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‘Physical and sexual abuse were found to be the most frequently alleged forms of abuse’

‘The first review of the safeguarding cases managed in sport within the UK’

A Review of Safeguarding Cases in Sport

This study represents the first investigation into incidents of safeguarding concern in sport within the UK. Questionnaires were completed by 41 lead welfare officers from national governing bodies. A total of 652 cases were reported by a range of key stakeholders, covering a variety of different forms of abuse. Physical and sexual abuse were found to be the most frequently alleged forms of abuse. The majority of alleged perpetrators and victims were males. The need for a standardised form for collecting case data as part of normal practice is highlighted along with the necessity for training and support to manage safeguarding cases both internally and externally to sport organisations. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGES:

- A total of 652 safeguarding cases were managed in sport by this sample during 2011.
- Physical and sexual abuse were the most frequently reported.
- The majority of victims were boys.
- There is a need to collect standardised data regarding all cases.

KEY WORDS: child protection; abuse; perpetrators; victims

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and Sport England established the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) in 2001. The UK is one of the first countries to have a state-funded specialist body to oversee safeguarding in sport. Having a lead welfare officer (LWO) is a core part of recommended safeguarding arrangements and forms part of the safeguarding standards. A part of the LWO’s role is to manage safeguarding cases within his/her sport. This study represents the first review of the safeguarding cases managed in sport within the UK.

Abuse in Sport

Raakman *et al.* (2011) have outlined that abuse in sport can take a range of forms including sexual, physical, emotional, neglectful and poor practice. There has been a growing body of research into abusive relationships in sport over the past decade. This work includes qualitative studies which have explored the experiences of both female (Brackenridge, 2001) and male (Hartill, 2009) victims of sexual abuse, as well as victims of emotional abuse (Gervis and Dunn, 2004; Stirling and Kerr, 2009). Whilst this body of work significantly enhances

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our understanding of the experience of abuse, it is also important to investigate the prevalence of such experiences within the population.

Quantitative methods have been employed to assess the prevalence of abuse in sport. These studies have been conducted in the USA (Volkwein *et al.*, 1997), Australia (Leahy *et al.*, 2002), Canada (Kirby *et al.*, 2000) and Denmark (Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001).

In the first prevalence study within the UK, Alexander *et al.* (2011) administered questionnaires to over 6000 young people. They were asked to reflect back over their experiences of organised youth sport in the UK. Although sport was viewed as a positive experience for many young people, many had also had negative experiences. Participants reported experiencing emotional abuse (75%), sexual harassment (29%), physical abuse (24%), self-harm (10%) and sexual abuse (3%). This study has clear value in giving an indication as to the prevalence of abuse in sport in the UK. However, as participants were recalling their experiences, for up to ten years, the findings may not reflect the current situation. There is a need for research into the current state of safeguarding cases being managed.

Managing Safeguarding Cases

The national governing bodies (NGBs) that responded to the current survey are part of a wider group of NGBs that are required by Sport England through their funding criteria to comply with the standards for safeguarding and protecting children in sport (CPSU, 2011). These standards include the expectation that NGBs will implement procedures for managing cases: 'All incidents and allegations of abuse are recorded and monitored' (CPSU, 2011, standard 9.5, p. 23). Brackenridge *et al.* (2005) identified three important functions of the systematic recording of safeguarding case data. The first is within-case progress chasing. This relates to the ongoing management of a case by an organisation. This is important as it will help NGBs handle cases efficiently and ensure that each case is thoroughly and fairly investigated. This can facilitate the making of effective decisions and ensure that both the alleged perpetrator and victim are supported throughout the process. The second function concerns within-case analysis. Through studying the timeline of events and the narratives of those involved, one can identify the possible temporal and development risk factors for abusive relationships (e.g. Brackenridge, 2001). The third function relates to across-case analysis. This can inform our general understanding of abuse in sport and identify differences in cases based on the characteristics of the perpetrator (e.g. qualifications), the victim (e.g. gender) and the context (e.g. type of sport).

Only a limited amount of research, however, has analysed the cases which are being managed. One study analysed 78 safeguarding cases in swimming (Myers and Barrett, 2002). Brackenridge *et al.* (2005) analysed 132 cases of alleged abuse in football which occurred between 1967 and 2002. These cases related to a range of different forms of abuse including physical abuse (N=30, 22%), bullying (N=28, 21.2%), emotional abuse (N=20, 15.2%), sexual abuse (N=14, 10.6%), neglect (N=5, 3.8%), previous sex offence (N=16, 12.1%), previous sex allegation (N=5, 3.8%), grievous bodily harm (N=3, 2.3%) and not specified (N=10, 7.6%).

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The Present Study

Existing research has focused on reviewing cases in specific sports (e.g. Brackenridge *et al.*, 2005; Myers and Barrett, 2002). Both of these studies also reviewed cases which occurred prior to 2002. Significant changes have taken place in relation to safeguarding within sport in the UK since the introduction of the CPSU. Research is merited to review the current caseload to inform future practice. The present study aimed to contribute to this field through reviewing the safeguarding cases which were managed within the UK during 2011. It specifically focused on four key areas: (1) What was the source of the allegation? (2) What was the nature of cases? (3) What are the characteristics of the alleged perpetrator and victim? (4) How are cases managed? Such research is merited as the findings can inform related policy, research and practice.

Method

Participants

Questionnaires were administered to all of the 50 NGBs' LWOs. Completed questionnaires were returned by 41 LWOs, which represents a good response rate of 82 per cent. The LWOs had all been in the role for at least a year. They had all attended 'Time to Listen' safeguarding training and had received support from the CPSU. The specific sports represented are not reported to maintain anonymity.

Instruments and Procedures

Approval for this study was granted by the first author's university ethics advisory committee prior to the commencement of data collection. The questionnaire was initially developed based on a review of related literature (e.g. Alexander *et al.*, 2011; Parent, 2011). The draft version of the questionnaire was then shared with two key groups who were invited to give feedback and make suggestions for further development. First, the questionnaire was made available to the case management group, which was set up to consider and make recommendations on the opportunities and delivery mechanisms for providing improved support and advice to NGBs and county sports partnerships in their management of child safeguarding concerns. This was important to ensure that the research supported the work of this group. Second, the questionnaire was presented and discussed at a meeting of the safeguarding framework group. This was attended by nine LWOs. This helped to ensure that the questionnaire covered topics of practical interest whilst making the most of the sources of data which are already accessible to LWOs. Minor changes and additions to the questionnaire were made based on the feedback of both groups.

The final questionnaire comprised 15 questions. These addressed issues related to the source and nature of the allegations, the alleged perpetrator and victim, and the management of the case. LWOs were also asked whether the number of cases had increased, decreased or stayed the same relative to 2010. Throughout the questionnaire, the LWOs were asked to talk about their cases as a whole rather than to provide specific data on all cases. This approach was adopted to help maintain the anonymity of those involved in the case and

to ensure that the level of work requested of participants was realistic and achievable. Questionnaires were administered via e-mail during January 2012. Reminder emails were then sent in February and March. A copy of the questionnaire is available from the first author on request.

Data Analysis

As data were collected at an aggregate level, it was not possible to employ inferential statistics. As such, descriptive statistics were used to summarise the data in relation to the four key research questions related to the source and nature of the allegations, the alleged perpetrator/victim and the management of cases.

Results

The descriptive statistics are presented relevant to each research question and are interpreted with reference to related literature. Overall, the 41 LWOs had managed a total of 652 cases in 2011. As this is the first study of this nature, there is a lack of research with which to compare this overall finding. However, this can now serve as an important baseline with which to compare future reviews of safeguarding cases.

Source of the Allegation

Table 1 illustrates that the allegations came from a variety of different sources. The most common sources were being alerted to an issue through a criminal records check (N=149), through a concern highlighted by a club welfare officer (N=97), or through someone who chooses to remain anonymous (N=55). Allegations also came from parents (N=23), coaches (N=11), local authority-designated officers (N=7), the police (N=7) and an athlete (N=5). Research indicates the importance of the reporting process, with negative experiences potentially contributing to negative consequences for the victim (Jonzon and Lindblad, 2004, 2005). As a result, it is very important that this wide range of people is fully informed about the procedures and policies relevant to reporting safeguarding concerns. This can help to ensure that the allegation reaches the LWO and can be appropriately managed. Research in the sports context has suggested that victims of abuse may not be believed or may be pressured to leave the team (Kirby, 1995). Victims can also normalise behaviour and not view it as abusive (Stirling and Kerr, 2009). This ensures

Table 1. Source of the allegation

Allegation reported by	<i>n</i>
Criminal records check	149
Club welfare officer	97
Anonymous	55
Parent	23
Coach	11
Local authority-designated officer	7
Police	7
Athlete	5
Not recorded	298
Total	652

‘An important baseline with which to compare future reviews of safeguarding cases’

‘Victims of abuse may not be believed or may be pressured to leave the team’

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‘In 65 per cent of the cases the victim was male and in 35 per cent was female’

‘Bullying... was highlighted as an important category through the piloting of the questionnaire’

that it is particularly important that the processes of disclosure are effectively communicated to all stakeholders. In almost half of the cases, however, the source of the allegation was not recorded (N = 298). The collection of such data should be embedded as part of the management of cases.

The Alleged Perpetrator and Victim

Within this sample, 91 per cent of the alleged perpetrators were male. This is comparable to the 92 per cent reported in Brackenridge *et al.* (2005). This reflects previous research which has suggested that the perpetrator is more likely to be male (Brackenridge, 2001). Furthermore, the vast majority of perpetrators (92%) were at least 18-years old with eight per cent being less than 18. Brackenridge (2001) highlighted that the perpetrator being older than the victim represents a risk factor for abuse.

A total of 196 of the alleged perpetrators had undergone a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check. This highlights that the CRB check can only represent a part of a much broader safeguarding system and emphasises that one cannot rely on this process to prevent abuse. A possible explanation for many perpetrators not being CRB checked is that the perpetrators were not eligible for a check, such as in the case of an athlete’s peers. Indeed, Alexander *et al.* (2011) reported that many abuses were primarily conducted by an athlete’s peers. Furthermore, of these perpetrators, 58 had undertaken safeguarding training. As in the case of CRB checks, this emphasises that such training is important as part of the overall system but cannot be relied upon to prevent abuse.

Overall, in 65 per cent of the cases the victim was male and in 35 per cent was female. This finding challenges the myth that the majority of victims of abuse in sport are girls. It supports previous research in football which reported that 85 per cent of the victims in their sample were male (Brackenridge *et al.*, 2005). It is likely that this figure was higher than that found in the present study due to a higher proportion of participants being male within football relative to the general sport population. In relation to age, 89 per cent were under 18 and 11 per cent were 18 or older. The work undertaken by the NSPCC’s CPSU is focused on those under the age of 18. There is therefore a clear need for further consideration of the safeguarding of vulnerable adults.

The Nature of the Allegation

The current study employed the following definitions of the four broad categories of abuse identified by the CPSU (2011): Sexual abuse (e.g. forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities); physical abuse (e.g. when a child is forced into excessive training and competition, is hit or encouraged to participate when injured); emotional abuse (e.g. conveying to children that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate, or valued only insofar as they meet the needs of another person); and neglect (e.g. the persistent failure to meet a child’s basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child’s health or development). We also included bullying as this was highlighted as an important category through the piloting of the questionnaire. The CPSU defines bullying as deliberately hurtful behaviour, usually repeated over a period of time, where

it is difficult for those bullied to defend themselves. It can take many forms including physical, emotional or cyber bullying. An 'Other' category was also included for respondents to indicate cases which did not appear to fit under these categories. These cases were then subsequently categorised by the authors.

The number of cases in each category is displayed in Table 2 along with some illustrative examples. There are a number of key points to emphasise. First, this demonstrates the variety of different types of abuse which need to be addressed by the safeguarding system. Second, the most prevalent form of abuse was physical (20.6%). This supports the findings of Brackenridge *et al.* (2005) who also reported that physical abuse was the most prevalent (22%). Third, the reporting of sexual harassment cases (1.8%) is relatively low compared to the cases of sexual abuse (19.1%). This may indicate that cases of a sexual nature primarily get reported once they reach the more harmful forms of abuse. There may be a need to encourage athletes, and other people who may witness inappropriate behaviour, to report harassing behaviour earlier to help prevent the future development of sexually abusive relationships. Fourth, in 13.4 per cent of the cases, the nature of the allegation was not recorded. This is more than the 7.6 per cent reported by Brackenridge *et al.* (2005). This highlights the need for a standardised system for collecting safeguarding case data.

In comparison with Brackenridge *et al.* (2005), rates of sexual abuse were found to be more prevalent (19.1% versus 10.6%). In contrast, rates of bullying (10.1% versus 21.2%), emotional abuse (10.1% versus 15.2%) and neglect (1.8% versus 3.8%) were all found to be less prevalent relative to the football sample. The relatively low number of cases of emotional abuse (10.1%) is particularly interesting in light of Alexander *et al.*'s (2011) research which suggested that 75 per cent of young people have experienced emotional abuse in organised youth sport. There may be a need to encourage children and any witnesses to report such behaviour.

Of the reported cases, 55 per cent related to behaviour within sport and 45 per cent concerned behaviour outside of sport. This highlights that sport may provide a context within which victims can disclose their negative experiences outside of sport. Research indicates that young people can develop strong relationships with adults in sport and it is via such relationships that

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Table 2. The nature of the allegation

Form of maltreatment	Examples	% (n)
Physical abuse	Hitting a child or encouraging them to train when injured	20.6 (134)
Sexual abuse	Enticing or forcing a child to engage in sexual activity	19.1 (124)
Criminal conviction	Drink-driving or burglary	10.4 (68)
Emotional abuse	Humiliating or persistently criticising a child	10.1 (66)
Bullying	A child being picked on by a group of peers	10.1 (66)
Inappropriate behaviour via technology	Sending inappropriate messages via social media	8.4 (55)
Racial abuse	Using racist language	3.4 (22)
Sexual harassment	Using sexist language	1.8 (12)
Poor practice	Using unsafe equipment or encouraging immoral behaviour	1.5 (10)
Neglect	Not meeting the basic needs of a child	1.2 (8)
Not recorded		13.4 (87)
Total		100 (652)

‘A need for effective information sharing between sport and other agencies’

‘Funding, resources and the extent to which safeguarding was prioritised all represent challenges’

‘Broader concerns about the extent to which cases are being effectively managed’

abuse outside of sport may be disclosed. It is thus important that sport is prepared for such circumstances. On the other hand, it may indicate that people involved in sport are facing allegations due to their alleged abusive behaviour outside of sport. There is thus a need for effective information sharing between sport and other agencies such that any potential risk being posed to children within sport can be identified and managed.

Managing the Case

A number of key challenges were highlighted in relation to how safeguarding cases were currently being managed. These challenges were experienced due to individual, organisational and cultural factors. At the individual level, it is difficult for welfare officers to have all of the knowledge, skills and experience required to cover the wide range of potential safeguarding cases. They felt uncomfortable being labelled as the ‘expert’ and emphasised that child protection should be part of everyone’s role. At the organisational level, factors such as funding, resources and the extent to which safeguarding was prioritised all represent challenges. Finally, the culture of sport in general can normalise some of these reported behaviours which can make it very difficult when trying to manage such allegations (Alexander *et al.*, 2011).

Of the referrals which were made to statutory agencies, 98 were passed back to organisations to manage. This highlights a significant training need. Appropriate staff should be equipped with the skills, knowledge, support and resources to manage such cases effectively. When an investigation was required, this was undertaken by a wide range of different people, both internal and external to the organisation. In relation to internal services, investigations were conducted by club welfare officers or, in more complex cases, a case management group was convened. In terms of external services, cases were investigated by local authority-designated officers, independent investigators, the police or social services. This further highlights a potential need for the training of appropriate staff. It also suggests a requirement for clear guidance to be provided to facilitate the selection of appropriate external personnel to conduct such investigations. The lack of an effective data-collecting system in some instances also raises broader concerns about the extent to which cases are being effectively managed.

In comparison to 2010, 15 per cent of LWOs reported that the number of cases had increased, 58 per cent stated that it had remained constant while 27 per cent had experienced a decline in the number of cases. This highlights that the management of safeguarding cases in sport is a significant ongoing issue which needs to be considered.

Conclusion

This study represents the first investigation into incidents of safeguarding concerns in sport within the UK. It builds upon research which has examined the prevalence of abuse (e.g. Alexander *et al.*, 2011), the experiences of victims (e.g. Gervis and Dunn, 2004) and cases managed in specific sports (e.g. Myers and Barrett, 2002). A total of 652 cases were recorded in 2011. The data support the argument that abuse in sport can take a range of forms (Raakman

et al., 2011). The data highlighted that the allegations came from a range of sources and were related to a variety of safeguarding concerns. Sport needs to recognise the broad scope of the nature of safeguarding and that it involves both male and female victims. These findings have highlighted that abuse can also target those who are over 18. This has clear implications for sport as the vast majority of safeguarding strategies are targeted at children due to the CPSU's association with the NSPCC. The fact that an individual reaches the age of 18 does not necessarily mean that they are suddenly no longer vulnerable. There are also implications for the relationship between sport and the criminal justice system. Some of the allegations relate to illegal acts and hence such cases require effective collaboration between these sectors. However, other allegations refer to behaviours which may be unlikely to lead to a criminal conviction. In such cases, sport may need to move towards a risk-based approach which reviews cases through disciplinary procedures as opposed to the criminal justice system.

In the future, there are three key recommendations which stem from this study. First, there is a need to develop and implement a standardised data collection protocol to enable more advanced analysis. Second, training and guidance are required to support NGBs to manage cases internally or to make appropriate decisions when referring cases to an external agency. Third, there would be merit in establishing an independent panel to help sports to manage the more challenging cases which are referred back to them by social services or the police.

The limitations associated with the present study also need to be acknowledged. As highlighted within the Results, the extent to which these data are currently available did vary across sports. This study relies on the accuracy of the data provided by the LWOs. More demographics are required to facilitate a more comprehensive picture (e.g. whether a child is a care leaver or if he/she has a disability). The introduction of a standardised form for case data will help to address this concern and facilitate more advanced analysis. These data only reflect the cases being managed in 2011, as many cases were ongoing, data regarding the outcome of the cases were not available. As a result, this study only focuses on safeguarding allegations rather than convictions. Future research which tracks the outcome of cases will develop our understanding of the full process of case management. Finally, the current data only reflect cases managed by sports with a NGB. Research is therefore required into abuse within sports which currently fall outside of this system. In conclusion, the effective management of safeguarding cases is clearly an integral part of any safeguarding system. The present findings shine a light on the cases managed during 2011 and now represent a foundation upon which to build future research, policy and practice.

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