

# Learning Network Resource Spotlight

## Maltreatment in Sport: Current Knowledge and Future Directions

Gretchen Kerr and Erin Willson

Thurs, Sept 29 from 1:00 to 2:30 pm ET



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## Resource Spotlight Guidelines

- All participants automatically have their mics and cameras off.
- Live captioning is available.
- If you have questions for presenters, please type them into the Q&A box.
- There will be an evaluation form link that automatically opens in your browser after the Spotlight has ended. A Certificate of Participation will be generated once you complete this evaluation.
- The Spotlight is being recorded. The recording and any materials (e.g. slides) will be posted on the Learning Network website and emailed to you after the event.
- For those wishing for support, a list of supports and services will be posted in the chat box.

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# Gender-Based Violence in Sport

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## Learning Objectives

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### Setting the Stage

Why gender-based violence in sport is relevant?

2

### Prevalence of GBV in sport

Types, frequency, effects on the athletes

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### Implications & Take-Aways

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## Benefits of Positive, Healthy, Safe Sport

- Increased physical and psychological health
- Increased enjoyment of sport experiences
- Sustained participation in sport including post-retirement (e.g., continue as coach, judge, volunteer, etc.)
- Better performance
- Experience of healthy relationships
- Learning of important life skills



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For most athletes and sport participants, sport provides numerous, positive benefits

**... and yet ...**

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Kyle Beach claims he was sexually assaulted and the NHL covered it up

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**No sport type or sport level is immune.**

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### **Uniqueness of Sport**

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- Performance Outcome Focus
- Power Structures
- Coach-Athlete Relationship
  - Extensive time together
    - Often in isolation
    - Traveling & Training
- Socialization of Parents
- Autonomy and Self-Regulation

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## Erin's Story





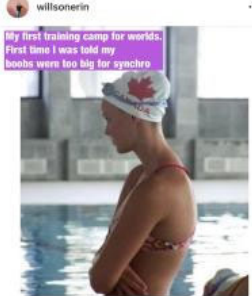

**CBC**

**Former artistic swimming athletes seek damages for alleged abuse by national team coaches**

Erin Willson said she was targeted and harassed about her weight by her coach while training with the national team. Several women stated that...

Mar 9, 2021







**The Globe and Mail**

**The suspect science used to push aspiring Olympians to ...**

Former Olympic synchronized swimmer Erin Willson and several teammates suffered dangerous eating disorders during their time on the national...

Dec 28, 2021



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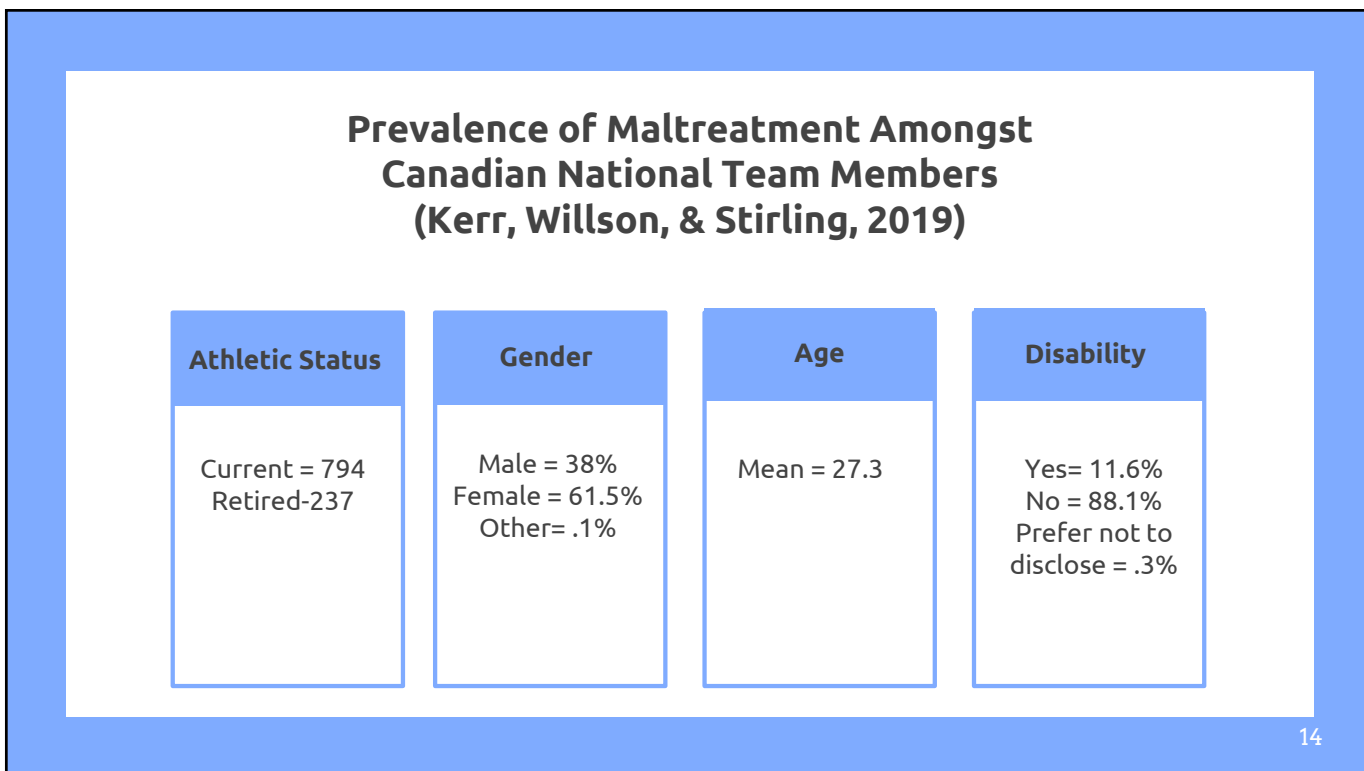
## Life as a Competitive Athlete

- The biggest part of my life growing up
  - Trained 5-6 hours a day in high-school
  - Friends
  - Coach was a second mom
- Wasn't just an activity, it was who I was
  - "Erin the swimmer"
- Big goals
  - I always wanted to go to the Olympics

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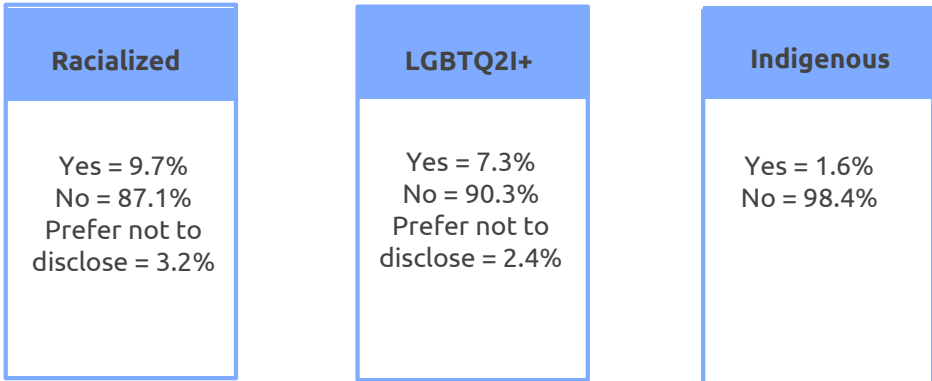
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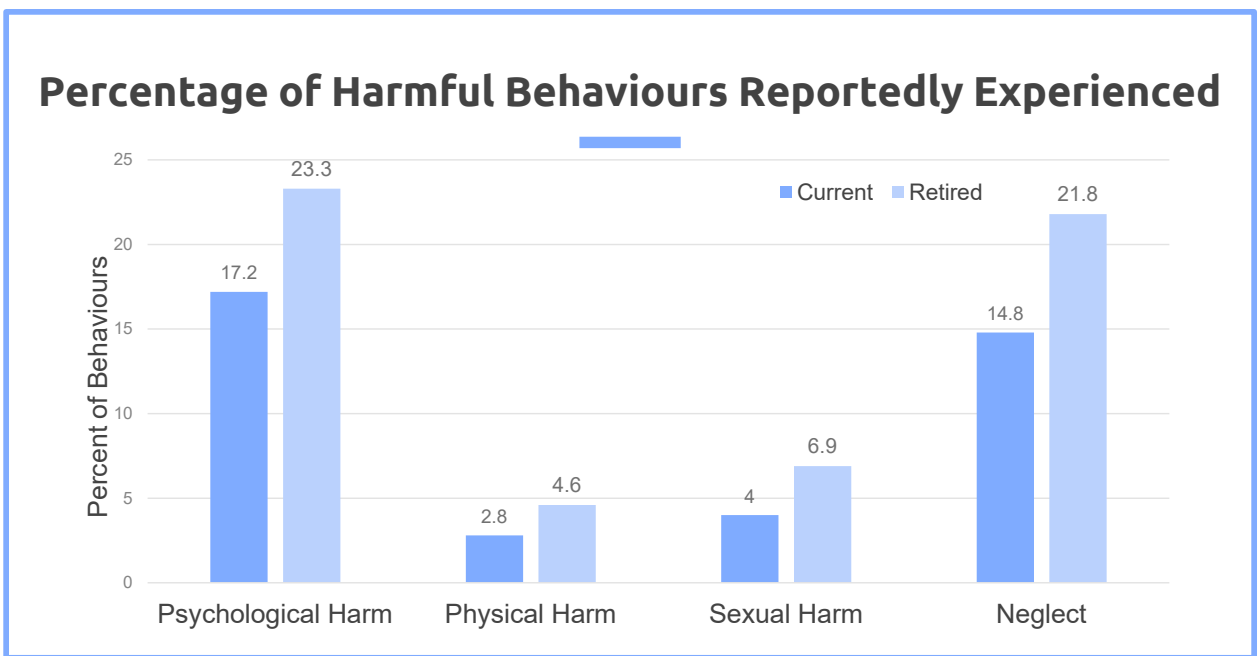
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### Study Overview

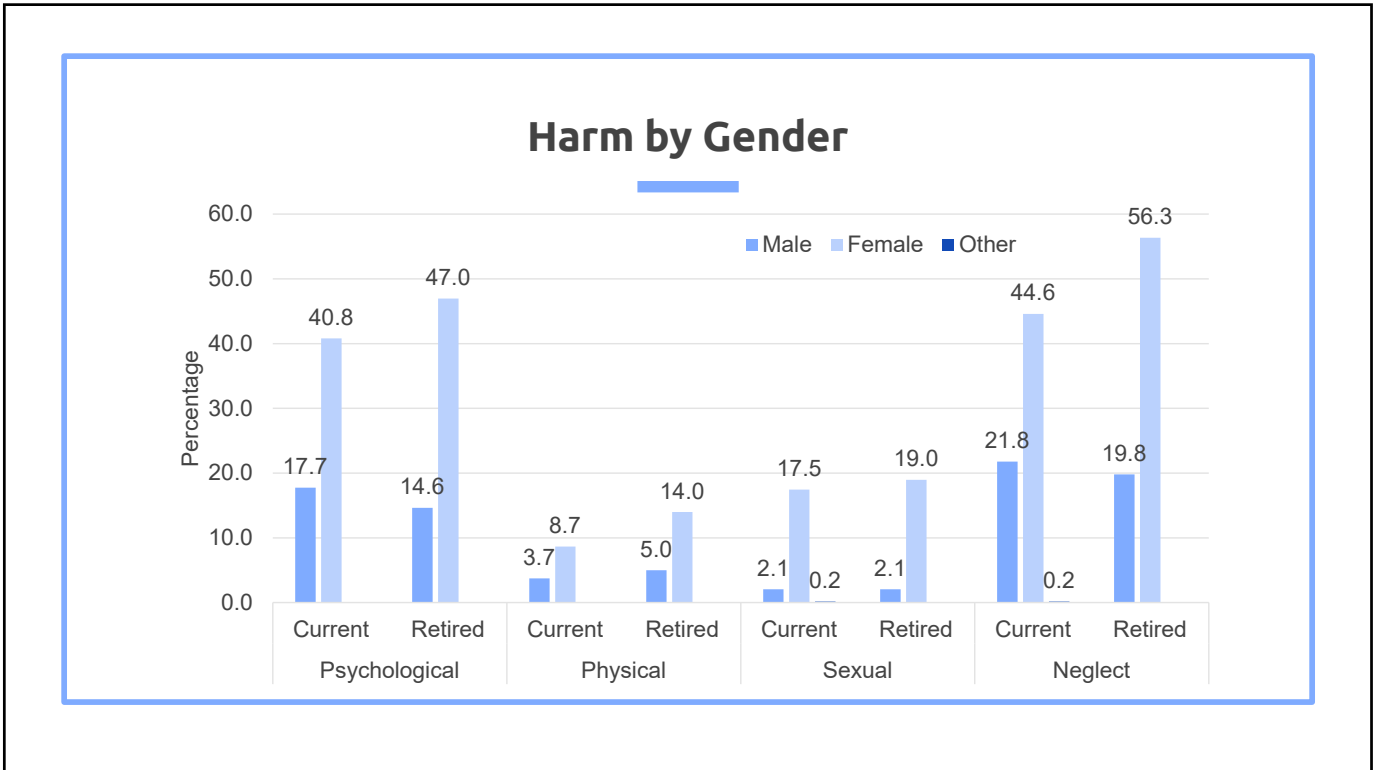


\*Lack of diversity is a finding in and of itself

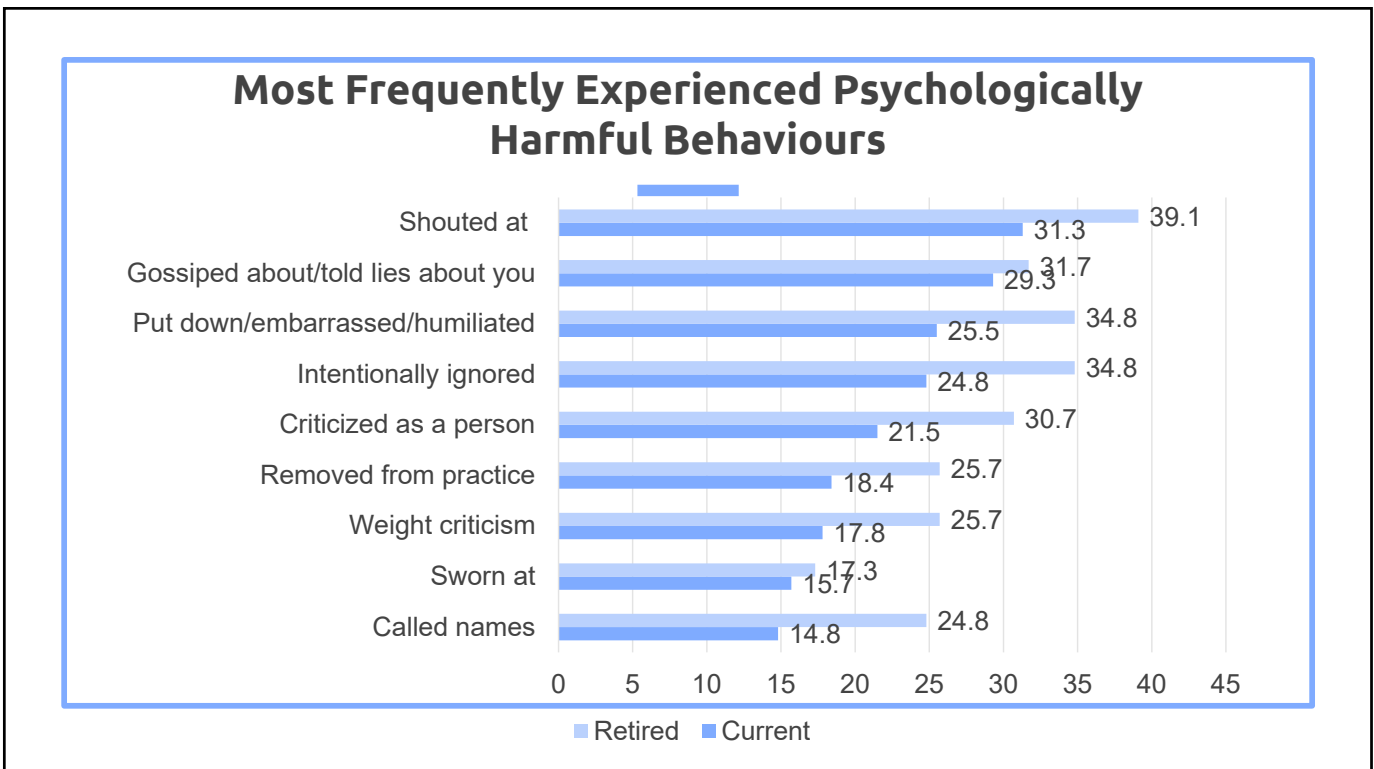
### Percentage of Harmful Behaviours Reportedly Experienced



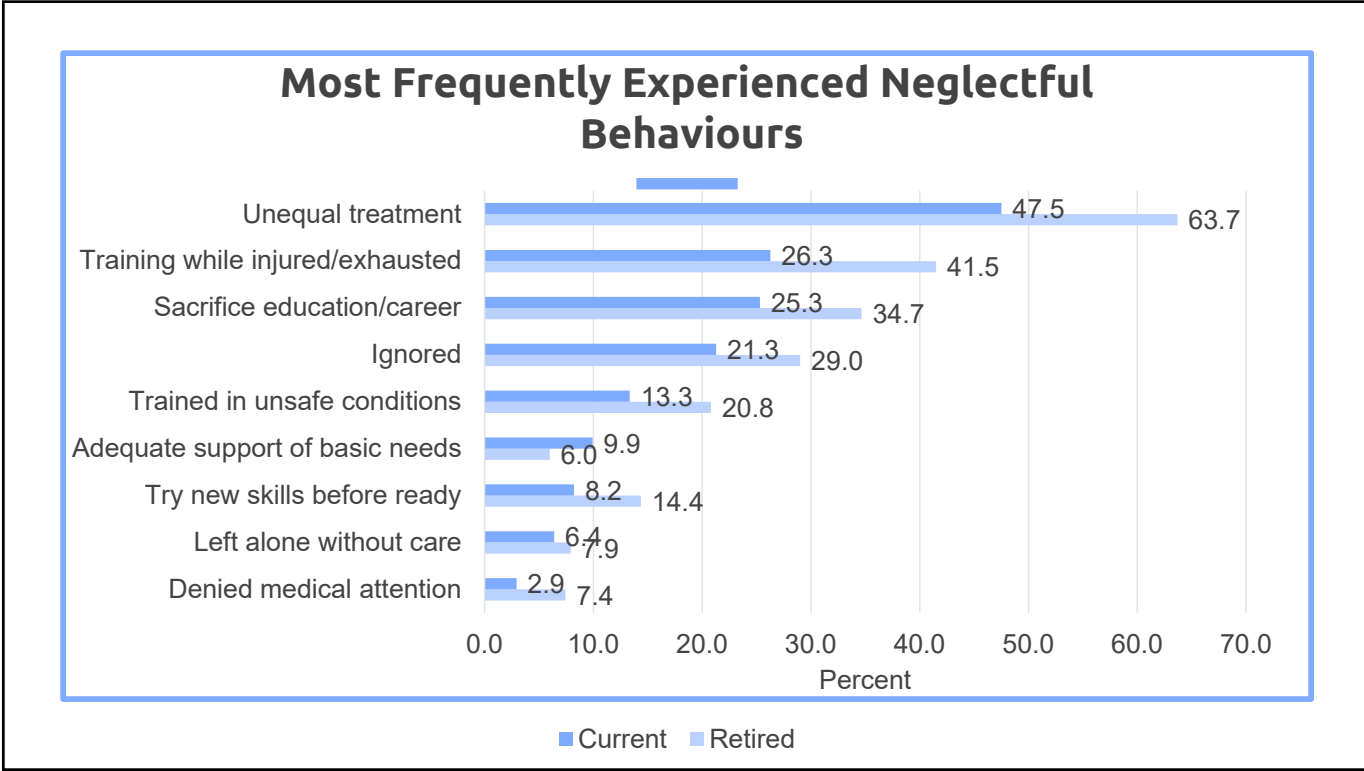




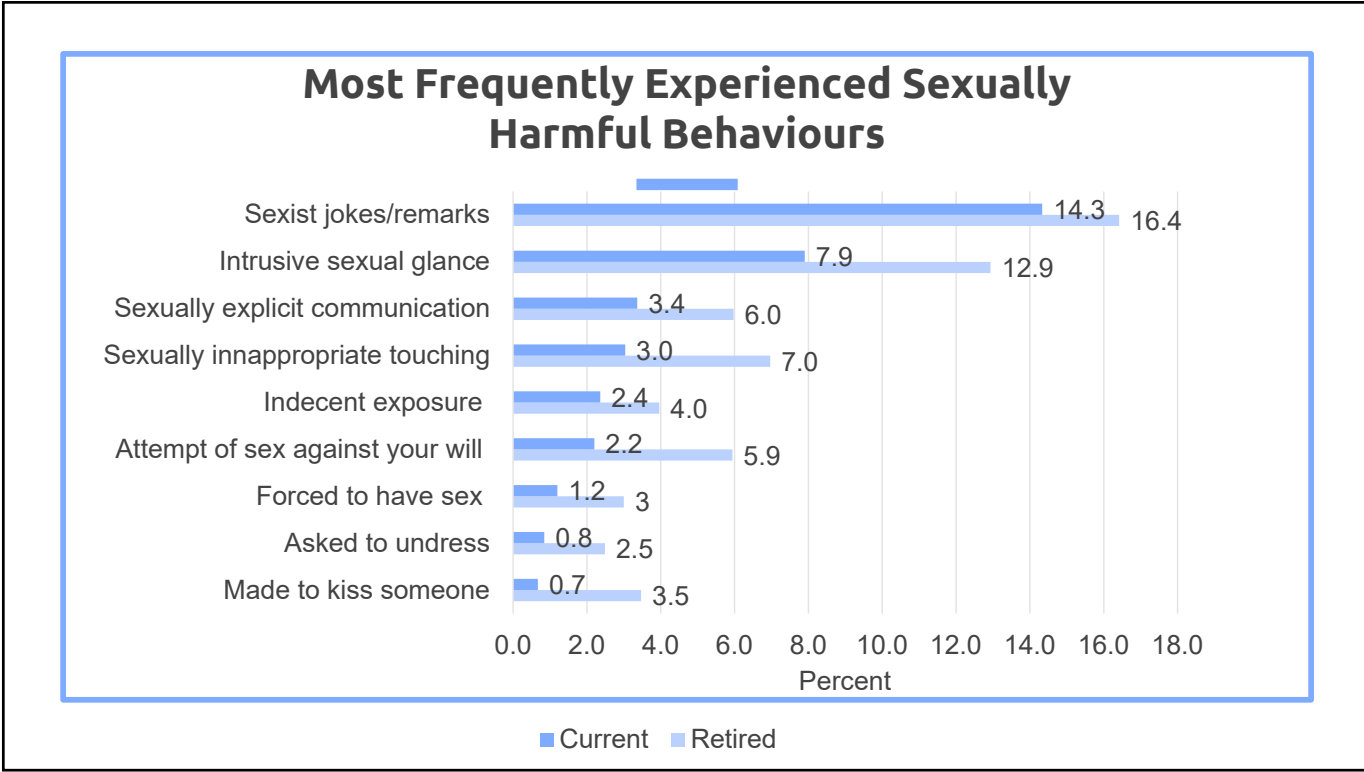
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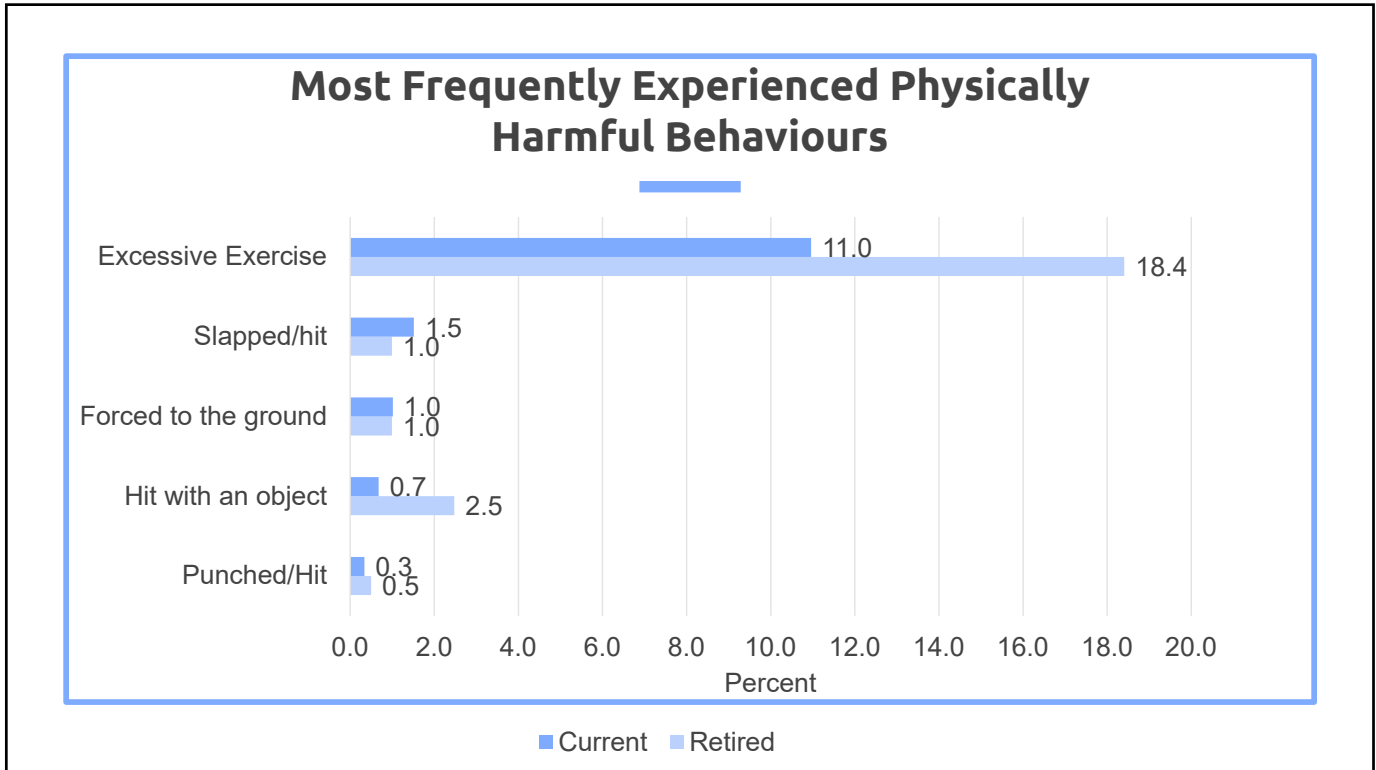
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### Influences of Intersectional Identities

- Racialized athletes reported significantly more experiences of physical harm
- LGBTQ2I+ athletes reported significantly more experiences of sexual harm
- No significant differences between para- and able-bodied athletes
- Too few Indigenous athletes to conduct analysis

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## Highlighting Emotional Abuse

"We would be called 'useless' and a 'waste of time' regularly" and 'fucking stupid' all the time. No one on the team escaped it."

"If coach wasn't happy with our practice she would just sit on the bench with an angry look on her face and she wouldn't talk to us. No feedback, no direction."

"we were in a training camp and my coach told me wasn't worth fighting for, and wasn't worth working on when I had a shoulder injury, and she just gave up on me basically"

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## Normalization & Complicity

"The high performance director thinks that the tougher the coach is the better we will become, so horrible conditions and abuse were not just tolerated but in fact, glorified."

"There is still a culture of excusing inappropriate coach behaviour by labelling them as 'passionate.' Former athletes go on to marry their coaches, with whom they had experienced imbalanced power and underaged sexual relationships. Abusive foreign coaches are excused of their behaviour toward children because they 'produce'. Clubs turn a blind eye/excuse bullying of young LGBT athletes by their peers as 'kids being kids.' Parents are brainwashed into thinking that only the toughest coaches will turn their children into champions, and support them blindly."

Willson, Kerr, Battaglia, Stirling, 2022

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## What does body shaming look like in sport?

### Constant monitoring

- Weigh ins (especially in public), being watched, requiring specific weights

I felt like everyone was looking at your weight no matter which weight you were. So, I thought that was really hard, just mentally.

### Negative comments

[my coach implemented weight management] by putting people on the spot and literally pointing out what they were doing wrong. When it has to do with weight, to me, that's just not something you do. So that was a big one for me... she would just call it out in a way that would make you seem like you were stupid and like question why you were on the team really.

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## What does body shaming look like in sport?

### Food & water restriction

we literally had nothing to eat and every time we took a second bite, or a second helping, even like with vegetables, I felt like I was looked at, and I wasn't eating a lot because of the coach

### Witnessing the criticism of teammates' bodies

it wasn't necessarily the comments directed at me personally, but it was to other people. And that would impact me because if you look at someone on your team who's very slim and slender and they are being told they are overweight, obviously then you look at yourself and go 'okay, well clearly I'm not doing very well'.

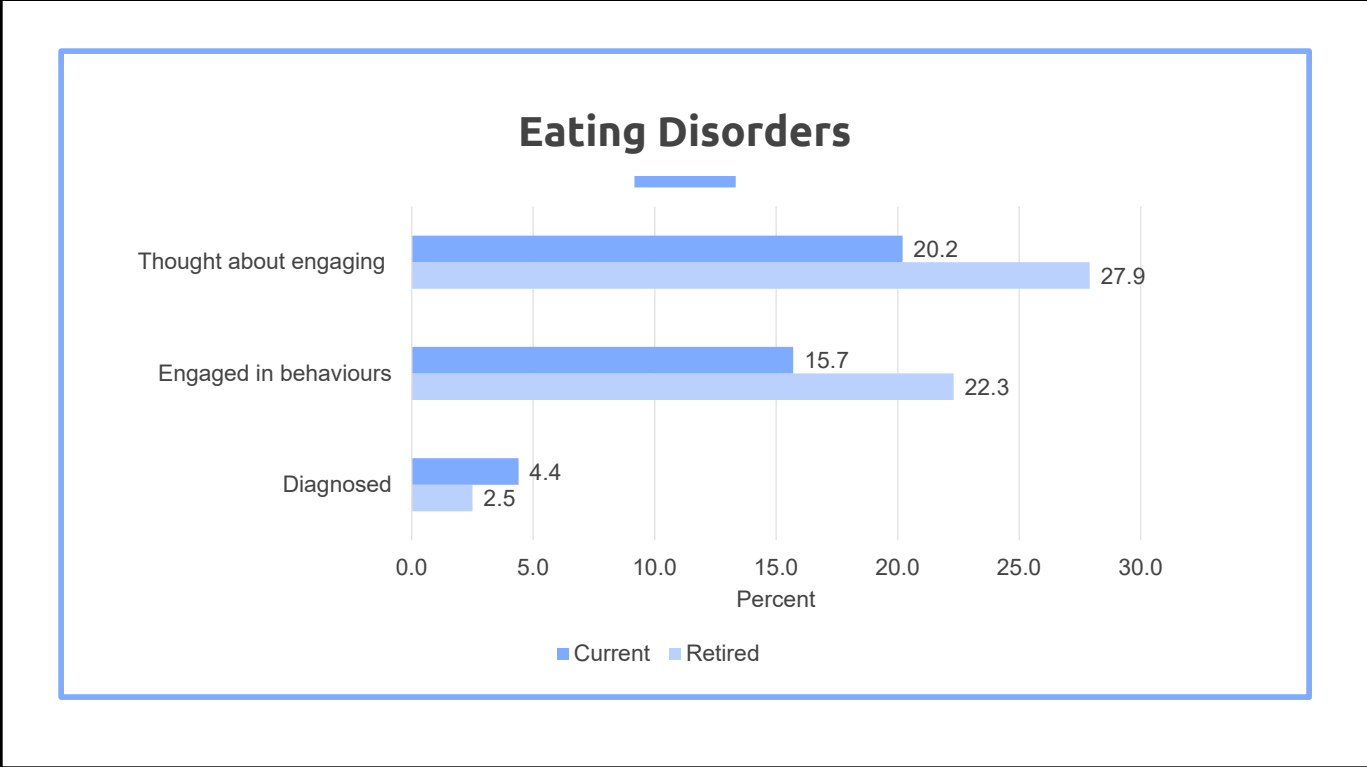
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it didn't matter if you were flexible or if you worked hard in your workout, or if you swam fast, if you weren't the weight you were supposed to be, all of that didn't matter. You were screwed because you weren't doing it on the scale.

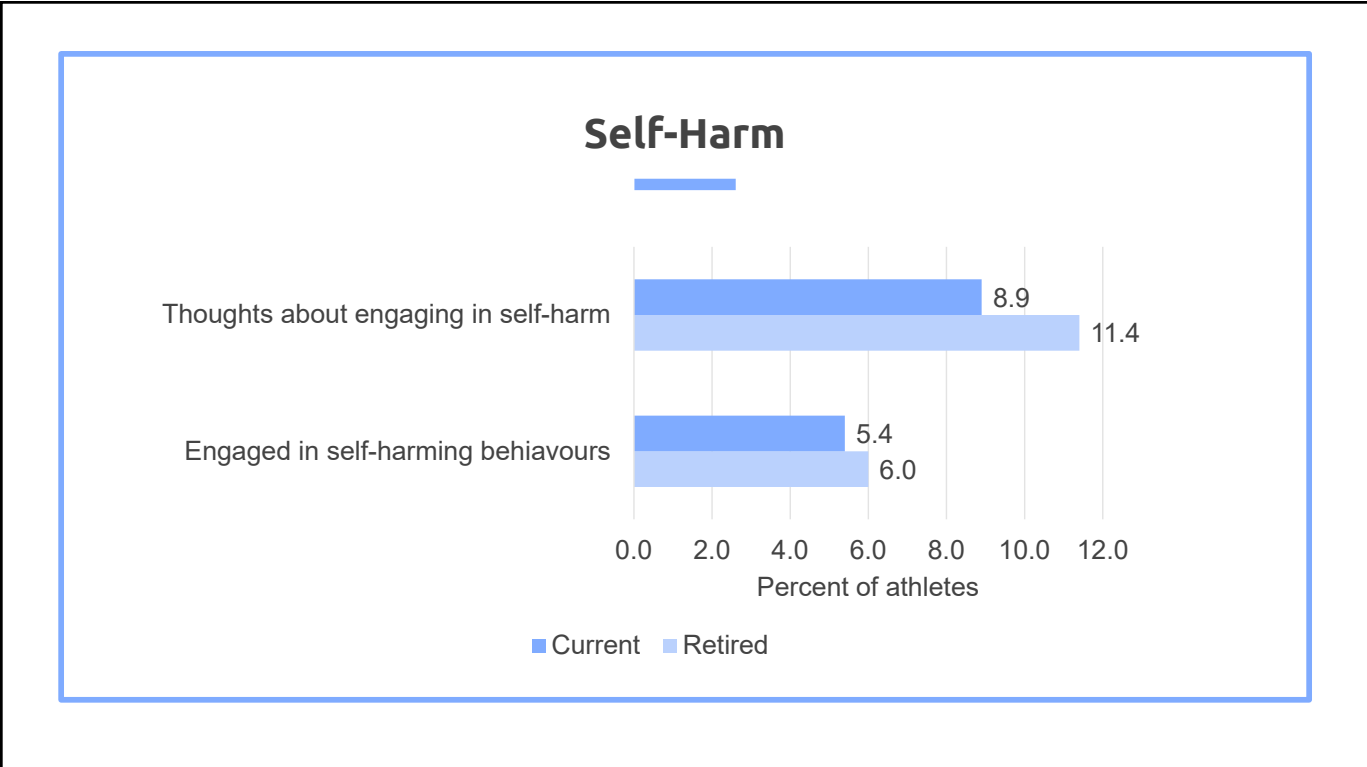
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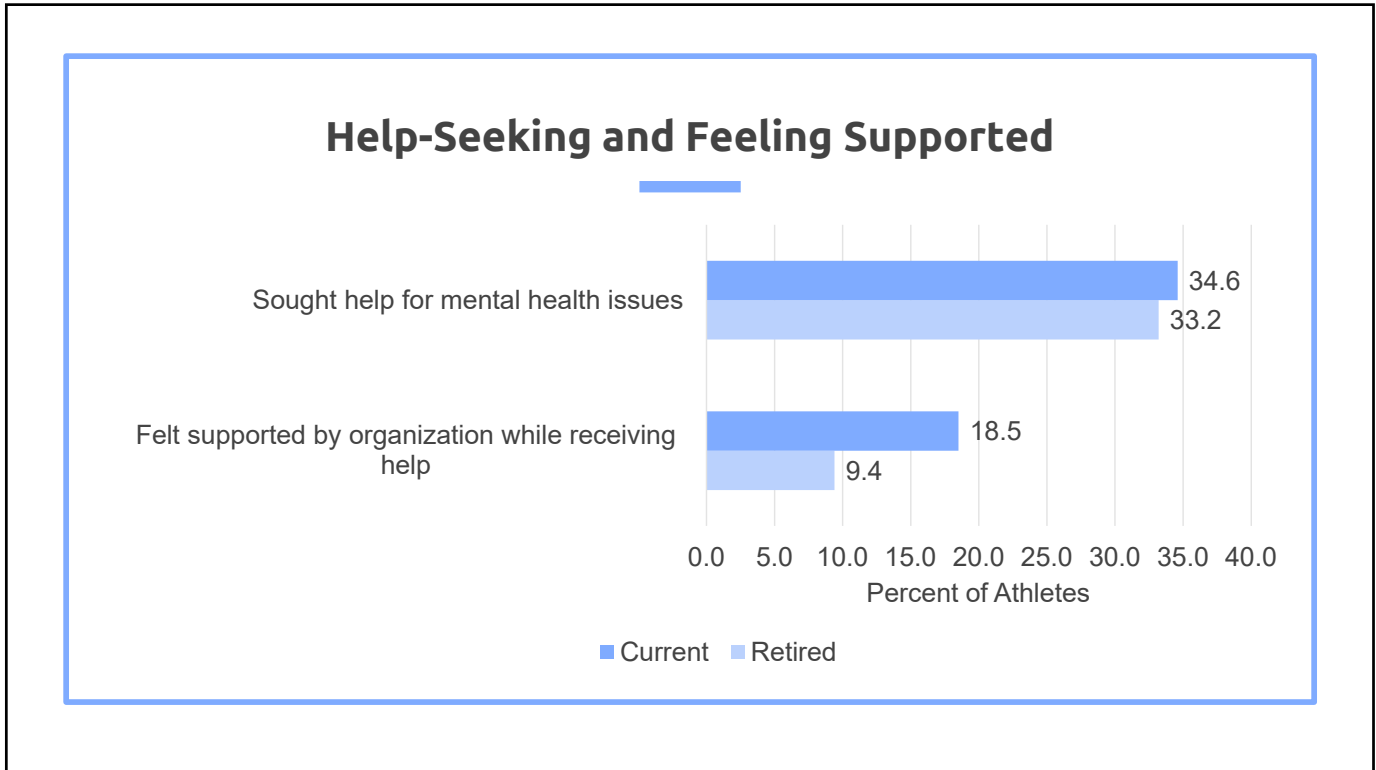
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- ### Outcomes of Emotional Abuse
- Depression
  - Anxiety
  - Eating Disorders
  - Leaving Sport
  - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
  - Negative memories from sport
  - Lack of pride

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## Effects of Emotional Abuse in Sport

"I had knots in my stomach every morning because I didn't know what kind of mood [my coach] would be in, what she would say to me or to my teammates."

"I was constantly in fear, in fear that I was not good enough, fear that I was, you know, not pretty enough or not thin enough, or that I would be kicked off the team for one reason or another."

"I remember coming home at night and crying myself to sleep every day because I knew I had to do it all over again the next day."

"And that's about the time that I had really really hard ideas, like if I took my own life right now, like who would notice, you know. So that's the point, it had gotten really bad."

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## Leaving Sport

"I was just a shell of who I was"

"Even to talk about the eating stuff, it definitely affected me after I retired. For like the whole year after, I was still weighing myself every other day, so crazy"

"I just felt relieved because I didn't have to deal with all the negative comments and all that I got from my coaches"

"Once I was no longer in the sport, I didn't want to talk about it, I didn't want to think about it, I wanted to escape. I didn't even want to acknowledge my existence in the sport for a long time, for a couple years."

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### 5-10 Years Later

"I've made my peace with it . . . but it took time, you know? It takes time to work on yourself and after all of these years of distress, it just, it takes time."

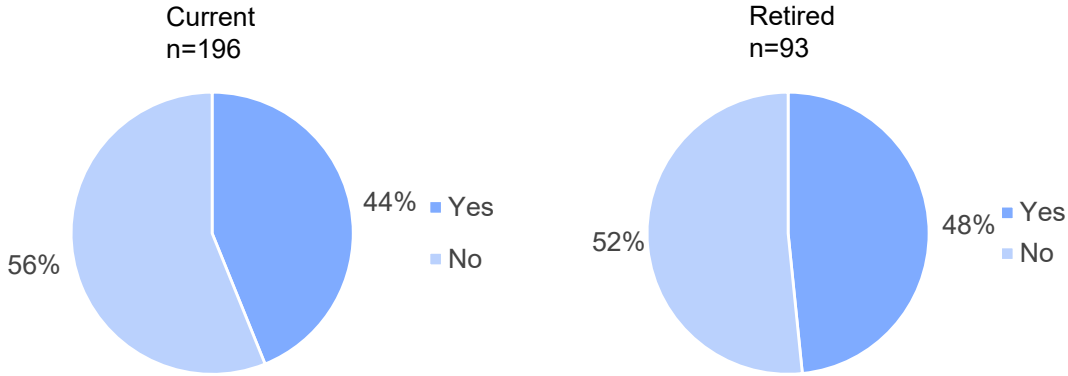
"I always still think of it when somebody calls me by my last name, I always just like flash back to [my coach] yelling my name in [my sport environment]."

"my heart sinks whenever I think about that time. But it's for a shorter amount of time. Before it would take me like a week to get over it, again. But I think, now it's just like, okay."

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### Disclosure

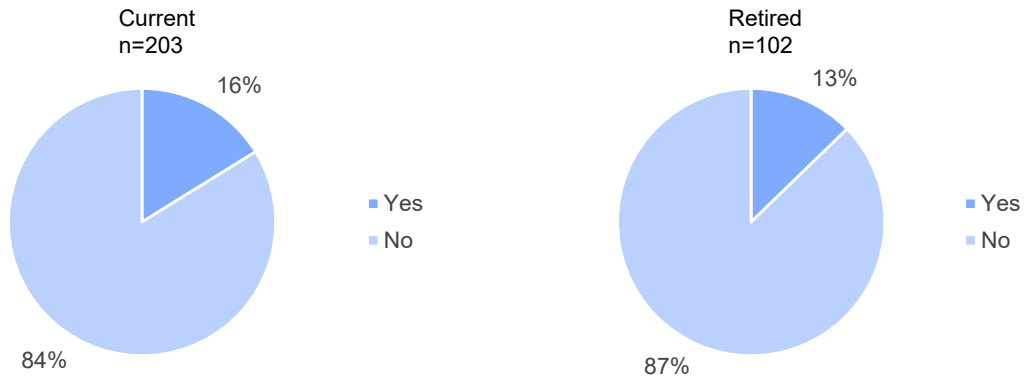
"If you experienced abuse, harassment, bullying, or hazing, did you tell anyone?"



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## Reporting

“If you experienced abuse, hazing, or discrimination did you submit a formal report/complaint of your experience(s)?”



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## Silencing

*“Knowing we can be replaced and our careers are on the line, you are regularly forced to ignore issues or maltreatment out of fear. I have witnessed blackmail, intimidation, favouritism, experienced verbal and mental abuse personally. We are silenced or put down if u ask questions. I am fearful that after I speak out, I will be punished.”*

*“I never felt like there was anyone I could speak to about [concerns about harmful behaviours] because [sport] was my life and I didn't want to jeopardize my career.”*

Willson, Kerr, Battaglia, Stirling, 2022

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## Fear of Reprisal with Reporting

*"I would never feel comfortable going to my National Sport Organization if I were harassed in any way and **would 100% need an individual body to report** the harassment too. I would be far too scared to say anything to my coach or my HPD."*

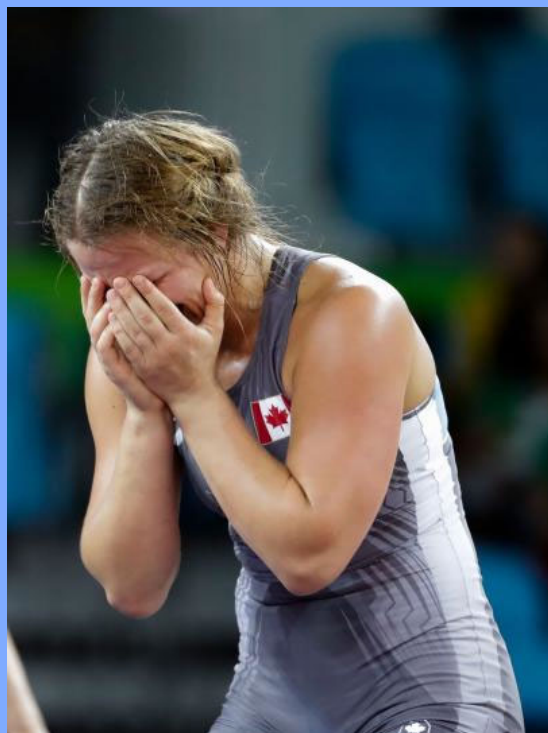
*"Asking sport organizations to deal with abuse in their ranks is like asking them to incriminate themselves"*

Willson, Kerr, Battaglia, Stirling, 2022

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## Why are Athletes Vulnerable?

- Access
- Power and authority of the coach
- Socialization of parents and others
- Complicit bystanders: "willful blindness"
- Value of background and criminal record checks is limited
- Emphasis on winning and performance
  - Funding and employment structure
- Uncertainty about when to report and who to report to



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## Why are Athletes Vulnerable?

- Normalization of unhealthy/abusive/neglectful athlete development strategies
- Early specialization (isolation from other experiences and relationships)
- Assumptions of methods to build team camaraderie
- Misperception that holistic development through sport and talent development are mutually exclusive



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***If it takes a village to raise a child,  
it takes a village to abuse one.***

Mitchell Garabedian (2015)

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*“To be clear, I blame Larry Nassar and I also blame an entire system that enabled and perpetrated his abuse...” (Williams, 2021).*



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**“If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse one.”**

(Mitchell Garabedian, 2016)

**Therefore, prevention and intervention requires a systemic approach**

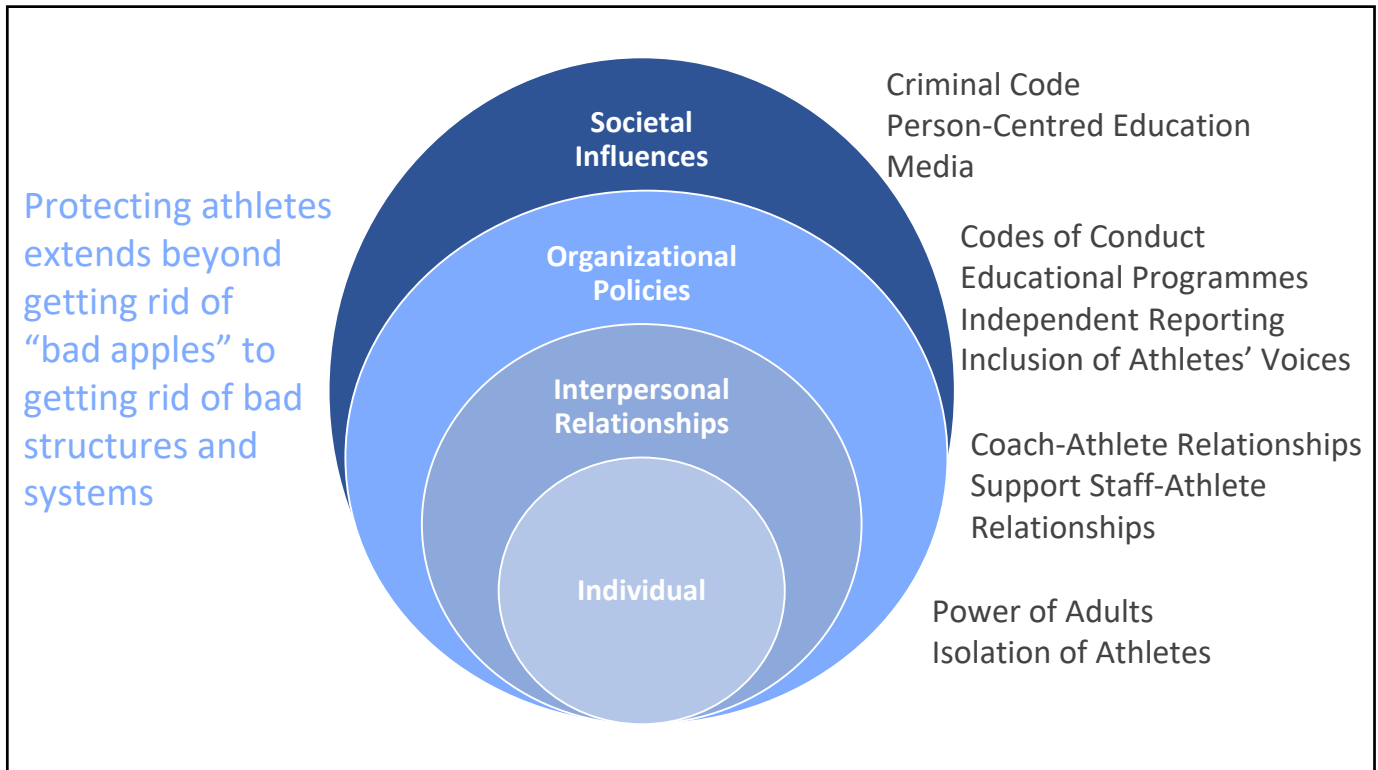
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*“All we needed was one adult to have the integrity to stand between us and Larry Nassar. If just one adult had listened, believed, and acted, the people standing before you on this stage would never have met him.”*

– Aly Raisman (2018)

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**Societal Changes:**  
**Use of Power**

- E.g., #MeToo and TimesUP Movements
- About how power should and should not be used
- Providing venues for people to speak up
- Developing communities of support for victims
- Providing clarity about and raised the bar for expected behaviours

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## Changing View on Use of Power in Coaching

- Autocratic, military-style approaches
  - Reliance on punishment, fear and shaming practices (e.g., berating, exercise as punishment)
  - Reliance on telling, commanding
  - 1:1 coaching environments
  - Coach and athlete travelling alone together, sharing hotel room to save costs
- Democratic, humanistic approaches
  - Coaches and athletes sharing power
  - Reliance on discipline, encouragement and support
  - Reliance on discussing, asking questions
  - Coaching in public

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## We Need a Culture Shift in Children's and Youth Sport

Sport in Canada is the only remaining child-populated domain that is self-regulating and completely autonomous, thus leaving young people vulnerable to experiences of maltreatment



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## Current Initiatives

- Canadian Minister of Sport, Pascale St. Onge has declared safe sport a crisis in Canada

 Penticon Herald

### Canada's top athletes begin mobilizing to change high ...

A unified message is needed, said Erin Willson, who is a former artistic swimmer now president of the national athlete association...

3 weeks ago



 The Globe and Mail

### National synchronized swimming program overhauls its safety ...

Erin Willson, one of about 50 synchronized swimmers who are now part of a class-action lawsuit against Canada Artistic Swimming...

Feb 11, 2022



 The Globe and Mail

### Former synchronized swimmer named Canada's first sport ...

Erin Willson, a former Olympic synchronized swimmer, was told by team officials to lose unhealthy amounts of weight or face losing her spot...

1 month ago



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## Implications for Practitioners

- This can occur at all levels of sport
- Sport adds a layer of complexity to Gender-Based Violence
- Sport is often integrated with the athletes' identity
- Quitting may not be the most appropriate solution
- Actions that occur in sport effect the athlete outside of sport
  - Support for athletes needs to be similar to other children/adults experiencing abuse
- Parents can both help and hinder the situation
  - They may know what is occurring and are conditioned to believe it's acceptable in sport
  - The athlete may not tell the parent (fear of repercussions)

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