



## Research article

# Profiling perpetrators of interpersonal violence against children in sport based on a victim survey



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 20 August 2016

Received in revised form

22 November 2016

Accepted 24 November 2016

## Keywords:

Child abuse

Harassment

Maltreatment

Organized sport

Youth sport

Characteristics

## ABSTRACT

The current article reports on perpetrator characteristics gathered in the first large-scale prevalence study on interpersonal violence against children in sport in the Netherlands and Belgium. Using retrospective web survey design, 4043 adults answered questions on their experiences in youth sport. The study looks at the number of perpetrators as well as individual descriptive characteristics (sex, age, and role in the sport organization) of perpetrators of psychological, physical and sexual violence as reported retrospectively by victim-respondents. This information was then clustered to provide an overview of the most common perpetrator profiles. Results show that in all types of interpersonal violence in sport, perpetrators are predominantly male peer athletes who frequently operate together in (impromptu) groups. Several differences between the three types of interpersonal violence are highlighted. While incidents of physical violence perpetrated by coaches tend to be less severe compared to those by other perpetrators, acts of sexual violence committed by a coach are significantly more severe. The presented findings shed new light on perpetrators of interpersonal violence in sport, nuancing the predominant belief that the male coach is the main perpetrator while providing nuanced information that can be utilized to improve prevention and child protection measures and other safeguarding initiatives in sport.

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## 1. Introduction

The scientific attention to interpersonal violence (IV) in sport has long been sporadic, but since the late 1990s interest has grown. The research primarily focused on the victims of sexual harassment and sexual violence in sport, with various

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studies looking into their prevalence in (student) athlete populations, while others took a qualitative approach to analyzing the processes, potential risk factors, and consequences (Brackenridge, 2001). With rates for sexual harassment ranging from 19% to 92% and those for sexual abuse between 2% and 49%, it has repeatedly been demonstrated that sexual violence is a highly prevalent problem in sport, while it has become clear that both girls and boys and women and men are victimized, and that specific aspects of organized sport seem to facilitate coach-athlete interactions to grow into hierarchical, abusive relationships of power (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

Although often more prevalent than sexual violence, far less attention has been paid to psychological and physical violence against children in sport (Vertommen et al., 2016). One of the few large-scale studies available, with over 6000 student-athletes in the UK gives an alarmingly high prevalence estimate of 75% for psychological harm and 24% for physical harm (Stafford, Alexander, & Fry, 2013; Stafford & Fry, 2013). These results should be interpreted with caution, however, as the study suffered from a very low response rate (under 1%). Asking a representative sample of 4043 Dutch and Belgian adults about their experiences in sports before the age of 18, we found substantially lower prevalence estimates: 38% for psychological violence and 11% for physical violence (Vertommen et al., 2016).

Remarkably little research has been dedicated to perpetrator characteristics in sport. Research on sexual harassment in sport grew out of studies on sexual harassment in public settings such as the workplace, problematizing it as an issue of employment conditions and gender relations (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2002). This explains the more organizational, rather than clinical approach taken in the literature on sexual harassment in sport. This feminist perspective that contributed to our understanding of sexual harassment in sport can explain the focus on male coaches as perpetrators (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2002; Kirby & Greaves, 1996; Lenskyj, 1992). Indeed, early studies often solely targeted male coaches as the agents and female athletes as the victims.

Confirming prevalence rates observed outside sport, studies on sexual violence in sport found that the majority of reported perpetrators are male (Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009; Fasting, Brackenridge, & Kjølberg, 2013; Sand, Fasting, Chroni, & Knorre, 2011). In their study with 356 female Turkish athletes, Gündüz, Sunay, & Koz (2007) noted that 40% of the victims reported spectators as the perpetrators of sexual harassment, while 33% mentioned teammates, and 25% coaches. Interestingly, some studies find that more often than coaches or other adult sport staff, peer athletes are being identified as the agents of sexual harassment. According to Elendu and Umeakuka (2011), who studied experiences with sexual violence in a sample of 1214 male and female athletes at southern Nigerian universities, 96% of the cases of gender harassment and 86% of the incidences of sexual harassment reported by victims was perpetrated by peers, with sexual coercion also being far more frequently attributed to peers (80%) than to coaches (34%). Rintaugu, Kamau, Amusa, & Toriola (2014) documented that in Kenyan universities 32% of the reported perpetrators of sexual harassment were 'spectators,' with teammates being mentioned in 23% and coaching staff in 8% of all incidences (N = 339 female athletes). Asking 6000 student-athletes about their experiences with negative behaviors in sport in the only large-scale survey in the UK, Alexander, Stafford, and Lewis (2011) found that teammates and/or other peer athletes were most often reported as the perpetrators of sexually offensive as well as emotionally and physically harmful behaviors. The authors also observed that the higher young athletes climb the competitive ladder, coaches become a more significant source of physical violence.

Aside from the scientific literature, information on perpetrator characteristics can also be derived from various administrative records such as court records, media reports, and incident report systems of sport organizations. Although gaining access to court records is often difficult, these data have the highest credibility because they represent 'proven facts' as recorded by police and court officials (Fasting et al., 2013). Having gained access to Danish judicial records documenting 160 cases of convicted abusers in sport, Toftegaard Nielsen (2004) noted that all perpetrators were male, with the majority being coaches with a mean age of 35 years. Fasting et al. (2013) analyzed 15 court reports, all describing male coaches (aged between 19 and 58 years) convicted for sexual abuse in sport in Norway. Considering that up to 95% of sexual offenses are not being reported (dark number) and that only a small number of reported incidents will lead to an actual conviction, court data only show us 'the tip of the iceberg.'

Despite having a lower credibility and sometimes lacking crucial information, media reports can be a source for incidents of IV in sport. In 2008, Brackenridge and colleagues analyzed 159 articles in the British printed media and found that 98% reported a male coach as the abuser of children in sport (Brackenridge, Bishopp, Moussalli, & Tapp, 2008). The study further uncovered different perpetrator strategies ('intimate', 'aggressive' and 'dominant' modes of interaction), showing consistency with themes emerging from similar behavioral analyses of rapists and child molesters.

Given that many cases of IV in sport are never reported to judicial authorities or covered by the media, the third source of information are incident records kept by sport organizations. Studies relying on such case files are highly depending on the degree of completeness and quality of the data (Brackenridge, Bringer, & Bishopp, 2005). Analyzing 132 cases of child sexual abuse in British association football (soccer), Brackenridge and colleagues (2005) found that 92% of the alleged perpetrators were male, of whom 35% were coaches/teachers, 14% administrative staff, 21% referees, and 7% peers or teammates, with the ages of the perpetrators ranging from 7 to 60 years. Reviewing 652 cases reported to the Safeguarding Cases in Sport panel in the UK, Rhind, McDermott, Lambert, & Koleva (2015) again found the majority (91%) of perpetrators to be male and older than 18 (92%).

Our research group examined 323 incidents of sexual harassment and abuse in sport obtained from the helpline of the Dutch National Olympic Committee and Dutch Sport Federation (Vertommen, Schipper-van Veldhoven, Hartill, & Van Den Eede, 2015) and likewise observed that the majority (77%) of the alleged perpetrators were male coaches aged between 31 and 50 years; and 13% of the incidents involved another athlete or group of athletes. Notably, in 5% of the cases the

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