

# Sexual Violence in Sports

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## Introduction

Athletes of all ages, genders, and athletic performance levels may experience sexual harassment or sexual abuse in sports.<sup>1</sup>

Interpersonal violence in sports is often committed by someone who has authority and responsibility over other people in a sport.<sup>2</sup> This violence may be sexual, psychological, and physical violence or neglect, and can occur in the form of hazing, bullying, and grooming.

- ‘People with authority and responsibility’ can be a coach, parent, medical personnel, spectators, or other athletes.
- Interpersonal violence in sport can happen during training, competitions, training camps, locker rooms, a coach’s home, and other locations where athletes gather.

## College Sports

College athletes may experience isolation, humiliation, rejection, physical abuse, and sexual abuse while practicing or playing their sport.<sup>3</sup> This is due to power imbalances, winner-take-all rewards, and an organizational tolerance of violence within sports culture.

- A 2021 study surveyed 1,004 student-athletes at 10 NCAA Division 1 institutions across the U.S.<sup>4</sup>
  - **29%** of the student-athletes reported experiencing some form of sexual violence, including unwanted sexual touch, unwanted sexual situations, stalking, attempted sexual assault, or completed sexual assault, while enrolled at their university.
    - Among the student-athletes who experienced sexual violence:
      - **17.5%** experienced a completed sexual assault and formally reported it
      - **14.1%** experienced stalking and formally reported it
      - **13.9%** experienced attempted sexual assault and formally reported it
      - **11.3%** experienced unwanted sexual situations and formally reported it
      - **9.4%** experienced unwanted sexual touch and formally reported it
      - **1/5<sup>th</sup>** reported feeling “very” or “extremely knowledgeable” about where to file a report of sexual violence, while only **10%** reported feeling “very” or “extremely knowledgeable” about what happens after a student reports sexual violence
- In a survey of 1,500 adults in the U.S., more than **1 in 4** current and former college male and female athletes reported experiencing inappropriate sexual contact from a campus authority figure.<sup>5</sup>
  - **28%** of these athletes experienced inappropriate sexual contact, **19%** were sexually harassed, **26%** were threatened into silence, and **42%** were groomed through inappropriate touch or words, all by authority figures.

<sup>1</sup> Solvberg, N., Torstveit, M. K., Rosenvinge, J. H., Pettersen, G., Sundgot-Borgen, J. (2022). “Sexual Harassment and Abuse Among Young Elite Athletes, Recreational Athletes, and Reference Students: A Prospective Study.” *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*. Retrieved March 14, 2025, from <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9584052/>

<sup>2</sup> Parent, S. & Fortier, K. (2018). “Comprehensive Overview of the Problem of Violence Against Athletes in Sport.” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*. Retrieved March 14, 2025, from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0193723518759448>

<sup>3</sup> Roberts, V., Sojo, V., & Grant, F. (2020). “Organisational Factors and Non-Accidental Violence in Sport: A Systematic Review.” *Sport Management Review*. Retrieved April 04, 2025, from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1441352318304455>

<sup>4</sup> Adhia, A., Ellyson, A. M., & Kroshus, E. (2023). “Prevalence and Formal Reporting of Sexual Violence Among Undergraduate Student-Athletes: A Multi-State Study.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. Retrieved April 04, 2025, from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/08862605221081936>

<sup>5</sup> Book, L. (2021). “College Athletes Report High Incidence of Sexual Abuse by Campus Authority Figures, Survey Finds.” Retrieved May 05, 2025, from [https://laurenkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/21-CRU-001-Campus-Sex-Abuse-Report-V2\\_5.pdf](https://laurenkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/21-CRU-001-Campus-Sex-Abuse-Report-V2_5.pdf)

- These athletes reported the following authority figures who committed sexual violence against them:
  - **44%** reported an athletic coach.
  - **39%** reported a professor.
  - **28%** reported an academic advisor.
  - **23%** reported a school administrator.
  - **21%** reported a counselor or therapist.
  - **21%** reported a medical professional.
- **34%** of respondents reported knowing a campus authority figure who used their position of authority to sexually coerce a student.
- **25%** of respondents reported knowing another athlete whose career or grades were threatened if the athlete refused sexual advances.

## Professional Sports

A 2020 survey of nearly 4,000 current and former professional athletes (including Olympians and Paralympians), from over 50 different sports reported:<sup>6</sup>

- **48%** of survey respondents reported being aware of coaches who developed sexual relationships with athletes.
- **9%** of survey respondents reported experiencing inappropriate sexual contact during their involvement with their sport.
- Athletes with a self-reported disability reported having more experiences of inappropriate sexual contact than athletes without a self-reported disability involvement with their sport.
- Black athletes reported having more experiences of inappropriate sexual contact involvement with their sport than those of other races.
- Bisexual athletes reported having more experiences of inappropriate sexual contact involvement with their sport than those of sexual orientations.
- **3.2%** of survey respondents reported experiencing a sexual assault or attempted sexual assault by their coach, trainer, another sport administrator, or athletic peer.
- **More than half** of survey respondents reported having unwanted sexual experiences as an athlete, before the age of 18.
- Athletes who experienced sexual harm also reported experiencing consequences from this violence:
  - **33.9%** of survey respondents who reported experiencing sexual violence also reported their mental health suffering as a result of the violence.
  - **31.4%** also reported their friendships or other important relationships being negatively impacted as a result of the violence.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Center for SafeSport. (2022, January 25). "2020 Athlete Culture & Climate Survey." Retrieved April 30, 2025, from [https://uscenterforsafesport.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CultureClimateSurvey\\_ExecSummary\\_012122\\_final\\_revised\\_v1.2.pdf](https://uscenterforsafesport.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CultureClimateSurvey_ExecSummary_012122_final_revised_v1.2.pdf)