

Psychological, Physical, and Sexual Violence Against Children in Australian Community Sport: Frequency, Perpetrator, and Victim Characteristics

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Abstract

Childhood sport participation is associated with physical, social, and mental health benefits, which are more likely to be realized if the sport environment is safe. However, our understanding of children's experience of psychological, physical, and sexual violence in community sport in Australia is limited. The aims of this study were to provide preliminary evidence on the extent of experiences of violence during childhood participation in Australian community sport and to identify common perpetrators of and risk factors for violence. The Violence Towards Athletes Questionnaire (VTAQ) was administered online to a convenience sample of Australian adults (>18 years), retrospectively reporting experiences of violence during childhood community sport. Frequencies of experience of violence were calculated and Chi-square tests were conducted to determine differences between genders. In total, there were 886 respondents included in the analysis. Most survey respondents were women (63%) and about a third were men (35%). About 82% of respondents experienced violence in sport as a child. Psychological violence was most prevalent (76%), followed by physical (66%) and sexual (38%) violence. Peers perpetrated the highest

rates of psychological violence (69%), and the rates of physical and psychological violence by coaches (both >50%) were also high. Age, sexual orientation, disability, and hours of weekly sport participation as a child were all associated with childhood experience of violence in sport. The rates of interpersonal violence against children in sport were high. This novel data on perpetrators of the violence and the risk factors for experiencing violence provides further context to inform safeguarding strategies in sport. A national prevalence study is recommended to advance our understanding of the childhood experiences of violence in Australian sport.

Keywords

interpersonal violence, sport, prevalence, child abuse, violence in sport

Introduction

Sport is woven into the fabric of Australian culture from a young age. Internationally, Australia is a leading nation in youth sport participation, with the latest national survey indicating 63% of children (under 18 years) participate in organized sport or physical activity outside of school at least once per week (Australian Sports Commission, 2018). While research demonstrates the mental, physical, and social benefits of sport participation for children (Eime et al., 2013), for these benefits to be actualized, the sport environment must be emotionally and physically safe.

In recent years, failures to safeguard children from interpersonal violence (IV) in sport have dominated the international sport media (e.g., UK Soccer

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and USA gymnastics). Much of the media attention has focused on high-profile sexual abuse cases against elite athletes; however, IV against children in sport reaches beyond the sexual forms of violence in the elite sphere (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2020; Vertommen et al., 2016). Emerging international evidence indicates that violence against child participants and athletes¹ in sport is neither competition-level specific nor sport specific, with violence occurring across a range of competition levels and sports (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2020; Vertommen et al., 2016). Moreover, there is a need to understand IV under its broader definition encompassing various forms of violence including psychological/neglect, physical, and sexual violence, and to consider who may be more at risk of experiencing certain types of violence in order to inform the development of targeted prevention strategies (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Parent & Fortier, 2018; Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2020).

The issue of violence against children in sport has risen to attract global recognition as being a key threat to the integrity of sport (Mountjoy et al., 2016). In Australia, national child safeguarding policies have been developed, with the creation of Sport Integrity Australia, including the Safeguarding in Sport Continuous Improvement program, which aims to “embed safeguarding practices, processes, and education” (Sport Integrity Australia, 2021, p. 20) in National Sporting Organizations. However, there is limited understanding of the occurrence of IV against Australian children participating in community sport. This knowledge could inform the development of targeted prevention and response interventions, as well as provide baseline measures, which could be used to monitor the effectiveness of prevention strategies. As such, the purpose of this study was to measure psychological/neglect, physical, and sexual violence perpetrated against children participating in community sport in Australia.

Literature Review

The Frequency of IV in Sport

While IV against athletes has only recently been part of public mainstream discussions, researchers have studied the phenomena for several decades. Thus far, studies on IV against athletes and participants have measured one particular type of violence, mainly sexual harassment and abuse, especially against girls/women participants/athletes (Chroni & Fasting, 2009; Fasting et al., 2003, 2010; Leahy et al., 2002; Parent et al., 2016; Rintaugu et al., 2014). Other studies have reported the frequency of bullying against children in community and in elite sport (Baar & Wubbels, 2011; Evans et al., 2016;

Gendron et al., 2011) and hazing in American high-school and college sport (Allan, 2009; Fields et al., 2010; Jeckell et al., 2018).

Research on IV is evolving and experts are advocating for the need to study the experience of violence in all of its forms. Herein we adopt the World Health Organization (WHO) definition of violence that underpinned the development of the Violence Towards Athletes Questionnaire (VTAQ) instrument implemented in this study (Krug et al., 2002; Parent et al., 2019). In WHO's definition, violence is conceptualized as the intentional, threatened, or actual use of either physical force or power that is likely to result in "injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation" (Krug et al., 2002, p. 1084). This holistic definition of violence encompasses forms of violence not previously considered in research, which has traditionally focused solely on sexual abuse. In addition, authors of the International Olympic Committee consensus statement on harassment and abuse in sport (Mountjoy et al., 2016), and other experts (Parent & Fortier, 2017; Parent et al., 2019; Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2020) agree on the importance of furthering the collective understanding of the links between different types of IV against athletes and children in sport, as well as of the risk factors potentially predicting these different types of IV, in order to inform prevention strategies. As a result, more recent studies have assessed the frequency of IV against children in sport by measuring different categories of violence, including predominantly psychological, physical, and sexual violence (Table 1) (Bermon et al., 2021; McPherson et al., 2015; Parent et al., 2016; Vertommen et al., 2016). These studies reported high, yet varying rates of psychological violence (from 38% to 80%), physical violence (from 9% to 40%), and sexual violence (from 7% to 28%). One explanation for the discrepancies in the prevalence rates identified in these studies relates to the sampling approach used. For example, one study used a representative sample of the population (Vertommen et al., 2016), another a convenience sample (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2020), and another a purposeful sample (Bermon et al., 2021). Different measurement tools could also contribute to the inconsistencies, as within these tools, the types of violence are often defined and operationalized differently. Indeed, psychological, physical, and sexual violence are complex concepts to define and measure, which is confounded by the lack of consensus on definitions and the lack of commonly used and validated measurement tools.

Validated Tools and Comparative Data

One challenge with ascertaining the frequency of violence against children in sport is the limited availability and existence of validated surveys. In recent

Table 1. Key Studies Measuring the Prevalence of Psychological, Physical, and Sexual Violence Against Children in Sport.

Study	Country	Population Sample	Competition Level	Measurement Tool	Prevalence (%)
Bermon et al. (2021)	International	Athletes attending the World Athletics under 20 World Championships, n = 480	Elite	Study-specific survey	Verbal: male 23%, female 21% Physical: male 12%, female 9% Sexual: male 12%, female 7%
Parent et al. (2020)	Canada	Adolescents (14–17 years old) participating in any sport n = 1,055	Any level	Violence Towards Athletes Questionnaire	Psychological: 79% Neglect: 36% Physical: 40% Sexual: 28%
Verommen et al. (2016)	Belgium/The Netherlands	Children and adolescents (below age of 18) participating in any sport (Retrospective and representative, with adults aged 18–50) n = 4,043	Any level	Interpersonal Violence against Children in Sport	Psychological: 38% Physical: 11% Sexual: 14%
McPherson et al. (2015)	Australia	Children and adolescents (below age of 18) participating in any sport (Retrospective, with adults aged 18–25) n = 107	Any level	Study-Specific Survey	50% reported "negative experience" including emotional and/or physical and/or sexual abuse

years, several survey instruments have been developed to measure IV against children in sport, but not all have been validated nor implemented in different cohorts or countries (Table 1) (Parent & Fortier, 2018; Parent et al., 2016, 2019; Vertommen et al., 2016). Validated survey instruments provide confidence that the results obtained are psychometrically sound and reliable. They also provide a foundation for the collection of comparable data either longitudinally within a country or internationally between countries. One such recently developed survey instrument is the VTAQ, which was designed to measure instances of multiple types of IV perpetrated against children in sport by either their peers, coaches, or parents/guardians (Parent et al., 2019).

The VTAQ advanced the conceptualization of IV against children in several ways. Beyond measuring psychological, physical, and sexual violence, it also measures neglect. Neglect is generally defined as a failure to provide for the development of a child, failing to protect them from harm, or causing harm to their health and wellbeing. An example of neglect in the sporting context would be permitting a child to participate in sport (training or competition) while they are injured and/or in contradiction to medical advice (Parent et al., 2019). Neglect is a well-recognized form of violence against children and is often categorized broadly with psychological violence, but there is currently limited empirical evidence of experiences of neglect in sport (Mountjoy et al., 2016). The VTAQ also advances the conceptualization of psychological violence by re-classifying items that previous literature aligned within the physical category into psychological violence. For example, while Alexander et al. (2011) indicated that being forced to undergo training when injured was physical violence, the VTAQ classifies this as a form of psychological violence (Parent et al., 2019). Finally, the VTAQ includes neglect, psychological, physical, and sexual violence items that are specific to a perpetrator (i.e., a peer player/athlete, a coach, a parent/guardian). Other tools have either not included perpetrator-specific measurements, or included them only as a contextualization of the violence, whereas the VTAQ allows for ready identification of the role of the perceived perpetrator (Bermon et al., 2021; Vertommen et al., 2016). The VTAQ was only recently developed, and as such has only been implemented in the Quebec (French Canadian) context, but has been validated in the Dutch (Flemish) region (Vertommen et al., 2021). The use and further validation of the tool in other countries and languages across the range of violence domains (psychological/neglect, physical, and sexual) is a critical progression of this field of research and will allow for directly comparable data. Understanding the extent of and types of violence occurring within Australian community sport could highlight Australia-specific trends or patterns in the experiences of violence that can inform targeted prevention and intervention strategies.

Role of Perpetrators and Relevant Sociodemographic Variables Related to Experiences of Violence

Efforts to prevent IV in sport would benefit from a contextualization of both the perpetrators of specific types of IV as well as the risk factors for being a victim of IV. The coach–athlete relationship has been a predominant focus in the IV in sport literature, but emerging evidence suggests that studying peer violence is of significant value as well (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2002; Johansson et al., 2016; Vertommen et al., 2017). Moreover, to our knowledge, no study to date has explored the role of parents as perpetrators of IV in sport in Australia. Given that in Australia more than two-thirds of volunteers are parents who play an important role in the organization and delivery of community sport clubs, understanding the role they play in the perpetration of violence against children in sport is critical (Sport Australia, 2021).

With regard to sociodemographic factors related to experiences of violence, recurrent findings support the notion that risks of sexual violence (the most heavily studied form of IV) are generally higher for girls/women than they are for boys/men (Fasting et al., 2003; Leahy et al., 2002; Vertommen et al., 2016). In contrast, the frequency of physical violence has been observed to be higher for boys/men (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2020). The gendered nature of other types of IV, however, is less clear with disparate findings in terms of the gendered experience of violence between countries (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2020; Vertommen et al., 2016). Elucidating the gendered experience of violence (in terms of type of violence as well as perpetrator) could further inform targeted prevention efforts. Moreover, to our knowledge, none of the studies exploring national frequencies of violence during childhood sport have reported the experiences of gender diverse individuals (those who identify as neither a man nor a woman).

Other victim characteristics that are associated with experiences of IV that have arisen from the literature include aspects such as age, sexual orientation, disability, and higher hours of sport practice per week. Previous studies have notable differences amongst these risk factors, with one study indicating being of older age increased the risk of experiencing any type of IV and another suggesting the opposite (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2020; Vertommen et al., 2016). Victims having a sexual orientation other than heterosexual has commonly been identified as a risk factor for various forms of IV, but the differential categorizations of sexual orientation across studies challenges the comparability, with some seeking to compare all non-heterosexual orientations against a heterosexual one (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2020), and others adopting more categories (heterosexual vs. bisexual vs. homosexual) (Vertommen et al., 2016). Disability has also been identified as

a risk factor for sexual and physical violence in one study (Vertommen et al., 2016), but did not predict any type of violence in the recent study using the VTAQ (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2020). Further elucidating disability as a potential risk factor is an important aspect of this study, given that it is an established risk factor for violence in contexts outside of sport (Hahn et al., 2014). Finally, increased hours of weekly sport participation has been found to predict experiences of both psychological and physical violence (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2020), but this was in a sample comprised of athletes from diverse levels of competition (local through internationally competitive athletes). Whether this is a risk factor at the community level of sport remains unknown.

With regard to the role of the specific perpetrators of violence in sport, historically much of the focus has been on peers or coaches. However, in the VTAQ, the parents are included as a third category of perpetrators of psychological/neglect and physical violence in the sport context specifically. Parent et al. (2019) distinguish general parental neglect from parental violence in sport by prefacing all questions in the VTAQ-P (parent component) with the following statements: “Because of your athletic performance or your behavior in training or competition, one of your parents. . .” or “In a sporting environment one of your parents, step-parents, or legal guardians. . .” This phrasing, followed by the sport-specific items, distinguish violence that occurs within the sporting context from other forms of violence and includes elements of neglect/ psychological or physical violence.

Aims of the Study

The aims of this study were threefold: the first aim was to retrospectively assess the frequencies of experiences of psychological (inclusive of neglect), physical, and sexual violence against children in Australian community sport using the VTAQ; the second aim was to identify the types and frequencies of violence perpetrated by specific actors (peers, coaches, and parents); and the third aim was to determine whether certain demographics were associated with experiencing specific types of IV in sport.

Methods

Recruitment and Data Collection Procedures

Retrospective, anonymous reporting using an online survey was conducted with a convenience sample of adults (over 18 years) who self-identified as having played Australian community sport as a child (before the age of

18 years). Survey respondents were recruited through two streams of advertising: (a) researchers associated with the project promoted the online questionnaire through various social media platforms of the study investigators (Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn) and (b) Play By the Rules disseminated the survey link to individuals on their membership database who had completed the organization's Child Protection Online Course. The investigators further used Facebook targeted advertisements (paid promotion) to broaden the potential reach of advertisement. To mitigate the risk of only recruiting participants who had experienced violence in sport, the advertisement's language did not contain words such as "abuse," "violence" (or related words). The advertisement stated that the study was on the topic of safeguarding and aimed to understand the experiences of children in community sport in Australia.

Interested individuals could access, through a hyperlink, the online questionnaire hosted on the Victoria University's Qualtrics secure platform. The landing page of the questionnaire was a participant information sheet and consent form, which provided detailed information in lay language about the aims of the project (including the purpose of measuring violence), how the data would be used and with a clause assuring maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity. If the individuals consented to participation, they were automatically progressed to the start of the VTAQ. If individuals chose not to participate, they were redirected to an end of survey landing page that provided a brief debriefing statement which included counseling resources they could contact. This debriefing statement was also included at the end of the full survey and counseling resources were linked at the bottom of every survey page. The research study was approved by Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (#HRE20-150).

The Survey Instrument

The VTAQ was used to assess self-reported experiences of violence in Australian sport for children and youth (Parent et al., 2019). The VTAQ was first validated in the Quebec (French Canadian) context and originally consisted of 70 items that assess the neglectpsychological, physical, and sexual violence experienced by children, perpetrated by either a peer, coach, or parent/guardian (Parent et al., 2019). Definitions for each form of violence are detailed within the original manuscript by Parent et al. (2019). For use in this study, the VTAQ was translated from French to English by the original research team (Parent et al., 2020). The translation to an English version of the VTAQ has been made using Corbière and Fraccaroli (2014) back translation procedure. The questions were framed in a retrospective manner. The VTAQ

is currently undergoing a refinement process whereby items have been broken down into sub questions and the survey tool is being validated in English. For example, items C8, C9, and P8 were each originally used as single items on the validated questionnaire and were all classified as physical violence (Parent et al., 2019). In the current version of VTAQ, these items C8, C9, and P8 have been subdivided into three separate survey items, each denoted as original classification (C8, C9, and P8) plus the letter a, b, or c (e.g., C8a), creating a total of nine items instead of three and bringing the overall tool to 76 items in total. We have implemented the tool with this English version (76 items), but to align with the original validation, we have maintained the same classification of violence type (physical) for all sub-classifications of the original survey items C8, C9, and P8. To adapt the questionnaire for use as a retrospective tool, only slight modifications were made, that is, the words, "As a child (under the age of 18 years)" were added to the front end of every question. In this way, the tool was able to be implemented in a sample of Australian adults and used to assess retrospective incidences of violence experienced when they were below the age of 18 years.

The VTAQ is subdivided into three distinct sections, each focusing on a different type of perpetrator (peer, coach, or parent). All responses are recorded on a 4-point scale measuring the frequency of experiences of violence (0=never; 1=rarely, 1–2 times; 2=sometimes, 3–10 times; and 3=often, more than 10 times). In the original validation of the survey (Parent et al., 2019), it categorized each question into a type of violence (physical, $n=19$, psychological/neglect, $n=37$, or sexual $n=14$) and further sub-divided the category psychological violence into psychological violence ($n=28$) and neglect ($n=9$), and the category sexual violence into sexual harassment ($n=4$), sexual abuse with no contact ($n=4$), and sexual abuse with contact ($n=6$). These same categories were utilized in the present study, with the six new items described above (C8, C9, P8 a and b) being similarly classified, increasing the total items relating to physical violence to $n=25$. Of note, each perpetrator category did not include questions relating to all three forms of violence. Peer questions included psychological (not inclusive of neglect), physical, and sexual violence. Coach questions included all three forms (inclusive of neglect), and questions for parents included psychological/neglect and physical. While the survey was predominantly comprised of the VTAQ items, it also included demographic questions (age, sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc.) as well as questions regarding their sport participation (type of sport, hours per week, etc.).

The VTAQ items were grouped in various ways that represented types and subtypes of violence, types of perpetrator, and combinations thereof. Internal consistency reliability was established for each grouping of survey items, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .65 to .95.

Statistical Analysis

The survey items were grouped in various ways that represented types and subtypes of violence, types of perpetrator, and combinations thereof. Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each grouping of survey items to provide a measure of internal consistency reliability. Consistent with Parent et al. (2020), a low threshold of experience of violence (no experience vs. any experience) was adopted in the present study. Firstly, for each type and sub-type of violence, each respondent was classified dichotomously, with 0=no experience of this type/sub-type of violence, and 1=at least one experience of this type/sub-type of violence, that is, a non-zero response for at least one item. This dichotomization of data is in alignment with the other study that has implemented VTAQ and allows for direct comparisons of the findings. Secondly, a similar dichotomous classification was made for each type of perpetrator, with 0=no experience of violence by this type of perpetrator, and 1=at least one experience of violence by this type of perpetrator. Finally, a similar dichotomous classification was made for each combination of type/sub-type of violence and type of perpetrator.

For each of the three sets of types (of violence, perpetrator, and combination of violence and perpetrator), frequencies of experiences of violence are presented by gender. Chi-square tests were conducted to determine differences between men and women, and also between men and women combined, and gender diverse individuals. To explore the risk factors for each of the three primary categories of violence, a binary multiple logistic regression was conducted. The potential socio-demographic factors included age, biological sex, sexual orientation, disability, sport type (participating in only individual sport, only team sport, or both individual and team sport), and hours per week of sport participation during childhood. Significance for all tests was set at $p < .05$. Analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 27.

Results

The Survey Respondents

A total of 1,191 individuals accessed the survey and completed the consent form. Of those, 25 declined to participate, a further 104 did not meet inclusion criteria (i.e., over the age of 18 and did not participate in Australian community sport as a child), and a further 176 did not complete any demographic data and/or did not respond to any of the VTAQ questions. This left 886 respondents in the final sample. Individuals were included in the final sample for analysis if they responded to all initial demographic questions, and at least one

subsection of the VTAQ. The final sample included 561 (63.3%) women, 308 (34.8%) men, and 17 (1.9%) individuals who identified as either “non-binary [gender],” “questioning,” or “don’t know”; these individuals were grouped together into the “gender diverse individuals” category for analysis purposes. The mean age was 42 years ($SD=15$), with 18% of individuals being aged 25 years or younger. Respondents represented all eight States/Territories in Australia, with the largest number of respondents indicating they currently live in either Victoria ($n=209$, 34.9%) or New South Wales ($n=212$, 23.9%). Most respondents (83.9%) further indicated that their current State of residence is the same one they lived in as a child under the age of 18 years. The vast majority of respondents (94.9%) were born in Australia, with a small percentage also from UK/Channel Islands/Isle of Man/Ireland (1.4%), and New Zealand (1.2%). A total of 118 individuals (13.3%) indicated that they have a disability (i.e., any form of disability/condition that restricts their life and has lasted/will likely last 6 months or more). Twenty-two individuals indicated they identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Most individuals indicated that their primary sport was team-based (70.4%). More than half (55.6%) of the respondents indicated that they participated in a secondary sport that was equally important to them as their primary sport. Participants self-reported playing in a total of 68 different sports. When breaking down the sports according to gender, the top three childhood sports reported by men were Australian football (27%), cricket (25%), and football/soccer (19%) and for women were netball (44%), swimming (13%), and dancing (12%); and the top childhood sports reported by individuals who identified as either “non-binary,” “questioning,” or “don’t know” were swimming (24%) and then athletics, Australian football and cricket, all at 18%. Lastly, the majority of respondents (70%) indicated they are sexually attracted to only people from the opposite sex. In descending order, the rest of the sample indicated sexual attraction to: primarily people from the other sex (8%); people from the two sexes (5%); primarily people from the same sex (2%); only people from the same sex (2%); and the remaining individuals indicated they were questioning, had never thought about it, preferred not to answer or were asexual (13%).

Prevalence of the Types of Violence

The majority of the survey respondents reported experiencing psychological violence/neglect (76%) or physical violence (66%) when participating in sport as a child (Table 2). More than one-third of all respondents reported experiencing sexual violence (38%). Women and gender diverse individuals experienced higher rates (significantly higher for women, $p=.049$) of psychological violence and neglect as a child compared to men. Women had

Table 2. Frequency of Each Type and Sub-Type of Interpersonal Violence^a Experienced by Children in Community Sport: By Respondents' Gender.

Violence type	Total Sample		Men		Women		Gender Diverse Individuals	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Psychological/neglect	864	76.4	298	72.5	549	78.5*	17	76.5
Psychological	863	79.4	297	74.1	549	82.0*	17	88.2
Neglect	779	26.6	275	18.2	488	30.9*	16	37.5
Sexual	845	38.1	294	33	534	40.3*	17	58.8
Harassment	844	37.6	294	32.7	533	39.6*	17	58.8
SA no contact	822	4.1	280	2.4	520	5	16	6.3
SA with contact	818	4.0	285	3.2	518	4.4	15	6.7
Physical	834	65.6	295	65.8	522	64.9	17	82.4

Note. N=overall sample size per category; SA=sexual abuse.
^aLow threshold violence, that is, reported at least one experience.
 *Indicates significant difference at $p < .05$ between men and women.

higher rates of both overall sexual violence ($p = .039$) and sexual harassment ($p = .027$) than men. Women also reported experiencing higher rates of sexual abuse with and without contact as a child than men did; however the differences were not statistically significant.

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of an individual having experienced one or more types of IV during their childhood sport participation. One-third of respondents reported having experienced all three forms of IV (not necessarily at the same time) in community sport as a child. There was further overlap in the experiences of physical and psychological violence (25%), and psychological and sexual violence (13%). Eighteen percent (18%) of the overall sample indicated they had never experienced any form of violence in sport as a child.

Rates of Reported Violence Perpetrated by Peers, Coaches, and Parents

Table 3 shows that peer sport players perpetrated the highest prevalence of any type of violence (73%), followed by coaches (60%), and parents (35%). Women reported higher rates of violence ($p = .001$) from a parent as a child than men.

Table 4 illustrates the breakdown of the sub-types of violence by perpetrator. Results indicate that the highest frequencies of experiences of childhood violence in the survey respondents were peer psychological violence (69%),

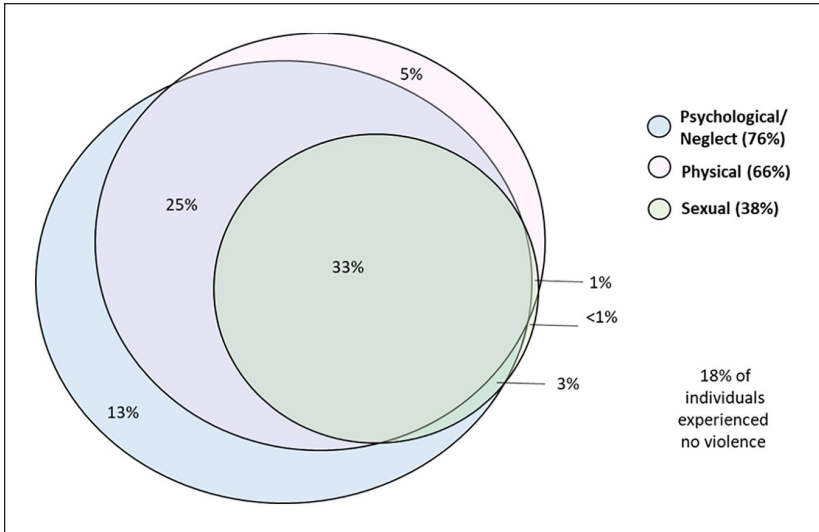


Figure 1. Frequencies of occurrence of different types of violence.

Table 3. Prevalence of IV^a Experienced by Children in Community Sport Perpetrated by Peers, Coaches, and Parents: By Respondents' Gender.

Perpetrator	Total Sample		Men		Women		Gender Diverse Individuals	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Peer	884	73	307	70	560	74.3	17	82.4
Coach	825	59.9	288	56.9	521	60.8	16	81.3
Parent	784	35.1	276	27.5	493	38.9*	15	46.7

Note. N = overall sample size per category.

^aLow threshold violence, that is, reported at least one experience.

*Indicates significant difference at $p < .05$ between men and women.

followed by coach physical violence (55%), and coach psychological violence (54%). The frequencies with which gender diverse individuals experienced childhood psychological (81%, $p = .026$) and physical (81%, $p = .035$) violence from a coach were significantly greater than the men and women groups combined. The rate of childhood peer sexual harassment was also relatively high in the total sample (31%), with gender diverse individuals experiencing significantly higher rates (59%, $p = .014$) than men and women

Table 4. Frequencies of Each Sub-Type of IV^a Experienced by Children in Community Sport: By Type of Perpetrator and by Respondents' Gender.

Violence	Perpetrator	Total Sample		Men		Women		Gender Diverse Individuals	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Psychological	Peer Athlete	886	68.8	308	63.6	561	71.5*	17	76.5
	Coach	825	53.8	288	49.7	521	55.3	16	81.3[^]
Neglect	Parent	784	29.7	276	22.8	493	33.1*	15	46.7
	Coach	824	20.8	287	13.6	521	24.2*	16	37.5
Sexual harassment	Parent	761	13.5	270	7	477	17*	14	21.4
	Peer Athlete	883	31.4	306	29.4	560	31.6	17	58.8[^]
Sexual abuse no contact	Coach	822	15.5	286	8	520	18.8*	16	37.5[^]
	Coach	822	4.1	286	2.4	520	5	16	6.3
Sexual abuse with contact	Peer Athlete	879	1.6	304	2.3	559	1.1	16	6.3
	Coach	822	2.8	286	1	520	3.7*	16	6.3
Physical	Peer Athlete	883	28.9	306	38.5	560	22.9*	17	52.9[^]
	Coach	825	55.3	288	50.7	521	57	16	81.3[^]
	Parent	784	16.1	276	15.6	493	15.6	15	40[^]

Note. N = overall sample size per category.

^aLow threshold violence, that is, reported at least one experience.

*Indicates significant difference at $p < .05$ between men and women.

[^]Significant difference ($p < .05$) between gender diverse individuals and men and women combined.

Bold text indicates significant OR values.

combined (31%). Compared to men, women further experienced significantly higher rates of childhood neglect from either parents (17%, $p < .001$) or coaches (24%, $p < .001$) as well as sexual harassment (19%, $p < .001$) and sexual abuse with contact (4%, $p = .030$) perpetrated by a coach.

Socio-Demographic Predictors for IV

Results from the multiple logistic regression analyses, as displayed in Table 5, indicate that psychological violence was less likely to be experienced by those who were older at the time of survey completion (“age” category) ($OR\ 0.97$), had a disability at the time of completion of the survey ($OR\ 1.89$) or practiced a higher number of hours each week as children ($OR\ 1.07$). Non-heterosexual individuals were more likely to report sexual violence ($OR\ 1.91$). Physical violence was less likely to be reported by older (at the time of survey completion) individuals ($OR\ 0.98$), individuals who played sport a higher number of hours per week ($OR\ 1.07$), and who played only team sports ($OR\ 1.49$).

Logistic regression models fitted to the violence sub-types (results not tabulated) indicate that men were less likely than women to report experiencing neglect as a child ($OR\ 0.55$, $p = .01$), and those who were not heterosexual were almost twice as likely as heterosexuals to report experiencing neglect as a child ($OR\ 1.77$, $p = .009$).

Discussion

This is a first national study in Australia to investigate the frequencies of experiences of psychological/ neglect, physical, and sexual violence against children in community sport using a validated survey tool (VTAQ). In this sample of 886 Australian adults, 82% reported having experienced some form of IV during childhood sport participation, and the majority of individuals in our sample experienced at least two types of IV and 33% experienced all three types. While these results are novel in Australian sport, they are relatively unsurprising given that much of the available evidence suggests that individuals often experience more than one type of violence (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2020; Vertommen et al., 2016).

Psychological violence was the most prevalent type of violence (76%) reported in our study. This finding mirrors those of Parent and Vaillancourt-Morel (2020) who reported frequencies of 81% for psychological violence using the same survey tool. Both the frequencies in Australia and Canada were almost twice those found in a larger prevalence study in the Netherlands/Belgium that used a different survey tool as well as a representative sample (Vertommen et al., 2016). With reference to the different tools, the subtle

Table 5. Results of Multiple Logistic Regression Analyses for Three Types of Interpersonal Violence Towards Athletes.

Risk Factors ^a	Psychological Violence and Neglect Nagelkerke R ² = .113				Physical Violence Nagelkerke R ² = .088				Sexual Violence Nagelkerke R ² = .091						
	95% CI		p	OR	95% CI		p	OR	95% CI		p	OR	95% CI		
	Lower	Upper			Lower	Upper			Lower	Upper			Lower	Upper	
Age	0.97	0.95	0.98	<.001	0.98	0.97	0.99	<.001	0.99	0.97	0.99	0.98	1.00	1.00	.07
Sex	0.88	0.59	1.33	.55	1.20	0.83	1.74	.33	0.75	0.51	1.10	0.51	1.10	1.10	.14
Sexual preference	0.99	0.62	1.59	.97	1.52	0.99	2.31	.05	1.91	1.29	2.82	1.29	2.82	2.82	.00
Disability	1.89	1.05	3.37	.03	1.58	0.96	2.60	.07	1.51	0.96	2.37	0.96	2.37	2.37	.08
Hours of weekly practice	1.07	1.02	1.11	<.001	1.07	1.03	1.11	.00	1.07	1.03	1.10	1.03	1.10	1.10	<.001
Sport type															
Individual only				.35				.02							.60
Team only	1.38	0.85	2.24	.19	1.49	0.96	2.31	.07	1.16	0.74	1.82	0.74	1.82	1.82	.51
Both	1.41	0.83	2.39	.20	0.01	2.01	1.23	3.27	2.08	1.28	0.79	1.28	0.79	0.79	.31

Note. OR = Odds Ratio.

^aAge: OR per year of age; Gender: men relative to women; sexual preference: other versus heterosexual; Disability: yes versus no; Hours of participation: OR per hour; Sport type: team only and both versus individual only.

Bold text indicates significant OR values.

variations in the conceptualization of psychological violence as well as differences in the number of items (VTAQ has more items for this type of violence) could explain some of the disparate findings.

Rates of physical violence (65.6%) in our sample were almost double those reported by Parent and Vaillancourt-Morel (2020) (39.9%), and six times those found by Vertommen et al. (2016) (11%). It is possible some of the discrepancy between our findings and those of Parent and Vaillancourt-Morel (2020) are due to the splitting of three original physical survey items into nine physical items, as explained in the methodology section. However, that alone is unlikely to account for the difference and could suggest differences existing between countries and/or resulting from the aforementioned differences in sampling and instruments.

Our findings for sexual violence follow a similar pattern to previous work, with the most common experience being sexual harassment (37.6%) followed by sexual abuse with contact (4.0%) and without contact (4.1%). Not all studies distinguish between the subtypes of sexual violence in this same manner; Vertommen et al. (2016) implemented a severity score for the types of IV, with sexual abuse with contact ranking as most severe. Their finding of 5.5% for severe sexual violence is similar to ours (4.1%).

Understanding who perpetrates various types of IV in youth sport is important to develop tailored prevention and response strategies, and yet, few national prevalence studies have explored this aspect of violence (Vertommen et al., 2016). While much of the IV in sport literature has focused on coaches' abuse of athletes, there is an increasing focus on peer-to-peer abuse (Bjornseth & Szabo, 2018; Brackenridge & Fasting, 2002; Johansson et al., 2016). In this current study, 73% of individuals reported at least one instance of IV perpetrated by a peer, and 60% experienced some type of IV from a coach. When exploring the frequencies of types of IV by perpetrator, our data indicates that 69% of individuals experienced psychological violence perpetrated by peers and 54% experienced it from a coach. While not many studies to date have explored the perpetrator profile for subcategories of IV, one study highlighted the predominance of peers as perpetrators of IV in sport (Vertommen et al., 2017) and further concluded that this was most frequently present in the form of psychological violence. The high percentage (>50%) of individuals in our sample who experienced coach perpetrated physical and psychological violence has not been reported previously, though Vertommen et al. (2017) did illustrate that of those who experienced physical or psychological violence, 43% and 38% respectively indicated the coach as the perpetrator. Overall this trend of high rates of peer-to-peer violence as well as coach violence speaks to the potential issue of violence normalization within the sport environment (Fournier et al., 2021; Parent & Fortier, 2018; Vertommen

et al., 2018). Indeed, a recent article by Fortier et al. (2020) speaks to this point in more depth, highlighting children's perceptions of how violence can be normalized as a necessary component of sport to win, prove their worthiness, or to not end up a victim themselves. This suggests that to truly address prevention of violence in sport, we must first broach the topic of why and how violence is currently being normalized, particularly violence that, if conducted external to the sport environment, would not be permitted (Fortier et al., 2020).

The role of parents in the perpetration of violence against children in sport is poorly understood at present, but is of critical importance, particularly at the community sport level when parents make up two-thirds of the sport volunteer workforce in Australia (Sport Australia, 2021). Our data is some of the first to illustrate the prevalence of various types of violence in sport perpetrated by parents, and the high rates, particularly for psychological violence (~30%) are alarming. Some of the items underpinning psychological violence (e.g., criticizing performance) also align with issues of normalizing violence under the notion of a win-at-all-costs mentality (Fortier et al., 2020). Prevention of violence in sport efforts will need to consider how this dual role of parent and sport volunteer (coaches, managers, support staff) further complicates any potential initiatives—for example, if the parent perpetuates the violence in sport but is also the coach, who should the child approach?

With regard to differences in individuals' experiences of IV in sport according to socio-demographic characteristics, our data highlights a gendered experience, both in terms of frequencies of violence and types of violence. Women experienced significantly higher rates of both psychological and sexual violence as a child than men. While the percentage difference between genders was only ~2% for each type of IV, data from studies outside the sporting context supports the notion that women and girls experience higher rates of sexual violence (Pereda et al., 2009; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). In the sporting context, the data is less clear with some studies reporting that girls experience higher levels of sexual violence than boys (Vertommen et al., 2016) and others reporting the opposite (Bermon et al., 2021) or no difference (Parent et al., 2020). These discrepancies can be due to a range of factors including the use of different measuring tools, disparate classifications and definitions of sexual violence, the established stigma and thus underreporting of sexual violence by boys and men and/or differences between countries. Another potential explanation for the discrepancies could be related to the #MeToo movement (Caputi et al., 2019). This movement increased public awareness of sexual violence against women and men and could have, to some extent, reduced the stigma around anonymous reporting for both genders. Internet traffic around the topic (including how to report) increased following this movement, so it is possible

that it could have increased the likelihood of responses, to later surveys on the topic (Caputi et al., 2019). Furthering the issue of gender-based differences of IV in sport, in our study, women had significantly higher rates than men of peer psychological or physical violence, parental neglect or psychological violence and coach neglect, sexual harassment and sexual abuse with contact. In fact, there were no categories of IV where men reported higher rates of childhood violence than women. Additionally, while those who do not identify as either a man or a woman are often not included in statistical analyses due to relatively low sample sizes, their inclusion within our analyses highlighted that they experience significantly higher rates of IV from coaches (psychological, physical, and sexual harassment), peers (sexual harassment and physical), and even parents (physical), when compared to men and women combined. To our knowledge, this study is the first to report the childhood prevalence rates of psychological, physical, and sexual violence in sport for gender diverse people. It is possible that the high rates we present are, in part, due to our convenience sampling, but it is also plausible that these individuals, being of a gender minority, could experience significantly higher rates of IV, as has been shown in other contexts outside of sport (Witcomb et al., 2019). These finding needs to be confirmed in a larger representative sample of the Australian population.

In terms of risk factors predicting experiences of IV, we found that gender (woman), younger age, non-heterosexual orientation as well as a current disability were associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing one or more types of IV in sport as a child. While women had significantly higher rates of various types of IV than men, gender was not a significant risk factor for most types of IV. However, women were almost twice as likely to experience neglect during childhood as compared to men. This finding further supports the need to classify violence as precisely as possible in order to accurately capture the nuances of sex-based and/or gendered violence. Younger age at the time of survey completion was associated with higher likelihood of reporting psychological or physical violence and this aligns with the findings of the retrospective study conducted by Vertommen et al. (2016). Given our study was also a retrospective one, and respondents reported their current age, the significance of age as a predictor shows that IV is more prevalent in younger respondents, which suggests that the experience of IV in sport is a current issue. Younger adults being more likely to experience violence, could also be reflective of a memory bias whereby older respondents potentially remember less about their past experiences, though this bias could be reduced in our sample due to the explicit and specific nature of the types of violence presented (Hardt & Rutter, 2004). Non-heterosexual individuals were twice as likely to experience sexual

violence as a child in community sport. This finding aligns with previous work indicating members of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community are more likely to experience violence as a child either within or outside of sport (Balsam et al., 2005; Vertommen et al., 2016). Individuals with disability were twice as likely to experience psychological violence. Other studies have similarly found that people with disability had higher rates of not only psychological violence (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2020) but also physical and sexual violence (Vertommen et al., 2016). Indeed, research shows that disability is an established risk factor for violence (in children and adults) both within and outside the sporting context (Hughes et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2012; Vertommen et al., 2016).

This study also shows the association of sport-specific factors with experiences of violence. We found that hours of practice per week, and team-based sport were both associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing one or more types of IV. For every 1-hour increase in sport participation, there was a 7% increase in the risk of experiencing any of the three forms of IV. This was also a finding in Parent and Vaillancourt-Morel (2020), which could be explained by the simple fact that the more hours that children participate in sport in each week, the more they are exposed to the sport environment and the higher their risk is of experiencing some form of IV. In addition, increasing the number of hours of training per week could be an indication that children are specializing in one sport to increasingly focus on performance development, and studies have shown that higher level of performance can increase the risk of experiencing IV (Vertommen et al., 2016). The finding of team-based sport being a risk factor for physical violence mirrors the findings of Parent and Vaillancourt-Morel (2020), but should be investigated further in future studies as it is not entirely clear why it would be a risk factor for physical violence and not the other forms.

Limitations

While the VTAQ is a validated tool, it has not yet been validated for use in English (Parent et al., 2020) nor has it been implemented retrospectively, though the authors suggested this was a potential option for future implementations of the tool (Parent et al., 2019). The convenience sampling technique creates a self-selection sample bias, potentially attracting those individuals who may be more likely to report experiences of violence. Efforts were made with initial advertisements to attract all members of the public with general, non-specific language, requesting participants to report on their “experiences in sport.” However, due to ethical considerations of the study, the consent form on the landing page of the survey did explicitly

state the survey would ask about experiences of violence in sport. Our sample also comprised an over-representation of women (63.3%), which limits the generalizability of the findings. Respondents were also only able to indicate if they had a current disability and their current sexual orientation. They could not further qualify the time of disability onset (at birth or acquired later in life) nor their sexual orientation when they were under 18 years of age. Therefore, it is possible that some individuals who reported having a current disability could have been able-bodied during childhood and some individuals could have had a different sexual orientation during childhood. Similarly, the current data does not allow us to draw conclusions with regard to when (at what age) or where (in what sport) a specific instance of violence occurred. Rather, the focus is on gathering broad information on total experiences of violence during all of childhood. A final limitation we note is the relatively small sample size of individuals identifying as gender diverse ($n=17$). The inclusion of these responses within the broader study is an important step forward, but we acknowledge that the small sample limits the generalizability of the findings. Most of these limitations can be addressed through conducting survey research with a representative sample of the population, which is a critical next step in understanding the prevalence of violence against children in Australian sport.

Implications and Conclusion

The results of this study highlight some key considerations for researchers, sport stakeholders, and policy makers. Many respondents reported experiences of IV in sport, with a third experiencing all three different forms of violence. The diversity in the types of violence experiences highlights the importance of measuring and reporting on various categories of violence. In order to have comparative data both nationally for longitudinal studies and internationally to further our global understanding of violence in sport, the use of the same validated tool is critical. Additionally, special consideration should be given to the inclusion and indeed direct recruitment of individuals from minority groups (inclusive of those from gender, ethnic, and sexual minorities as well as those with a disability), as these individuals are more likely to experience violence in sport. It is critical for future research to replicate this study in a representative sample of the population, and to implement prevalence studies longitudinally so that the interconnectedness of violence types can be examined.

For policy and practice, this study demonstrates that, like other social institutions, for example, family, school, and church, sport is not immune from the issue of violence toward children. Our findings offer a number of

key considerations for policy in practice. First, the diversity in terms of both the type of violence and the perpetrator provides novel insights that can inform educational campaigns and assist in creating more targeted interventions. For example, while peer psychological violence has been frequently highlighted in the literature, our novel findings of high rates of coach physical violence and parent psychological violence indicate that initiatives need likely include targeted education on appropriate behaviors for these stakeholders while also defining types of violence within the sporting context. While types of violence can be broadly defined, the inclusion of sport-specific examples (e.g., coaches throwing clipboards, parents asking children to play while injured, etc.), will assist in combatting violent behaviors which are currently normalized within the sporting environment. Our study also suggests that it is important for prevention and response policies to take into consideration the gendered experience of IV, while also emphasizing that any child can experience IV. Regularly measuring the prevalence of violence against children in community sport will be an important way to evaluate the effectiveness of policy initiatives.

IV against children in Australian community sport is prevalent in all forms, is gendered and is perpetrated by peers, coaches, and, to a lesser extent, parents. The media, policy makers, and sport stakeholders can continue to play an important role in acknowledging, recognizing, responding to, and in preventing this problem so that the sporting environment is safe and nurturing for all children.

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Note

1. In this article, the term “participant” is used to describe individuals who participate in grassroots organized community sport. The term “athlete” is used to describe individuals who compete at high-performance and elite levels.

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Tine Vertommen, PhD is criminologist and researcher in the Forensic Psychology Research Unit at Thomas More University, and in the Social Epidemiology and Health Policy research unit at the University of Antwerp in Belgium. She has led studies on prevalence of violence in sport in Belgium and the Netherlands, and now leads the Belgian partnership in the European CASES project about childhood abuse in sport.

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