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# SafeSport: Perceptions of harassment and abuse from elite youth athletes at the Winter Youth Olympic Games, Lausanne 2020

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Athlete Involvement:
Athlete representatives and members of the athlete entourage were involved in planning the research priorities through membership on the IOC Working Group on the Prevention of Harassment and Abuse in sport. Athletes were also actively involved in the development of the educational materials utilized at the YOG through pilot testing the tools at youth sport events. We will invite athletes and the entourage to help with dissemination and application of the results.
Scientific contributions of each author:

Margo Mountjoy, MD, PhD: First author, substantial contributions to the conception and design of the review, interpretation of data, manuscript writing, and revising of the manuscript, and final approval of the version to be published.

Tine Vertommen, PhD: Second author, substantial contributions to the conception and design of the review, analysis and interpretation of data, drafting, writing, and revising of the manuscript, and final approval of the version to be published.

Stephane Tercier MD: substantial contributions to the conception and design of the review, drafting, interpretation of the data, revising of the manuscript, and final approval of the version to be published.

Susan Greinig, Kirsty Burrows: substantial contributions to the conception and design of the review, data collection, drafting, interpretation of the data, revising of the manuscript, and final approval of the version to be published.

All authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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Ethics approval:
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No Additional data: No supplementary data.

What are the new findings?

- Almost one third (30%) demonstrated a lack of global awareness of the concept of harassment and abuse and only 10% of all participating athletes were able to correctly link the term “#SafeSport” to sport free from harassment and abuse.

- A third (32%) reported that harassment and abuse ‘likely’ or ‘very likely’ occurs in their sports.

- Twenty-six percent of winter YOG athletes were unaware of where to report allegations of harassment and abuse in their sport organizations.
• Sport competitive gender (registered for male event vs female event) and event type (individual vs team sport) did not influence athlete understanding of the concept of safe sport, the perception of occurrence, or the knowledge of reporting and support mechanisms.

**How might it impact on clinical practice in the near future?**

• In response to the findings in this study, coaches, team physicians and other members of the entourage are urged to take responsibility to act to prevent harassment and abuse in youth sport.

• By the reputation of the profession, team physicians are often seen by athletes to be trusted members of the entourage. As such, team physicians should have the clinical competency to be able to recognize the signs and respond to allegations of harassment and abuse when working with elite youth athletes.

• Organizers of youth sport events should implement safeguarding strategies to prevent and to manage allegations of harassment and abuse at all championships/tournaments.

• The findings of this study demonstrate a need for robust prevalence research to more accurately quantify the occurrence and types of harassment and abuse in elite winter youth sports.

• Educational interventions targeting youth athletes are required to improve athletes’ understanding of harassment and abuse in sport, as well as the available reporting and support mechanisms.
ABSTRACT

Objective: To analyse the winter Youth Olympic Games (YOG) 2020 athletes’ understanding and perceptions of harassment and abuse in sport and their knowledge of reporting mechanisms.

Design: A cohort study

Setting: The winter YOG2020 in Lausanne Switzerland

Participants: Accredited athletes at the YOG2020

Intervention: An athlete safeguarding educational program was delivered at the YOG2020. Participating athletes were encouraged to answer a survey embedded in the safeguarding educational materials during the YOG.

Main Outcome Measures: Perception of occurrence of harassment and abuse as well as knowledge of the term “Safe Sport” and reporting mechanisms.

Results: The survey response rate of athletes attending the Safe Sport Booth was 69%. When asked to define Safe Sport, 10% of athletes at the YOG2020 correctly identified a sport environment free from harassment and abuse; 20% identified fair play/anti-doping, and 19% safety. When presented with the definition of harassment and abuse, 30.4% expressed surprise, in contrast to 46% in the summer YOG2018. A third (32%) reported that harassment and abuse was either ‘likely’ or ‘very likely’ present in their sport, which was similar to the YOG2018 (34%). The group of athletes not knowing where to go to report harassment and abuse was greater than in the YOG2018 (26% vs 11%). There were no differences in responses between competitive gender (boys’ vs girls’ events), or type of sport (team vs individual).

Conclusions: Outcomes of this study, such as the development of youth-friendly terminology, and emphasizing mechanisms for reporting of harassment and abuse, should inform the development of safeguarding educational materials for youth athletes.
#SafeSport: “A practice that protects my health, my mentality and my dignity. Sport should remain a pleasure” Anonymous YOG2020 athlete

The Youth Olympic Games (YOG) are an elite multi-disciplinary sporting event for athletes aged 15-18 years from around the world, based on the Olympic Games sports program. The underlying premise of the YOG is to “educate, engage, and influence young athletes and other young participants, inspiring them to play an active role in their communities.”⁵ The YOG is structured to deliver a ‘Compete, Learn and Share’ framework around 3 themes: i) athlete performance, ii) protect the clean athletes, and iii) athlete beyond sport.⁵

The first winter YOG was hosted in Innsbruck 2012, and the most recent (3rd) edition was held in January 2020 in Lausanne, Switzerland with 1784 athletes from 79 countries. Eighty-one medals were won in 8 sports and 16 disciplines held in 8 competition venues.² New sports included ski mountaineering, 3x3 ice hockey, and new events for women in doubles Luge and Nordic Combined.³ Another novel innovation was the “two wave” participation system, designed to increase the total number of participating athletes by decreasing their duration of stay in the Youth Olympic Village with athletes arriving and leaving Switzerland to align with competitions scheduled in either week 1 or week 2.

Behind the action on the various winter fields of play, the YOG2020 athletes were encouraged to participate in interactive educational activities located in the Athlete365 Awareness Zone located at Youth Olympic Villages in both St. Moritz and Lausanne. These educational programs were based on 5 key themes: Olympism, Skills development, Well-being and healthy lifestyle, Social responsibility, and Expression through digital media,⁴ reflecting the IOC’s priorities for athlete support, including post-sport career planning, health for performance, social media safety, anti-doping, athlete mental health, and safeguarding.⁵

‘Safe Sport’ is defined as “…an athletic environment that is respectful, equitable and free from all forms of non-accidental violence to athletes”.⁶ In an effort to prevent harassment
and abuse in sport, the IOC has embedded safe sport principles in a number of underpinning IOC statues, as outlined in Table 1.

The safeguarding initiative at the YOG2020 was the #SafeSport Program, developed by the IOC Medical & Scientific Department in collaboration with the IOC Olympic Games and Sports Departments. It was previously implemented at the summer YOG2018 held in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Details of the components (see Table 2) and an analysis of this program have been previously published. This study was the first to evaluate a large cohort of elite youth athletes’ i) understanding of harassment and abuse in sport, ii) perception of occurrence of harassment and abuse in their sport, and iii) knowledge of where to report allegations. Results from this study demonstrated that athletes had difficulty defining the term ‘Safe Sport’, and 46% expressed surprised upon learning the definition of harassment and abuse in sport. Almost half (48%) stated that harassment and abuse did not, or not likely occur in their sport, while 34% reported ‘likely’, or ‘very likely’, and 19% were ‘unsure’. When asked if they knew where to go to seek help, 37% were unaware. While this study outlines the summer elite youth athletes’ understanding and experience with harassment and abuse there is a gap in the scientific literature with respect to a similar evaluation of winter sport elite youth athletes. Thus, the objective of this paper is to analyse the winter YOG2020 athletes’ understanding and perceptions of harassment and abuse in sport, as well as their knowledge of reporting mechanisms.

**METHODS**

**Subjects**
All athletes registered for the YOG 2020 were eligible to participate in the #SafeSport program. As per the eligibility rules, athletes were to be born between 1 January 2002 and 31 December 2005 and were successful in meeting the criteria outlined in the YOG qualification pathways outlined by their respective International Federation and National Olympic Committee. In total, there were 1,784 accredited athletes from 79 countries, with gender parity.

Logistics and materials

The #SafeSport Booth was located in both Youth Olympic Villages in St Moritz and Lausanne. In Lausanne, the Booth was situated in the Awareness Zone. The Booth was staffed by the IOC Safeguarding Officers (SG+KB) and three trained volunteers. The educational tools are summarized in Table 2. Aspects of program were piloted at the International Canoe Federation Freestyle World Championships held in Barcelona 2019.

Embedded in the tablets in the Safe Sport Booth was a survey for participants to complete before and after engaging in the educational materials. It was developed by the IOC Safeguarding Officers (SG+KB) in collaboration with two scientific experts (TV + MM), and was available in seven languages (English, Russian, German, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish and French) thus allowing athletes to respond to the questions in their language of choice. The questions mirrored the survey utilized in the YOG 2018 to facilitate comparison of results. Prior to implementation, the survey was piloted with a focus group of youth athletes to refine the questions. We ensured face validity by reviewing the survey with both survivors and experts in the field but did not evaluate the survey for reliability or construct/ content validity. Our findings also demonstrated criterion validity. The survey can be found in Supplemental Data File (on-line).

*****Insert Table 2 here*****

*****Insert Figure 1 here*****
Procedures

The study period was from the 8th to the 22nd of January 2020 coinciding with the opening and closing of the Youth Olympic Villages. All athlete-visitors in the #SafeSport Booth were encouraged to participate in the on-line survey.

Statistical procedure and ethics

Frequency and cross tables are used to present the data. Chi Square tests were used to compare athlete groups based on the continent, gender, team sport vs individual sport and YOG edition. The significance level was set at 5%. Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS software version 25. To investigate athletes’ interpretations of the term ‘safe sport’, thematic analysis was applied. Coding was performed by two independent researchers (TV + MM), with excellent interrater reliability (Kappa = .82). Ethical approval was sought from the Hamilton integrated Research Ethics Board of McMaster University (Canada), but was not deemed necessary given the embedded levels of strict confidentiality.

RESULTS

Response rate

Of the total number of athlete participants at the YOG (N=1,784), 569 (32%) visited the Safe Sport Booth. Of these 569 visiting athletes, 392 completed the on-line survey (response rate of 69%).

Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

The majority of participating athletes came from Europe (68%) and Asia (20%). Athletes from North America (7%), South America (3%) and Oceania (2%) made up only a small percentage of the total; no responses were collected from African athletes, as there were only 2 African athletes registered at the YOG. These numbers are consistent with the continental representation
of the athletes at the YOG (Europe 72%; Pan Am 13%, Asia 14% and Oceania 1%). Forty percent participated in a female competition, 38% in a male event, and 17% in a mixed event. About half completed the survey in English (50%) and a fifth in Russian (22%). German was the third chosen language (13%), followed by Chinese (6%), Japanese (5%), Spanish (3%) and French (2%). Table 3 identifies the breakdown of responding athletes by sport discipline and the respective response rates.

*****Insert Table 3 here*****

**Athletes understanding of the term ‘safe sport’**

#SafeSport is: “…when he is treated with respect and is also viewed as a human being and not just as a means of winning gold medals. His safety should also be looked after, both psychologically and physically.” Anonymous YOG 2020 Athlete

The athletes were asked to describe their understanding of the term ‘Safe Sport’. Two researchers (TV + MM) thematically coded the data into one or more themes (with a maximum of 3 per response). A total of 248 valid responses and 44 invalid or empty responses were gathered, with an average of 1.5 themes per response. Most responses related to fair play (including sport free from doping) (N=235; 20%) and safety (N=222; 19%). About 10% referred to sport free from harassment and abuse. From the responses that could not be categorized in a pre-existing code (from the 2018 study), 14 were directed to a new theme of ‘not using any kind of force’. The other 24 uncategorized responses related to different themes such as not sharing private and sensitive information on social media, knowing when and where to report in case of an incident, taking responsibility, doing sport with genuine people, and safe sport integrity.

*****Insert Table 4 here*****

**Athletes understanding of what constitutes harassment and abuse in sport**
The athletes were also asked whether the listed behaviours constituted harassment or abuse. All athletes correctly identified bullying and the majority correctly identified sexual harassment and abuse, forced use of doping or supplements, physical abuse, and cyber bullying. Less often identified were neglect, training when injured, sick or exhausted, training in unsafe environments and inappropriate training (see Table 5).

When the athletes were prompted that all listed behaviours are forms of harassment and abuse, 30% (N=119) indicated surprise at this fact. No differences were found when comparing male, female and mixed disciplines, or type of sport (team vs individual). In athletes representing Asian and Oceania countries, more surprise was found (43%), compared to athletes from Europe (29%) and the Americas (15%).
Athletes’ perception of the occurrence of harassment and abuse in their sport

More than a third of the athletes (39%) reported that harassment and abuse was ‘not’ or ‘not likely’ happening in their sport, while almost 32% stated that harassment and abuse ‘likely’ or ‘very likely’ occurs in their sport (Table 5). No differences were found between boys and girls. Athletes from North and South America expressed a higher likelihood of harassment and abuse taking place in their sport, with 51% of them saying this (very) likely happens in their sport, in comparison with Asia and Oceania (38%) and Europe (26%).

When asked whether the athlete knew where to go when feeling uncomfortable or if they had witnessed something that made him/her concerned for someone else’s welfare, almost 70% reported knowing where to seek help, 7% were unaware of what to do, 19% responded ‘maybe’ and almost 4% of athletes indicated that they would not feel comfortable to speak about it. No differences were found between boys and girls. Athletes coming from North and South America were most sure where to go to report harassment and abuse (88%), compared to European (69%) athletes and those from Asia and Oceania (64%).

DISCUSSION

Striving for a safe sport environment should be the objective of everyone in sport.6 According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, youth athletes have the ‘right to participate fully in play and recreation activities’, 21 in a safe, welcoming and respectful environment.22 Youth-oriented safeguarding interventions, such as the IOC #SafeSport educational program, is one strategy to realize this goal.

Youth sport practices often necessitate the relocation of minors to remote locations removing them from the supervision and support of family during a sensitive stage of development when there is a great need for protection.22 Despite the many positive physical
and psychological benefits from sport participation, prevalence studies indicate that youth athletes are subject to harassment and abuse from coaches, peer athletes and members of the entourage. In a comparative study with a German and a Belgian-Dutch sample of elite athletes, Ohlert and colleagues (2020) found that all types of interpersonal violence are prevalent in elite sport. Psychological violence was reported by 72% of athletes, physical violence by 25% of athletes and sexual violence by 31% of athletes. Furthermore, a high overlap of experiences of the different types of violence was found. A study by Kirby and Greaves (1997) revealed that 1.9% of elite Canadian athletes were sexually abused in sport before the age of 16 years. An Australian study of youth athletes found that 9.7% of athletes experienced sexual abuse prior to the age of 18. Given the context of the elite youth sport environment, the underpinning prevalence data, and the findings of this study, there is a need to ensure a safe sport environment for youth athletes.

This study is the first to look at the understanding, knowledge, and perceptions of occurrence of harassment and abuse in a large cohort of elite youth athletes from a variety of Olympic winter sports from 79 countries. This is the second time the questionnaire has been implemented with similar findings, attesting to the universality and comprehension of the survey.

**Athlete understanding of safe sport**

Like the YOG2018 cohort, the winter YOG athletes had difficulty interpreting the term ‘Safe Sport’. Both groups reported similar interpretations in the same proportion, many relating to injury prevention, anti-doping, and fair play highlighting the lack of understanding for the term ‘Safe Sport’. This underscores the importance of involving youth athletes in the concept development and design phases to ensure that the terminology utilized resonates with the target audience. The concept of stakeholder engagement in knowledge translation initiatives is
defined in Knowledge Transfer Frameworks\textsuperscript{26} and is recommended specifically in adolescent interventions by the World Health Organization.\textsuperscript{27}

Despite the lack of understanding of the term ‘Safe Sport’, the athletes do appear to understand the concept as evidence by their recognition of the behaviours of harassment and abuse (see Table 5). When asked if they were surprised upon learning the definition of what constitutes harassment and abuse in sport, the YOG2020 athletes showed less surprise than the YOG2018 cohort (30\% in 2020 vs 46\% in 2018)\textsuperscript{18}, demonstrating an increase in awareness. While the reasons for this finding are not determined in this study, we speculate it could be due to greater awareness through social media exposure to harassment and abuse in sport with the public disclosures of sexual abuse of prominent athletes such as the elite Korean speed-skater Shim Suk-hee\textsuperscript{28} and Simone Biles, Olympic gold medallist and survivor of sexual assault by the former USA Gymnastics doctor, Larry Nassar.\textsuperscript{29} In addition, there has been an increase in public exposure of harassment and abuse outside of sport with the #MeToo movement since the 2018 YOG.\textsuperscript{30} Another hypothesis is that there are geographical differences in composition between the two groups which may reflect different cultural exposures to harassment and abuse.

\textit{Perceived occurrence of harassment and abuse in elite winter youth sport}

In this study, we found that the athletes reporting ‘no’ to the question if they believe that harassment and abuse occurs in their sport, was significantly smaller in the YOG2020 sample compared to the YOG2018 (18 vs 30\%)\textsuperscript{18}. While the design of this study is not a prevalence study due to the privacy constraints related to data collection at the YOG, it is discouraging to see this trend. The reasons for this finding could be due to a difference in sport culture between the summer and winter programs, or a difference in the geographical representation between the 2018 and 2020 athlete participants.

When comparing the two groups of athletes from the 2018 and 2020 YOG who reported that harassment and abuse ‘likely’ or ‘very likely’ occurs in their sport, there is little difference
between the summer (33.5%)\textsuperscript{18} and the winter cohort (31.6%). This finding, while not prevalence data, is also concerning, demonstrating an urgent need for more robust prevalence research of elite international youth sport to quantify the amount, types and associated factors of harassment and abuse in this cohort.

\textit{Athlete awareness of reporting and support mechanisms}

Despite being more aware of the concept of harassment and abuse, the winter athletes in this study were less familiar with where to file a complaint than their summer cohort (26% in 2020 vs 12% in 2018)\textsuperscript{18}. The reason for this discrepancy is unknown and is also concerning. Equipping an athlete with awareness and knowledge, but without a strategy to obtain support or means of reporting outside of the YOG can increase the impact of the original trauma. This scenario creates a perception for the athlete that the behaviours are socially acceptable, and that people in a position of power lack accountability to protect the athletes. This passive attitude, or denial of the entourage to act compounds the psychological trauma and can further silence athletes from reporting.\textsuperscript{31,32}

\textit{Limitations of this study}

As with all surveys, there is the potential for a voluntary response bias. Another potential bias is the under-coverage bias. The low response rate in the YOG2020 cohort (22% ) may be attributed to the new ‘two wave participation’ model, resulting in less free time to participate in the educational programs. Also, sport disciplines with the lowest response rates (ski mountaineering, alpine ski, biathlon, ice hockey), had longer travel times between the Athlete Village and their competition venues limiting their freedom to participate in the educational activities. In addition, the Safe Sport Booth in Lausanne was located in an area of low athlete flow and visibility.
Another limitation is that the methodology is not a prevalence questionnaire, predicated by the privacy limitations of the IOC. In addition, there was limited involvement of adolescent athletes in the development of the Safe Sport tools, which may have impacted athlete resonance, compounded by the fact that the questionnaire was available only in seven languages, thus presenting a language barrier for some athletes. A final limitation of this study is that systematic evaluation is required to determine the efficacy and impact of the IOC #SafeSport educational program to refine and improve outcomes.\textsuperscript{33,34}

**CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of this study underscore the need to improve the understanding of the term ‘Safe Sport’, and to equip youth athletes with knowledge of reporting and support mechanisms. Most importantly, there is a need to address the occurrence of harassment and abuse in all winter youth sports. Indeed, until we reach a point where harassment and abuse in youth sport is eliminated, we cannot be complacent. Outcomes of this study, such as the development of youth-friendly terminology, and emphasizing mechanisms for reporting of harassment and abuse, should inform the development of safeguarding educational materials for implementation at international youth athlete events as well as at the national educational programming. The study outcomes should also serve as a stimulus to encourage sport medicine physicians, who are trusted members of the entourage, to acquire the clinical competency to detect and manage allegations of abuse in sport and for researchers to perform prevalence studies in elite youth athletes. We also recommend that the program be adapted and implemented at the Olympic Games. These initiatives would help to realize the objective outlined in the IOC Consensus Statement on Training the Elite Child Athlete, that “\textit{the entire sports process for the elite child athlete be pleasurable and fulfilling}”.\textsuperscript{35}

“For me safe sport means being able to feel comfortable with my team without feeling discriminated against or abused….to be able to talk freely and feel safe and happy with what i
do…. Safe sport is integral to ensuring a sport is able to be enjoyed by all athletes and their supporters.” Anonymous YOG 2020 Athletes
REFERENCES


**FIGURE LEGEND**

**Figure 1.** Athlete incentive initiative: a photo frame opportunity for athletes to personally pledge support for Safe Sport with the captioning: “Respect for Everyone” in 8 languages. The backdrop for the photo is a large colouring wall depicting the words “Safe Sport” and customisable winter sports silhouettes, which athletes could interact with, providing time for reflection on the educational materials.