



## How do referees feel about cancellations and reffing during a pandemic?

This survey asked officials to share how they felt about refereeing during the Omicron wave of late 2021-early 2022. This question is particularly interesting because the COVID-19 pandemic cancelled the 2020-2021 Hockey Winnipeg season. However, in Fall 2021, the season started successfully and ran smoothly until just before Christmas 2021 when Omicron started to become a reality. Christmas tournaments were cancelled and Hockey Winnipeg decided that exhibition games would not be approved such that teams could have the best chance to finish the regular season and playoffs. There was a very real reason to wonder if the 2021-2022 season would be completed.

### Methods: The Survey

The survey was posted on wpgrefs.com between January 2022 and March 2022. It was advertised using email blasts to the wpgrefs.com email list during this same time period. The items on the survey included experience and age questions. In addition, items related to whether an official had reffed during the 2021-2022 season, when their last game was, their plans to ref again, and whether they felt that the season should be cancelled.

### Results

There were 38 respondents: 5 first years, 7 with 1 to 3 years of experience, 12 with 4 to 6 years, and 14 with 7+ years. The ages of these respondents were: 12-14 years (6), 15-17 years (5), 18-24 years (6), and 25+ years (21).

There were three research questions explored in this survey. The results of each are here:

#### Research Question 1: *What proportion of referees have stopped refereeing due to Omicron?*

The first item asked the person to identify the last time they refereed. Of the 38 respondents, 10 said they last refereed between September and December 2021. 1 person said that they last refereed in 2019-2020. 27 selected "Between January and March 2022." Of the 11 people who had not reffed after December 2021, 7 explained why: 5 said "omicron", 1 said "injury", 1 said "too busy" and 3 responses were lost to a technology error.

#### Research Question 2: *How has the Omicron wave effected refs' confidence in refereeing now or in the future?*

The first item asked referees "if hockey is not cancelled, do you plan to referee during the omicron wave? Here are the results:

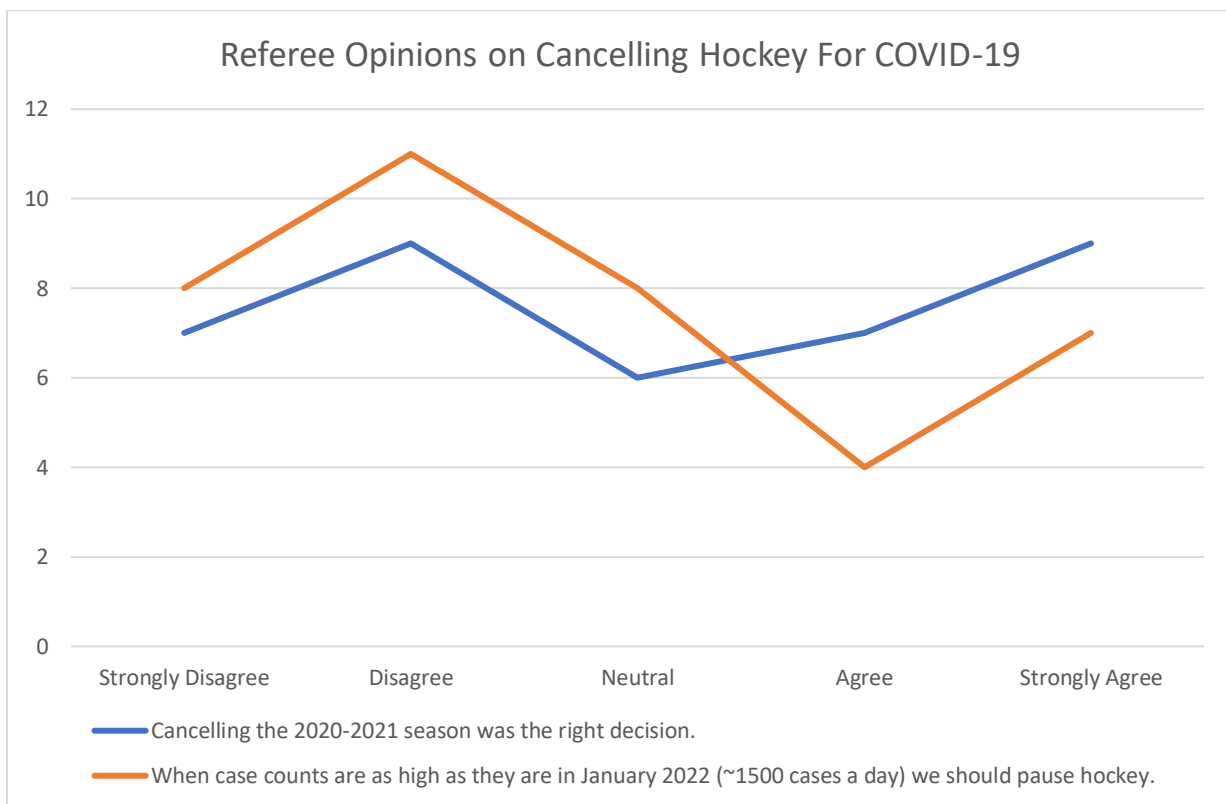
	Tally
Just No.	1
No, waiting for cases to drop.	2
Maybe...not sure.	2
Yes, but I have not reffed yet.	5
Yes and I already have reffed.	28

The second item was “after the 2021-2022 season, will you ref again?” 8 people said “I don’t know, wait and see” with 30 people saying “I will return in fall 2022 no matter what”.

**Research Question 3:** *Do referees agree with the cancellation of hockey due to COVID-19?* This question was explored by asking respondents to agree or disagree with two statements:

- “Cancelling the 2020-2021 season was the right decision.”
- “When case counts are as high as they are in January 2022 (~1500 per day) we should pause hockey.”

The following graph illustrates responses:



Finally, there was an open field for comments about refereeing during a pandemic.

Respondents provided the following comments:

- Limit spectators, reduce times to show up for games.
- I like reffing this year.
- The season could have been completed with players, team officials and on ice officials only. Fans are not necessary. Cancelling the season for 2021/2022 is the same in my opinion. Players, team and on ice officials only.
- We need to keep playing.

- Schedule of games at arenas should allow time for official changeover without 4 To 6 people in a small room at the same time. Mandatory masking in ref room. Rooms disinfected. I should never have to chase down rink attendants for soap and towels. The last is ridiculous.
- RE: Cancelling 2020/2021- it was seemingly the right thing to do at the time due to lack of vaccine access and still learning about the virus. This question is interesting, don't see the merit in asking...RE: Case counts ~1500 - I cannot come to an answer here. If it was as obvious that large rates of transmission was happening in the hockey setting, then yes. But with the dropping of contract tracing it made tracking this transmission virtually impossible, so proceeding as per the updated isolation orders is the best we can do. Comments: Get COVID officers at arenas, teams are still doing warm-ups, some people still not even making an attempt to distance and wear masks properly.
- Should not be much different than reffing without a pandemic
- Happy to be doing something normal.
- I would like to see the rules change because of Covid. Players try to go nose to nose when talking after a whistle. Any advances into another person's personal space after a whistle should warrant a game misconduct since they are not wearing masks when this happens.
- Pausing hockey and delaying everything for a month, personally would be best. Lots of teams go into games short benched and struggle to keep up. My suggestion is we pause the season as is and continue where we left off in the regular season. This would also possibly give chance to reschedule games that were canceled.
- Life has to go on, rules requiring everyone to be vaxxed help keep us safe!
- I wish they had brought back hockey sooner when it was proven to be safe in early 2021. A lot of unnecessary hardship was caused by banning it for so long.
- I wish all refs would wear their masks while in ref room.
- People needs sports now more than ever.
- The scheduling of games should take into account the change over of officials and result in 6 people in a room barely suitable for 3.
- I caught covid and it wasn't bad. In that case I'm not concerned about getting covid from reffing anymore for a bit.
- Keep kids playing and reffing.
- Assuming we continue to require vax status I would believe that sports should continue. It's an important outlet for the kids and for me as an official it's important exercise and fun for me.
- As a minimum referees have to make the effort to protect themselves and their colleagues by properly wearing a mask in referee dressing rooms in order to work toward the goal of completing the season in full.
- very difficult to get everyone to follow the ever-changing covid protocols
- I think hockey should be put on pause because as a ref i see many different teams a week versus a play who sees maybe one to two teams a week. For me personally I do 5+ games a week leaving to 10+ teams of exposure.
- Sports are needed now more than ever to help people.

- From a referee perspective, I am fine to continue. the ref rooms allow enough space to distance and everyone seems to be acting properly.
- People scared of what is basically a common cold are probably not cut out to officiate hockey anyway.
- Are there special officiating masks/neck gaiters we can use to increase safety measures on the ice as well?
- There are no good answers.

## Discussion

Here are the answers to each research question:

- *What proportion of referees have stopped refereeing due to Omicron?*
  - Overall, referees were still engaged in refereeing hockey as only 10 of 38 (26%) respondents had not refereed after Christmas with Omicron really becoming engaged right around the Christmas period. Furthermore, only 5 of 10 (13% of total 38 respondents) said they were not refereeing was due to Omicron.
- *How has the Omicron wave effected refs' confidence in refereeing now or in the future?*
  - Referees are confident in refereeing again in the future. Only 3 referees said they would not be refereeing this season and 2 said maybe. The other 33 respondents said they plan to referee again in 2021-2022.
  - Similarly, 30 of 38 (79%) respondents expressed a desire to return in fall 2022. The other 8 said "maybe" No one said "no, I am not returning." This suggests that there is belief that COVID will not interrupt life or hockey again.
- *Do referees agree with the cancellation of hockey due to COVID-19?*
  - The effect of vaccines may play a role in responses to this research question. People were more likely to agree with cancelling the 2020-2021 season than they were to agree to pausing during the Omicron wave. It almost looks as though people said "we have vaccines, we should get back to life."

The open-ended responses revealed two main ideas in January 2022:

1. Keep the season going, keep playing:
  - a. 13 responses suggested this idea ranging from "let's just play" to "no need of fans, let's just play" to "Ignore COVID and move on."
2. Ref rooms are really small and refs need to wear masks in the ref rooms
  - a. 6 Responses ranged from "had COVID, not concerned" to "refs need to wear masks in ref room more consistently" to "ref rooms are small".

## Conclusions

1. Referees are still engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 13% of respondents said they stopped refereeing due to COVID. Wpgrefs.com website hits in 2021-2022 (4071) were similar to 2019-2020 (3923). Even during the cancelled season, there was only a 25% decrease in traffic.

2. Referees are prepared to return to the ice in fall 2022 with all respondents saying they will definitely or maybe be back.
3. Opinions about cancelling the hockey season appear to mirror the societal opinion about “getting back to normal life”. In January 2022, referees were less likely to say we should shut down hockey than they were for the cancelled season. Society appeared to agree that once vaccines were widely available then lock downs and COVID restrictions should end.

### **Research Limitations**

There are two main limitations to this research.

- There were only 5 first year Referees. Therefore, this group was underrepresented. In contrast, there were 21 people who were older than 25.
- The sample would be biased towards active referees rather than ones who had taken a break during the Omicron wave as those inactive officials are less likely to use wpgrefs.com or engage in surveys.