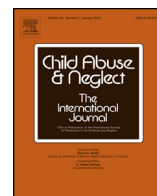




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Research article

Interpersonal violence against children in sport in the Netherlands and Belgium[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The current article reports on the first large-scale prevalence study on interpersonal violence against children in sport in the Netherlands and Belgium. Using a dedicated online questionnaire, over 4,000 adults prescreened on having participated in organized sport before the age of 18 were surveyed with respect to their experiences with childhood psychological, physical, and sexual violence while playing sports. Being the first of its kind in the Netherlands and Belgium, our study has a sufficiently large sample taken from the general population, with a balanced gender ratio and wide variety in socio-demographic characteristics. The survey showed that 38% of all respondents reported experiences with psychological violence, 11% with physical violence, and 14% with sexual violence. Ethnic minority, lesbian/gay/bisexual (LGB) and disabled athletes, and those competing at the international level report significantly more experiences of interpersonal violence in sport. The results are consistent with rates obtained outside sport, underscoring the need for more research on interventions and systematic follow-ups, to minimize these negative experiences in youth sport.

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Introduction

Interpersonal violence (IV) in sport is an understudied phenomenon. Indeed, it is not customary to dwell on the negative sides of sport, which is traditionally viewed as a social good. Policy makers have been more preoccupied with making sport available (the sport-for-all doctrine) and injury-free than making it safe from interpersonal violence such as

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harassment and abuse (Schipper-van Veldhoven, 2012). Competitive sport is characterized by unique structures and cultures, a high tolerance of random incidents of physical violence and injuries as being part of the “rough and tumble” of the game, asymmetrical power relationships between coaches and athletes, a male-dominated gender ratio, and a sports culture often being associated with authoritarian leadership, often-required physical contact, reward structures, and participation at an early age (Alexander, Stafford, & Lewis, 2011; Brackenridge, 2010; Cense & Brackenridge, 2001; Kirby, Greaves, & Hankivsky, 2000). These characteristics suggest that sport is a conducive climate for IV against child athletes. Still, very few people expect sport to be associated with IV. As it is one of the responsibilities of leaders in organized sport to create a safe climate, a better understanding of the nature and frequency of occurrence of IV in youth sport is essential. The current study is the first large-scale quantitative analysis of the prevalence (i.e. the proportion of a population that has a specific characteristic at a given time) of IV among young athletes in the Netherlands and Belgium.

Prevalence Research

There is a paucity of empirical evidence of IV against children in sport. The first quantitative studies in this field focused on unwanted sexual experiences among female athletes of various ages and found the prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse to vary between 2% and 50% (Fasting, Chroni, Hervik, & Knorre, 2011; Kirby et al., 2000; Leahy, Pretty, & Tenenbaum, 2002). Comparison of such studies is difficult because of the different definitions and research approaches they adopted. Nonetheless, recurrent findings are that risks are higher for girls and women than they are for boys and men, and more so for athletes performing at the elite rather than the recreational level (Fasting, Brackenridge, & Sundgot-Borgen, 2003; Leahy et al., 2002).

The focus on sexual violence in sport has recently widened to include other types of IV, with some (mostly qualitative) studies investigating emotional abuse, overtraining, physical punishment, hazing, bullying, and pressurization of young athletes (Baar & Wubbels, 2013; Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Stafford & Fry, 2013; Stirling, Bridges, Cruz, & Mountjoy, 2011; Stirling & Kerr, 2013; Tiessen-Raaphorst & Breedveld, 2007). In the United Kingdom, Alexander and colleagues (2011) recorded prevalence estimates of 75% for emotional harm and 24% for physical harm in athletes under the age of 16. However, the study suffered from a very low response rate (under 1%) and a potential selection bias can therefore not be excluded. A Dutch study on unwanted behavior in sport that gauged verbal, physical, and sexual violence (Tiessen-Raaphorst, Lucassen, van den Dool, & van Kalmthout, 2008) revealed that 1 in 5 respondents aged 12 years or over reported having been a victim (11%) or a witness of unwanted behaviors including verbal (12%) or physical aggression (6%), and sexual harassment (1%). More recent Dutch data (Romijn, van Kalmthout, Breedveld, & Lucassen, 2013) shows that nearly 4 in 10 of those who regularly participate in organized sport experience or witness unwanted behavior. To date, reliable prevalence rates for psychological and physical violence in organized youth sport are not available.

Study Purpose

The main objective of the present article is to assess the prevalence of retrospectively self-reported IV in organized youth sport in Flanders and the Netherlands, while also considering differences by cohort and between men and women.

Secondly, it is the aim to compare prevalence estimates in Flanders and the Netherlands. Shortly after a high profile case of sexual abuse in Dutch sport in 1996, the sport authorities in the Netherlands effected a Prevention of Sexual Harassment in Sport policy, which would later be incorporated into a comprehensive Safer Sports Climate program (Schipper-van Veldhoven, Vertommen, & Vloet, 2014). Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of the federal state of Belgium, on the other hand, only recently took action by implementing a safeguarding policy in sport (Vertommen, Tolleneer, Maebe, & De Martelaer, 2014). Whilst it is not the purpose of this study to evaluate the efficacy of the Dutch prevention system, this difference in the timing of prevention strategies underscores the relevance of a comparison of the Flemish and Dutch situation.

The third objective of this study is to focus on potentially risk-increasing factors such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, and highest performance level. Whilst there is no strong evidence available from studies in sport, the majority of studies in the general population indicate a higher prevalence of IV in minority groups consisting of LGBs, immigrants and people with disabilities (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005; Friedman et al., 2011; Hussey, Chang, & Kotch, 2006; Jones et al., 2012; Putnam, 2003). Sport demands the most of its elite performers. International youth athletes invest an immense amount of time, money, energy in their sport, and have much more to lose. This makes them more vulnerable for exposure to IV in a sports context. Several studies have found elite athletes to be at higher risk of experiencing non-accidental violence in sport (Alexander et al., 2011; Fasting et al., 2003; Leahy et al., 2002).

Methods

Definitions

Violence is a contested term and has numerous definitions. Operationalizations of the concepts violence, maltreatment, and abuse vary worldwide, which complicates the interpretation and comparison of prevalence rates across studies. For our study we adopted the definition of violence as documented in article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989): “[...] all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or

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