crowdsourced enforcement’ extended the ‘government’s gaze into restaurants, stores and other spaces’ (Brayne *et al.* 2023: 467). In this article, we document how this gaze permeated recreation spaces and activities, how ordinary folks were tasked with interpreting and enforcing public health regulations and were routinely reliant on ‘surface acting’ and other modes of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) to do so successfully, and how the creep of coercive control and regulation into these spaces changed the way these spaces felt and were experienced.

Emotional labour and COVID-19

Per Hochschild (1983), emotional labour refers to the myriad ways in which one regulates emotions—both internally and in outward expression—to meet the expectations of a particular job or social setting. In other words, emotional labour involves the self-management of feelings as part of work performance, often to the benefit of an organization, institution, or, at the most abstract level, the state. While historically much focus has been directed at emotional labour required in customer service occupations, more recently scholars (e.g. Bagdasarov and Connelly 2013; Haw *et al.* 2020; Karimi *et al.* 2014; Pandey and Singh 2016; Riley and Weiss 2015) have documented how healthcare workers must manage their own emotions in difficult situations, cultivate a safe, positive environment for patients and families, and navigate relationships with other staff. Miele’s (2023) detachment to the pleas of family members desperate to be with loved ones is one example of the emotional labour required of various frontline healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the sporting world, researchers have outlined how coaches must regulate their own emotions as they mentor athletes, mask disapproval of mistakes, display particular emotions and motivate others in order to achieve team objectives, and manage relationships

with athlete families and friends (Ha *et al.* 2021; Lee and Chelladurai 2018; Porter *et al.* 2025). The care and compassion required of coaches routinely goes unrecognized and underappreciated (Porter *et al.* 2025). Not surprisingly, COVID-19 necessitated adjustments and additional emotional labour as training sessions or seasons were cancelled and coaches were compelled to modify plans and deal with disappointed athletes (Petiot *et al.* 2024).

Alongside this, there has been increasing acknowledgment that emotional labour is an essential feature of policing (e.g. Chapman 2009; Schaible and Gecas 2010) and required for others working in the criminal legal system, including lawyers (Westaby and Subryan 2021), probation officers (Fowler *et al.* 2021), prison staff (Norman *et al.* 2025; Nylander and Bruhn 2021), magistrates (L'Hoiry 2026), and those in the penal voluntary sector (Quinn and Tomczak 2021). Police routinely deal with dangerous situations and traumatic events (Lumsden and Black 2018). This is also true of civilian personnel tasked with answering emergency calls, supporting crime victims and dealing with lawbreakers, responding to public concerns and demands at the local station, or assigned other administrative responsibilities (Jones *et al.* 2023). In sum, those working in the criminal legal system are expected to stay composed, calm and objective in difficult situations, suppress negative emotions and simultaneously empathize with victims, families and suspects (Adams and Mastracci 2020; Black and Lumsden 2021; Huey and Kalyal 2017; Jones *et al.* 2023; Martin 1999; White 2014). During the COVID-19 pandemic, some frontline officers discussed their anxiety about contracting the virus on the job and the potential risk that policing posed to their family members in this respect (see De Camargo 2022a; Fix and Powell 2024; Newiss *et al.* 2022). On this matter, frontline officers were subject to increased spit and cough attacks by individuals who sought to weaponize the virus (De Camargo 2022b; Elliott-Davies 2023). Other sources of pandemic-related stress included attending and managing sudden deaths (Elliott-Davies 2023). Working for strained police departments, officers sometimes complained about having to secure their own personal protective equipment, staffing shortages leading to burnout, and rapidly changing directives (Fix and Powell 2024; Fleming and Brown 2023; Shjarback and Magny 2022). Police officers also had to navigate the growing discontent with and defiance of public health restrictions (e.g. Fleming and Brown 2023; McCarthy *et al.* 2021).

Scholarship has thoroughly mapped the state's mobilization of digital surveillance and sovereign police power to regulate population health. We know, for instance, how technologies were deployed to track viral spread, that police officers enforced restrictions at a significant psychological cost, and that ordinary individuals were encouraged to monitor peers for the violation of public health protocols. Our analysis highlights how these ad-hoc pandemic control workers (Koskela 2011a) relied on affective labour as they were tasked with the biopolitical function of filtering population flows—granting or denying access to recreation spaces based on biological risk. Everyday recreation spaces and activities mutated into quasi-carceral spaces with limits placed on access, a host of new regulations governing bodily comportment, and strict protocols informing social interactions. We explore how these encounters with social control changed the 'felt experience' of sport and physical recreation for some athletes (see also O'Neill and Fileborn 2026: 349).

Data and methods

Data for this project are derived from 43 semi-structured interviews conducted with adult recreational athletes ($n = 19$) and employees, volunteers and administrators of recreational sport organizations ($n = 15$); nine participants wore both hats, participating in *and* helping to organize recreational sport. The research team conducted interviews via phone and Zoom between November 2023 and June 2024. The broad aims of these interviews were to understand how

pandemic restrictions impacted access to recreational sport and to assess barriers and challenges to post-pandemic sport participation. These interviews ranged from approximately 16 minutes to one hour and fifty minutes in length. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 73 years old. 26 participants self-identified as men, while 11 respondents identified as women, two identified as non-binary, and four did not provide a gender identity. 23 participants self-identified as 'White', while four identified as 'Asian' or 'Chinese Canadian', two as 'Black' or 'African American', two as 'mixed', one as 'Middle Eastern', one as 'Eastern European', one as 'Latin American/Hispanic', and the remaining nine participants elected not to specify their ethnic or racial identification. 31 participants resided in Ontario, Canada's most populous province. Participants also resided in the provinces/territories of British Columbia ($n = 6$), Manitoba ($n = 1$), New Brunswick ($n = 1$), Yukon ($n = 1$) and Northwest Territories ($n = 1$). Two participants lived in multiple provinces over the course of the pandemic. We acknowledge the sampling constraints. Most notably, the participant pool skews heavily towards white, man-identifying individuals concentrated in Ontario; further, our study lacks representation from Canada's Francophone community. Such geographic and demographic clustering inherently limits generalizability. Ultimately, this means that we are unable to speak to the distinct systemic challenges that more diverse recreational communities faced across the rest of Canada.

The extent and timing of pandemic restrictions varied across provinces. Despite jurisdictional differences, core regulatory mechanisms profoundly altered the recreational landscape in relatively similar ways. Public health mandates frequently necessitated the outright closure of indoor complexes, imposed strict participant caps on outdoor leagues, and required rigorous vaccination or masking compliance to cross facility thresholds. Across Canada, all pandemic restrictions ended by Autumn 2022. As a result, our interviews asked participants to reflect upon their past experiences retrospectively, rather than as they unfolded during the period of state-imposed pandemic restrictions. We acknowledge this is a potential limitation, given research suggests that recall is contingent on the interval between event and interview, the relevance and duration of the event, as well as other factors (Stull *et al.* 2009). While we used cues during some interviews to remind participants of the timing of lockdowns, vaccine availability and the lifting of restrictions (see, for instance, Conway and Loveday 2015), we concede that retrospective sensemaking inevitably filters historical facts through present realities.

We adopted a general, qualitative thematic approach to analysing our data. Emphasizing collaboration, the research team deployed Braun and Clarke (2006)'s six-step approach to thematic analysis: (1) familiarizing ourselves with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes and (6) producing the report. Each member of the research team separately reviewed several interview transcripts and began to draw out an initial set of descriptive codes. We then met as a group to discuss how these codes could be sorted, combined and organized into overarching themes. This process engaged Glaser's (1965) constant comparative method, where indicators are raised, clustered for similarity, and then abstracted into broader themes. After these meetings, close reading of the interviews resumed. At this stage, team members were able to collaborate in more specifically naming, defining and coding themes within Dedoose, a cloud-based application developed for the management and interpretation of qualitative data.

Findings

Control worker responsibilities

In this section, we chronicle how the state's biopolitical objective to manage population flows was offloaded onto community sport organizations and coaches, transforming them

into pandemic control workers (see [Koskela 2011a](#)). In other words, control workers were operating at the behest of or in collaboration with public health agencies and other government organizations. Participants described conducting temperature checks, improvising informal tracing systems in the absence of state infrastructure, and enforcing public health guidelines in spaces where compliance from athletes and parents was inconsistent. In this capacity, these employees and volunteers were required to inquire about private medical information such as vaccination status, monitor building capacity limits and act as biopolitical gatekeepers who refused or admitted entry to recreation spaces. Some also devised modified rules of play to try to maintain physical distancing between athletes, implemented new cleaning protocols and ensured recreation enthusiasts made use of available hand sanitizer.

While existing research ([Kitchin 2020](#); [Lee 2021](#); [2023](#)) highlights how data collection and surveillance were fundamental to pandemic governance initiatives that regulated access to space, our research underscores that this digital architecture relied heavily on human enforcement. Access to recreational spaces became contingent upon digital screening of participant symptoms and/or vaccination status, yet the actual responsibility for verifying eligibility was offloaded onto staff. For instance, an executive director for a minor baseball association recounted their use of a popular youth sport team management platform that tracked registrations, invoicing, schedules, rosters and communication. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this platform added a screening module which effectively deputized team coaches to verify the biopolitical eligibility of each player. Although the executive director described the app as ‘amazing’ for streamlining the process compared to manual tracking, they acknowledged the burden it placed on volunteer coaches. As they noted, ‘the poor coaches had, like, this additional layer now that they needed to, like, see the green check mark for the player on the app’. This requirement was more than a minor administrative task; it positioned the coach as a critical node in the security apparatus. This system left coaches and administrators making on-the-fly adjustments to standard practices while simultaneously managing the emotional fallout from angry parents unable to accompany their children or from families attempting to skirt vaccine requirements (see also [Ha et al. 2021](#); [Petiot et al. 2024](#)).

We found that screening protocols and practices varied dramatically across organizations. While some organizers, such as the participant quoted above, utilized digital tools, others improvised and developed low-tech solutions, such as paper charts and waiver forms, to collect information. For example, one participant held an administrative position at a community recreation complex that contained a pool, gym and other facilities. This administrator supervised a team of youth recreational attendants, some of whom worked as door screeners. When the community recreation complex first reopened, some of these youth control workers were ‘very stressed and very anxious about going back into the workplace’. During these early stages, ten persons were admitted for each one-hour block. This administrator devised a low-tech sign-in system: ‘It did not take me long to figure out how to do sign-in sheets, and have, you know, print out a table with...who’s working the shift and ten rows for names’.

Some staff at the complex welcomed the introduction of vaccine passports (which, in Canada, were digitally displayed on a smartphone app) in 2021 because it simplified the screening process and eliminated the need for temperature checks. However, some recreational athletes expressed concern about the use of their personal medical information. [Lee \(2021; 2023\)](#) contends that this ‘dataveillance’—mobilizing people’s data to engage in ongoing social control and surveillance—was a key disciplinary strategy throughout the pandemic. That is, health and medical data were used to restrict access to space and/or personal contact in a form of biopolitics. The community recreation complex administrator

acknowledged that some individuals were worried about where personal information would be stored, but they simultaneously dismissed these concerns: 'you know, you carry a microphone in your pocket if you use a smartphone, so really there was just kind of general hand waving by a lot of folks about data security'.

Pandemic control workers (see [Koskela 2011a](#)) were tasked with enforcing public health protocols, including mask wearing and physical distancing. Some participants suggested that masking and physical distancing guidelines were generally followed by people eager to get back to the sports and activities they enjoyed, but that they received more pushback regarding vaccine mandates. The president and head coach of a fencing club shared this about the club's approach to vaccine messaging and enforcement:

We had two or three members who were anti-vaxxers, so they started to get, I don't know, ignorant. They were ticked off with me. And one of the things, I was like, 'hey guys, I'm the messenger here. Don't beat up on me'.

In this case, the president and head coach were forced to regulate and display appropriate emotions—to stay calm and composed—in pursuit of re-opening the fencing club (see, e.g., [Lee and Chelladurai 2018](#)).

As the COVID-19 pandemic dragged on, noncompliance became more prevalent. This took a toll on these pandemic control workers ([Koskela 2011a](#)). For instance, the youth recreation attendants already feeling some anxiety about returning to work at the community recreation complex received extra coaching and mentorship from their direct supervisor about how to respond to noncompliance and navigate behavioural issues. The administrator explained:

the youth [recreation attendants] were finding it harder and harder to ask people to sign in or scan their vaccine card, or whatever the protocol was, because the public will was kind of shifting and that fatigue was kind of showing. Like, 'hey, we're already all vaccinated, like who cares?' kind of points were being raised. And so it was harder on the youth workers.

The administrator elaborated, noting that by the fall of 2021 the youth recreational attendants were also having a more difficult time requesting that people wear masks in the building. When individuals would show up obviously sick, they would be asked to leave the recreation complex.

These youth recreational attendants would issue verbal warnings and, if necessary, file incident reports in cases of acting out, littering, vandalism, use of profane language and physical or verbal harassment. If the problematic behaviour continued, the individual would be asked to leave and security was called in to provide support to the attendant. Notably, it was typically young, marginalized workers assigned these frontline positions and tasked with screening and enforcement. These were the employees deemed more expendable by organizational structures. When the administrator expressed some concern about the safety and well-being of the youth recreational attendants, it was dismissed by their supervisor:

They were not interested in the potential risks of putting a minor as a door screener, potentially interacting with people with COVID, without first consulting their parents. I flagged that as a risk and they said it wasn't important...The assumption was there's a lot of youth in the community, if they don't want to work it, they can find someone else. That's what the assumption was, or the culture was within our side of operations. So it was, that was where the frustration lies.

In this context, the emotional labour of these recreation attendants as they took on responsibility for pandemic controlwork (Koskela 2011a)—navigating disruptive peers, managing the emotions of recreation-seekers frustrated with public health protocols, and so on—was undervalued (see Porter *et al.* 2025). The emotional burden of absorbing public anger and enforcing compliance functioned as an affective subsidy for the state.

These ad-hoc pandemic control workers (see Koskela 2011a) were tasked with granting or restricting access to recreation spaces and activities but were also able to regulate the bodily movements of people within these spaces. For instance, an activity group director for a large social and recreational organization located in Western Canada relayed an anecdote wherein he scolded a coordinator for posting a photo on the club's webpage of the coordinator hugging someone. The activity group director discussed other challenges with enforcing physical distancing guidelines (in Canada, public health officials recommended individuals stay two metres apart to prevent transmission):

I did have one coordinator report to me that, that there was an individual on hikes who would tend to, you know, just through enthusiasm or whatever, not respect the six foot [i.e., two metres] of separation kind of thing, or whatever. And, you know, he had to, you know, tell this person, 'look, you need to follow these things and if you can't follow them, then you're not welcome to come on the outing'. And, you know, they took a little bit of exception, thinking that it was a personal attack.

Elsewhere, a triathlete commended their 'resourceful' club coach for balancing the enforcement of public health restrictions with training goals. For example, with no access to pools, the group of triathletes adapted by swimming at a nearby lake in smaller groups divided into time-blocks. In these public spaces, however, the coach instructed team members about appropriate interactions with peers. This was something this triathlete, at least, embraced, observing that the volunteer coach did her best 'to provide an experience' while operating 'within the restrictions that were in place'. For instance, the coach would 'remind us that we had to wear our mask on the deck or remind us, you know, 'don't be spending time hanging out [with] that person, by their truck'. Like, 'you need to be getting in your car and leaving'. In short, COVID-19 forced this coach to find new ways to motivate and to support their performance (see Porter *et al.* 2025). For their part, the chief instructor at a karate school took on new responsibilities during the pandemic, including controlling 'access and egress from our space', acting as the 'gatekeeper' who reviewed documentation from people who received exemptions from mask-wearing from their medical provider, and then explaining to kids and families in the dojo why someone was participating while unmasked.

The anecdote regarding the 'scolding' of a coordinator for posting a photo of a hug serves as a potent example of how this security logic changed how these encounters felt. For Young *et al.* (2023: 10), 'contemporary life is conditioned by a swathe of sensory encounters with criminological objects and images', while McClanahan and South (2020) advocate for greater attention to the ways our senses are connected to crime and social control. Throughout, participants remarked on how their experiences of physical recreation and sport were changed because of the enforcement of public health restrictions. In this context, the hug—ordinarily a physical gesture of community and affection—is re-coded as a 'vector of transmission'. The director's intervention represents a form of affective correction aimed at maintaining the visual legitimacy of the security regime. The controlwork here involves actively suppressing natural human impulses (connection, touch) to uphold the sanitary order. Thus, the labour of the control worker extends to policing the optics

of safety, ensuring that even the representation of the organization aligns with the rigid demands of pandemic biosecurity.

Expanding on the sensory effects of these biosecurity measures, one participant talked at length about how the return to taekwondo with pandemic restrictions looked, felt and sounded different than it had pre-COVID-19: 'everything was supervised and policed. We weren't allowed to just exist together'. They expanded, noting that squares were taped on the floor of the studio, marking off where each individual should stand and 'you had to exist within your box...we couldn't hug each other, we couldn't high-five, we couldn't share in each other's physical energy'. There were other restrictions:

We weren't allowed to, like, 'talk loudly', I think it was called...We have this thing called a spirit yell, like a kihap, in our style where it's releasing your energy through a vocal sound. We weren't allowed to do that. It was banned. You weren't allowed to touch your hands to the floor in any way. So we weren't allowed to do push-ups. You couldn't lay on the floors so there was no sit-ups. You weren't allowed to, obviously, touch anyone else. So we couldn't do self-defense. We couldn't do sparring. We couldn't do a lot of our things.

Other athletes talked about how the return-to-play protocols impacted the felt experience of physical recreation. One tennis player, for instance, discussed trying to play the sport without touching the ball with their hand because of concern about surface transmission:

if you're trying to get... your partner's balls to the other side you would have to sort of pick them up with your foot and your racket and like try to do it with the way that you're not touching the ball and it was the same thing with...the ball from the neighbouring court came over.

Another tennis player echoed this, observing that 'people invented new serves where you didn't have to hold the ball'. Meanwhile, in at least one region, baseball tasted different because players were forbidden from chewing sunflower seeds. Likewise, a Scottish country dance group prohibited eating and singing. Much like guerrilla street art such as yarn bombing changes 'the look and the feel of the city', then, we should be sensitive to the ways that the enforcement of public health regulations by ad-hoc pandemic control workers changed the recreation experience (see [Millie 2019](#): 1282).

Virus and violence

Above, we documented how police officers feared virus exposure, were subject to spit attacks, and struggled with burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. [De Camargo 2022a](#); [2022b](#); [Elliott-Davies 2023](#); [Fix and Powell 2024](#); [Fleming and Brown 2023](#); [Newiss et al. 2022](#); [Shjarback and Magny 2022](#)). Our study reveals the distinct challenges for *ordinary folks* thrust into the role of pandemic control worker ([Koskela 2011a](#)), a group who had considerably less power, authority and resources than law enforcement to navigate this role. There was also limited training for those on the ground. An executive director for a large basketball organization outlined the messaging to local teams and other members: 'do your best'. He acknowledged that 'we had a lot of guides and a lot of plans, like PDF-style plans, that people could share with their members, and we had little checklists and stuff to try and make it easy to get the communication out there'. But when asked directly if the organization had provided any de-escalation or conflict resolution training for those tasked with checking participants' vaccination status, this executive director answered, 'no'. This was not uncommon.

Other organizations instituted a training program for ‘frontline’ staff. An office administrator/instructor at a dance studio reflected that there was ‘training as an entire faculty team and as an office team on what the policies were, how we were going to implement them, what our strategy was, what the procedures were going to be’. However, this individual also relied on their own instincts and experiences when dealing with difficult situations: ‘I guess the problem solving also came from myself in knowing how to de-escalate a situation given also my experience in customer service for quite some time ...like I know when to push and when not to’.

Elsewhere, training focused on conflict management. For instance, the director of community services for a small Ontario town, whose role involved overseeing the town’s recreation facilities and programs, explained:

We did some training. We did some for our staff because it was, again, the frontline staff and every level that was, that was dealing with the customer was finding that it was challenging... So, we did some education about why they were treating us like this. We did some education about what to do ‘if’. When to close. When to call the [Ontario Provincial Police]. That you’re not on your own. We did a lot of conversations, a lot of communication. We set up protocols. We set up safeguards. And then we ended up having senior managers being on site.

Any training, however, was inherently limited in effectiveness given the ever-changing policies and public health guidelines. A participant who worked part-time at a fitness facility, reflected on the unavoidable ambiguity and room for interpretation when enforcing protocols, including what qualified as a physical activity. In this person’s words, ‘it was hard to navigate because what do you define as physical activity? What do you define as dancing? What do you define as, you know, a student needing to take off the mask?’ They were torn, ‘wanting to abide by the masking policy, but also not wanting to overdo or underdo it’. Echoing the experiences outlined in [Miele’s \(2023\)](#) autoethnography, participants in our study expressed frustration and exhaustion due to the regularly shifting COVID-19 protocols. By leaving the definition of terms like ‘physical activity’ open to interpretation, the system effectively forced the control worker to act as a judge in real-time. That is, control workers were tasked with absorbing the uncertainty of the state’s biopolitical directives—no protocol could account for every scenario—and transforming it into concrete, enforceable actions.

These ad-hoc control workers faced a heightened risk of exposure to the virus because of their duties as organizers, coaches and screeners as well as increased incidents of abuse, harassment and violence. The executive director of the basketball program, for instance, commented on the backlash to requiring vaccine passports: ‘We had some people, like, freak out and threaten to sue us because they couldn’t come watch their kid play.... Or ‘cause their kid wasn’t allowed to play if they were of a certain age’. In their view, the ‘level of entitlement, anti-authority’ nature of parents and caregivers has ‘been amplified or magnified’ since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has manifested in increased yelling at referees, caregivers refusing to leave the gymnasium and other violations of the code of conduct.

The pandemic made the director of community services for that small Ontario town realize that the recreation centre was ‘essential for people’s mental and physical health. To keep them out of the hospital. To keep them out of illness’. The closure of the centre and cancellation of classes and programs had a significant impact on many lives, contributing to growing frustration among those who missed their regular sport and recreation and adding *new*

responsibilities for those who worked at the recreation centre: 'now we had to manage people's feelings, people's mental abilities, their illnesses, that they were coming to us because they were, everybody else was too busy, and we tried to assist wherever we could'. Despite the staff's best efforts, there was much resistance from people who were denied access to the recreation spaces and programs: 'I don't think people realized the amount of abuse and the severity that this team took. And from all levels and from all roles. Because there was such a push on to them to do more with less and to, to give in. Or to interpret [public health protocols] differently'. She discussed her shifting role: 'So, I did work the front desk to deal with irate customers. To support my staff. My managers also did the same thing because it was the frontline staff who took most of the abuse. I certainly took a lot of emails and a lot of phone calls myself'. Below, the director relays in some detail the community's mentality during this period and how she sought to protect staff in her role as director:

people were angry at us, as the deliverers of these programs. You know, we had locked doors, we had protocols, we had, you know, all of those things ... We took a lot of abuse. We had to call the [Ontario Provincial Police] many, many times. And ... the minute that we could get anybody into any kind of program, in any kind of way, they were always maxed out. So, with every inch, they pushed for another foot.

These ad-hoc control workers faced a twofold risk profile that included potential infection from close contact and the acute danger of public hostility. When the state offloaded responsibility for enforcing public health restrictions, it effectively transformed these individuals into human buffers who absorbed the friction of the new security regime. The abuse they endured was not merely an occupational hazard, but the direct result of a system that demanded they work in partnership with the state. Notably, here, the ongoing cooperation with the local police force affirms [Garland's \(1996\)](#) observation that the punitive arm of the state continues to serve an important role in crime control even when it appears that responsibility has been offloaded. Access to sport and recreation became such a flashpoint in Canada ([Norman et al. 2024](#)) that the director requested funding for a security guard, and it was then that the city council began to understand the extent of the harassment and abuse that staff were enduring. Their emotional labour had up to this point been unnoticed and unappreciated (see [Porter et al. 2025](#)).

Determining access took an emotional toll. The director of community services recalls: 'How do we pick and choose who is getting in? And it just became something we had to bear. So, it was really a very difficult time'. But even after you let some individuals into the space to access recreation opportunities 'the rest of [the individuals waiting] are standing at the door with their face pressed against the glass, mad at you, you know, because it wasn't them that got in. And you know, how was it fair? And so it just, it tore at your heartstrings'.

To be sure, these community sport organizers, coaches and administrators engaged in emotional labour prior to the pandemic. For instance, prior to COVID-19 the executive director of the minor baseball association had to navigate questions relating to playing time or concerns about coaches illegally drinking alcohol in the parking lot. During the pandemic, however, they were confronted with other difficult issues. On this matter, they talked about trying to 'dissuade people's fear' including the fears of worried moms out on the diamond with tape measures trying to ensure that athletes and spectators were appropriately distanced. On the other hand, this administrator recalled having a 'broken heart' following a conversation with a young player looking for help getting vaccinated in order to play baseball in defiance of his parents' wishes.

For others this shift into pandemic control worker was significant because it made them confront their deeply held principles. One participant, who identified as a Black gay man, was tasked with screening and enforcing public health guidelines. This participant situated his new responsibilities in a broader context of racialized police violence (see also [Preito-Hodge 2023](#)) and articulated his deep discomfort with reconciling his personal commitment to equity and social justice and the temporary duties he had to take on to pay bills:

it was very ironic that I was literally becoming that that I fear, and that that I don't enjoy, which is a police officer... Given that I was essentially policing, I was, you know, hovering over and walking around ...making sure everyone had their mask on or that, or that, you know, your child who was here was under the age of six...But again, I didn't want to lose my employment. I didn't want to lose my job. I too had bills to pay. And so it was a balance of, you know, over policing versus just enforcing rules.

Here, the participant employs the language associated with surface acting (see [Hochschild 1983](#)), wherein the individual aims to modify their outward display of emotions—they hide their true emotions and put on a mask or front to align with organizational objectives. In this case, they did not reveal their unease with enforcing public health regulations and instead aimed to de-escalate conflict, pacify clients and ensure a safe return to play. They elaborated on the struggle:

So to ask somebody, for example, to put on a mask or to ask somebody for their verification of vaccination, it was really tough mentally, especially for me who is not very confrontational, who doesn't enjoy, you know, arguing or picking a fight with anyone.

This participant's reflection on their experience highlights the complexity of navigating identity within systems of power and the different forms of emotional labour with which pandemic control workers (see [Koskela 2011a](#)) were tasked. The internal conflict experienced by this participant exposes the racialized contradictions embedded within pandemic controlwork. In this specific instance, the 'surface acting' described by [Hochschild \(1983\)](#) functions as a necessary protective mechanism that allows the participant to suppress his political consciousness and moral discomfort to function as an agent of biosecurity. This scenario demonstrates how the biopolitical state extracts labour from those it often fails to protect. The state utilizes the control worker's capacity for de-escalation to secure the population, while ignoring the psychological cost of forcing them to mimic the policing structures they might oppose.

Discussion and conclusion

A wealth of scholarship has considered security and surveillance at sporting 'mega-events' such as the Olympics (e.g. see [Bajc 2016](#); [Bennett and Haggerty 2012](#); [Boyle and Haggerty 2009](#); [Giulianotti and Klauser 2010](#); 2011; [Molnar and Snider 2011](#)). Other scholars have investigated social control, security and surveillance practices in professional sport, but have tended to focus on European association football leagues. For instance, [Giulianotti \(2011: 3299\)](#) argues that UK football stadiums are 'highly securitised, private urban' spaces that enable 'the bio-political classification, zoning, immobilisation, monitoring and control of its publics'. We document the ways the same were infused into everyday sport and recreation activities and spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, this controlwork ([Koskela 2011a](#)) was not performed predominantly by police agencies and private security firms, but instead it was delegated to ordinary folks with sometimes limited institutional support or

training. While existing literature focuses on technological surveillance (Andrejevic 2006; 2007; Lee 2023; Lyon 2017), our study highlights the human infrastructure of biopolitics. We demonstrate that the 'smart city' or 'pandemic surveillance' relies heavily on the 'flesh and blood' emotional labour of unpaid or low-paid actors.

Our analysis elucidates how community recreation facilities, dance studios, social clubs, gymnasiums, fitness centres, hiking trails and the like were transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as how volunteers, coaches, administrators and office staff became temporary control workers (see Koskela 2011a) tasked with interpreting and implementing public health guidelines (i.e. checking vaccine passports, enforcing masking protocols) and restricting access to recreation spaces and activities. The act of granting or restricting access based on biological markers—such as temperature or vaccination status—changes the control worker into the gatekeeper of a sanitary enclosure. They are no longer merely checking membership passes, they are performing the quintessential biopolitical function of 'sorting' the population to maximize collective health. The ability to control bodily movements and social interactions within these spaces demonstrates how the recreation centre, hiking trail, lake and other spaces ordinarily associated with recreation, pleasure and health took on diffuse carceral characteristics (see, e.g., Moran 2015; Moran et al. 2018; Norman 2022) that detrimentally affected those that were made responsible for surveillance and rule-enforcement.

To understand how these biopolitical mandates were operationalized on the ground, we extend Koskela's (2011a) concept of controlwork. While Koskela (2011a) originally utilized the term to describe the rise of everyday virtual surveillance of borders, we re-theorize controlwork in the pandemic era as the affective management of population flows. In this iteration, controlwork is not simply the act of watching or reporting; it cannot be viewed as administrative rule-following or 'good customer service'. Instead, enforcement of health protocols represents the operationalization of biopolitical security at the micro-level. When a volunteer checks a vaccine passport or enforces a mask rule, they are acting as a 'technician of security' (Foucault 2007), tasked with filtering the population to distinguish between 'safe' and 'risky' bodies. Because these recreation workers lacked the sovereign force of law enforcement (i.e. the badge, the weapon, or the legal power to detain), their ability to regulate the flow of bodies (i.e. deciding who enters and who is excluded based on biological risk) depended on their deployment of soft power and emotional regulation.

Emotional labour becomes biopolitical when emotional regulation is tied to the health and functionality of the population—for instance, the nurses, teachers, social workers, grocery store employees, job seekers and 'everyday citizens' who were expected to remain calm, caring and resilient during COVID-19 while being self-responsibilized over their own health (e.g. Lu et al. 2022; Muller et al. 2020). In other words, our analysis reveals a critical theoretical convergence where the 'managed heart' (Hochschild 1983) functions as the operational engine for the 'managed population' (Foucault 2007). By fusing the contributions of Koskela and Hochschild, we reveal that the controlwork of the pandemic was a deeply affective project where the labour of managing feelings became a mechanism for managing public health. To ensure the 'security' of the recreation space, these workers were required to engage in intense emotional self-regulation, suppressing their own anxieties and absorbing public hostility to secure compliance without escalation. In this context, emotional labour ceases to be merely a commercial exchange for service satisfaction; it is repurposed as a technology of governmentality (Walters 2012). The control worker's internal discipline—their ability to remain calm, empathetic and firm in the face of resistance, disappointment and harassment—becomes an essential infrastructure through which the biological health of the population is governed. Thus, the successful 'reopening' of sport and

recreation was structurally dependent on this biopolitical emotional labour. What is more, the undervaluation of this labour is evidence of a biopolitical economy that prioritizes the circulation of the population while obscuring the human toll required to sustain it.

The emotional labour of pandemic controlwork (see [Koskela 2011a](#)) extends far beyond its conventional associations with crime prevention or risk management, revealing its deeper entanglement with the biopolitical regulation of populations. Controlwork under pandemic conditions was redeployed to manage not deviance per se, but life itself. The compulsion for community sport organizers to check vaccine statuses, recreation employees to confront unmasked customers, or office administrative staff to enforce physical distancing regulations was not aimed at preventing criminal behaviour but at shaping biological and behavioural compliance for the sake of collective health. In this sense, the pandemic foregrounded how controlwork operates as a biopolitical technology: it is not merely about deterring transgression, but about emotionally managing populations to ‘make live’ by securing the circulation of care, safety and affective stability ([Foucault 2007](#)). The expansion of controlwork into everyday sites of recreation and athletic pursuit reflects a broader shift in which emotional labour becomes central to governing populations—not through coercive force, but through diffuse, relational and affectively charged mechanisms of self and social regulation. Emotional labour among public safety personnel—typically police officers, but also civilian staff—can negatively impact health and well-being, leading to stress, burnout and anxiety (see [Jones et al. 2023](#)). Our project suggests the same might be true for ordinary individuals tasked with ad-hoc controlwork ([Koskela 2011a](#)).

What is certain is that encounters with pandemic public health restrictions routinely transformed the ways that recreational athletes navigated their daily lives. Tennis, baseball, dance, a group hike and taekwondo (among other activities) all sounded, looked, felt, tasted—and given the many references to hand sanitizer, likely smelled—different than they had before. These were sensory encounters with social control (see also [Young et al. 2023](#)). In multiple ways, then, our project underscores the importance of being attentive to the affective and sensory dimensions of controlwork in unexpected spaces (see also [Antojado 2025](#); [Umamaheswar 2021](#); [Young et al. 2023](#)).

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