

FACTS AND FIGURES



Sexual violence against children and young people in sport

— What is sexual violence?

Sexual violence is a broad term that includes sexual harassment and sexual abuse, and can be defined as a sexual act that is committed or attempted by another person without freely given consent of the victim or against someone who is unable to consent or refuse (Basile *et al.*, 2014). Sexual abuse is usually defined as any sexual activity involving a child that does not fully understand, is unable to give informed consent to, or is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent. Sexual harassment refers to behaviour towards an individual or group that involves sexualised verbal, non-verbal or physical behaviour, whether intended or unintended, legal or illegal, that is based upon an abuse of power and trust and that is considered by the victim or a bystander to be unwanted or coerced (International Olympic Committee, 2007). Non-contact sexual acts (e.g. posing for pornographic photographs or online grooming) are included in this concept.

— How often does it happen?

Research suggests that one in five children or young people in Europe are victims of some form of sexual violence (Council of Europe, 2007). In sport, research on this topic is relatively new and coming from a small selection of countries only. Studies surveying sexual harassment in sport reveal prevalence estimates between 3% and 52%, and for sexual abuse between 0.2% and 9.7% (Parent & Fortier, 2017). The wide variation in estimates can be explained by the differences in methodology and definitions used. Whether these wide variations result from real differences in the risk of being subjected to sexual abuse/violence in the different cultures reported on or from conceptual differences remains unclear. In any case, if studies include abuse by peers and non-contact cases in their definition of sexual violence, this is likely to raise the prevalence rates significantly.

— Who are the victims of sexual violence in sport?

Sexual violence can be targeted at any athlete regardless of age, sport ability, gender, nationality, race or ethnicity, social class, education level, sexual orientation or disability. Although sexual violence is still often pictured as a “male perpetrator and female victim” problem, recent studies found no or only small prevalence differences between victimhood in boys and girls in sport (Parent & Fortier, 2017; Vertommen *et al.*, 2016). Studies show that young athletes competing at international level report more experiences with sexual violence in sport than athletes who compete at lower level. Also, vulnerable subgroups such as LGBT athletes, ethnic minority and disabled athletes are more at risk of being victims of sexual violence in sport.

— Who are the perpetrators of sexual violence in sport?

Both men and women and young people are perpetrators of sexual violence. Coaches and other entourage members are often perpetrators of sexual abuse, but peer athletes are more likely to be perpetrators of sexual harassment than coaches (Mountjoy *et al.*, 2016). Sexual harassment by peer athletes often involves more than one perpetrator. However, when coaches are involved in incidents of sexual violence against children or young people in sport, incidents tend to be more severe (Vertommen *et al.*, 2017).

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— What are the risk factors of sexual violence in sport?

Sports are characterised by unique structures and cultures that are infused with a high tolerance of random incidents of physical violence and injuries (all considered part and parcel of the “rough and tumble” of the game) and unequal power relationships between coaches and athletes and authoritarian leadership. Together with the male-dominated gender ratio, the often required physical contact and the reward structures, these conditions contribute to a climate that is conducive to sexual violence against children and young athletes.

There is a context of potential risk in sports, such as:

- ▶ changing rooms
- ▶ showers
- ▶ carpooling
- ▶ overnight stays during training camps or competitions.

Still, very few people associate sports with sexual violence. Organisational factors which influence increased risk of sexual violence and harassment include: a sport culture where inappropriate sexual behaviour is tolerated; bystanders ignore its signs or tacitly approve of it; discrimination and gender inequality are accepted. (Mountjoy *et al.*, 2016).

Disclosing experiences of sexual violence in sport is difficult. The taboo is maybe even bigger than in other settings, as athletes are supposed to be strong and vulnerability is considered a weakness. Boundless ambition of young promising athletes make them vulnerable and will maintain the secrecy introduced by the perpetrator, as the child fears the negative consequences (such as having to leave sport) when the secret is disclosed.

— Are some sports more at risk than others?

Often it is thought that contact and/or individual sports are more at risk than other sports. However, to date, there is no scientific evidence that this is true. The amount of clothing, cover, touching and sport type are not risk factors for sexual harassment or abuse in sport (Fasting K. *et al.*, 2004).

— What is the impact?

Based on studies outside sport, we know that experiencing childhood or adolescent sexual violence can have a devastating impact on short and long-term physical, psychological and social health. Illness and injury, performance loss, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harm, low self-esteem, behavioural problems, learning difficulties, elimination disorders, disruptive, impulsive control and conduct disorders, attachment problems, anxiety, depression and a higher risk of suicide are all possible outcomes of sexual violence. There is no reason to assume that experiencing this in the context of sport leads to less serious consequences than sexual violence outside of it.

There is an organisational impact to sexual violence. Reputational damage, dropout of athletes, loss of sponsorship are some of the negative outcomes at organisational level.

— Key References

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