

**RALIANCE**

Ending Sexual Violence in One Generation



# THE POWER OF SPORT

ADVANCEMENTS AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS  
FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE  
PREVENTION IN SPORT

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## ADVANCEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN SPORT

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With input from the Sport and Sexual Violence Prevention meeting participants.

### BACKGROUND

#### RALIANCE and Center on Gender Equity and Health Partnership on Sport and Sexual Violence

For the past three years, RALIANCE and the Center on Gender Equity and Health (GEH) at UC San Diego have built a multidisciplinary collaboration focusing on the unique position of sports as a platform through which we can promote prosocial norms and model healthy relationships to prevent sexual violence. RALIANCE is a national partnership dedicated to ending sexual violence in one generation. RALIANCE partners with a wide range of organizations to improve their cultures and create environments free from sexual harassment, misconduct and abuse. GEH is an academic and research center focused on reducing gender inequities and gender-based violence. A partnership between the two organizations developed in 2017 when RALIANCE launched their Sport and Prevention Center that includes a report developed by GEH. RALIANCE and GEH has hosted three in-person meetings with experts to discuss the current state of the field of sport and sexual violence (SV) prevention research, identify gaps, and develop a plan of action for future research. The group has collectively produced publications, national reports, and presentations at professional conferences focused on etiological studies, intervention evaluations, and practice-research partnerships providing insight into the value of sport for prevention of sexual violence. In February 2020, we held our third meeting of experts with the goal of reviewing our three-year progress and prioritizing the next stage work for this collaborative to build partnerships and undertake new directions in this arena.



[RALIANCE.org/Sport-Prevention-Center/](https://RALIANCE.org/Sport-Prevention-Center/)

# SPORT AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION RESEARCH CONVENING

February 2020

On February 7, 2020 researchers and sexual violence prevention practitioners from across the nation met for the third meeting of this group. We invited academic researchers, sports medicine physicians, athletic coaches and trainers, sports organizations, and prevention specialists to participate to ensure broad expertise and input into our understanding of the state of the field. (See appendix for list of attendees.) Since initiation of this collective, our group has expanded to include a broader array of expert practitioners working at the intersection of implementation science research and sports programming. These attendees are engaged in work occurring across the developmental spectrum, from youth to collegiate to adult athletes. This includes leisure, elite, collegiate, and professional athletes, including representatives working with the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic National Governing Bodies (NGBs) of sport.

The day began with a roundtable of updates from the participants on their work since the last convening, which resulted in fruitful group conversations. Below are a few highlights from these updates:

- Dr. Miller and Paul Mulbah published a paper on the coach-delivered, Coaching Boys Into Men prevention program. The randomized clinical trial was conducted among 41 middle schools with a total of 979 male middle school athletes. The Coaching Boys Into Men prevention program was 50% effective in increasing bystander behavior and 75% in reducing abusive behaviors.<sup>1</sup>
- Dr. Kaufman authored a paper on “powerful perpetrators” in youth serving organizations (YSO) involving the examination of seventeen prominent child sexual abuse inquiries and case studies. The authors offered a series of recommendations including an argument for the creation of a second wave of prevention efforts within YSOs that are “upward focused” (i.e., directed toward safety policies and practices targeting YSO leadership, board members and donors). This is in contrast to existing prevention policies/practices that are downward facing and intended to apply to YSO staff and volunteers.<sup>2</sup>
- The Center on Gender Equity and Health, GEH and the California Coalition Against Sexual Assault (CALCASA) collaborated on a systematic literature review on sexual violence in the United States between 2015 and 2019. The review found evidence to identify sport as a potential risk factor for perpetration of sexual violence, but also for engagement with sport as an effective means of sexual violence prevention with adolescents.<sup>3</sup>



- Dr. Raj and Jennifer Yore were authors on a paper examining the effect sport had on adolescent populations in Bihar, India. This study found that sports engagement promoted social participation among adolescents and prevented early marriage and promoted contraceptive use among girls.<sup>4</sup>
- RALIANCE, in collaboration with Michigan State University, hosted an invitation-only listening session for athletic trainers from Division I, Division II and Division III colleges and universities on how athletic trainers can be leaders in sexual violence prevention. Approximately 20 athletic trainers, sexual violence researchers, and representatives from the NCAA gathered at the B1G Headquarters in Chicago, Illinois to develop recommendations for the profession. Dr. McCauley and RALIANCE’s David Lee were accepted to present findings at the 2020 National Conference on Health and Domestic Violence.

## CURRENT STATE OF THE FIELD

### Advancements and Persistent Gaps

After the roundtable of updates, the group engaged in a group exercise to highlight recent advancements in the field and the research gaps identified during our 2019 meeting that persist across the following priority areas:

- theoretical underpinnings,
- etiology of sexual violence,
- interdisciplinary collaboration,
- and research-practice implications.

## THEORY

### Advancements

The field has made important progress in its integration of theory, the first priority area, by drawing from a broad array of different disciplines (e.g. psychology, public health, criminal justice, sociology), which may inform prevention efforts designed to reduce sexual violence in sport. Drawing from a broader range of theories offers opportunities to utilize more “mature” theories that underlie empirically-based prevention efforts in other disciplines. It also expands our ability to ensure the inclusion of critical prevention components, such those that ensure a gendered perspective, considerations about intersectionality, and address concerns across the social-ecological continuum. Based on planning from the group’s second meeting, Dr. Kaufman is leading a work group that is completing a comprehensive review of theories pertinent to the prevention of sexual violence in sport for a special issue to be published in a peer-reviewed journal.

### Gaps in the field

During this meeting, it was noted that a number of significant gaps in theories available to form a strong foundation for the prevention of sexual violence in sport remain.

In the sport and SV literature, there appears to be an insufficient use of theory to guide the development and enforcement of policy and practice, despite improved availability of these theories for application. Further, a single unifying framework or comprehensive ecological thinking that incorporates multiple theories within it does not exist; such a framework would aide in the development of comprehensive prevention efforts. The comprehensive review of theories noted above is working to address this gap in the field so that it can be applied diversely across sport (e.g., level of sport and the contact level of sport) and populations (e.g., women and men, LGBTQ+, people of color).



## ETIOLOGY

### Advancements

In the second priority research area, etiology of sport and SV, there have been important advancements in our understanding of social norms and networks, including gender norms and gendered peer networks, and individual attitudes and beliefs that shape perpetration of sexual violence. Increased attention has also been given to early adolescents ages 10-14, including development of manuscripts/papers on that age group generated by members of this collaborative. This is an important advancement given that gender-based conflicts occur early in the developmental life course. Recent publications highlight the relevance of protective factors related to social support and belonging, which can be fostered by sport engagement, reduce risk for bullying and sexual harassment among early adolescents, and buffer transitions from exposure to childhood experiences of violence to perpetration of dating violence in adolescence.<sup>5,6</sup>

### Gaps in the field

There is inadequate analysis of how factors at the outer levels of the social-ecological model influence risk and protective factors for gender-based violence in the context of sport; in particular, we need more research on the role of sport policy environments, institutional and organizational climates and culture, and accountability structures. Second and related is the grossly inadequate focus on protective factors inherent to sport that promote pro-social behaviors among youth, including emphasis on responsibility and teamwork. While we know that we can effectively train coaches to use their role as mentor and role model to alter restrictive and damaging gender norms and catalyze a reduction in gender-based violence among youth, we have less understanding of the mechanisms through which these changes occur. We need more mechanistically focused research, including qualitative as well as quantitative methods to provide these insights. Finally, we need greater focus on improvement of measurement of both SV and sport engagement to ensure we are effectively and accurately studying the issue; we are likely undercounting both among youth and inadequately representing chronicity and intensity of experiences related to both as well.



Finally, a significant remaining gap is in understanding the cultural and socio-economic factors at play among vulnerable or minority groups of athletes such as LGBTQ+ populations,<sup>7</sup> specific racial or ethnic groups, athletes with disabilities, immigrants, and refugees. For example, an analysis of the Green Dot bystander intervention program delivered to high school students showed a reduction in violence perpetration and victimization among sexual majority students, but didn't see the same effects among sexual minority students.<sup>8</sup> There is a need to differentiate and tailor prevention programs for these specific groups, and more research is needed to understand the impact of education programs across both groups. Currently available research on one population of athletes cannot be applied to each subpopulation within it or to a different population of athletes. Additionally, risk factors (e.g., adverse experiences in childhood) and risk behaviors (e.g., alcohol use) may not operate similarly in their association with SV for different subpopulations. Intersectionality and the role of this in unequal risk for SV experiences and accountability for those who commit SV requires more attention, and these efforts must also consider effects of the elite positioning of a given athlete in how SV may occur and is handled after the fact.

# INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

## Advancements

In the third area of interdisciplinary collaboration, a few areas of advancement were discussed. It was widely acknowledged that the field is doing a better job at getting “the right people to the table” to ensure the building of logistically practical and evidence-based approaches for sport as a platform and an avenue to prevent SV. We now see more practitioners working in sport engaged in research on sport and SV, and this is resulting in a growing number of publications<sup>9</sup> and conference presentations<sup>10</sup> with both researchers and practitioners included as authors. Simultaneously youth-serving organizations and large national sports institutions such as the NCAA,<sup>11</sup> and US Center for Safe Sport (through its prevention work at the organizational level with NGBs recognized by the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee<sup>12</sup>) are increasing trainings, developing policies and protocols, and utilizing toolboxes for sexual violence prevention activities. Importantly, this work is being done by practitioner and advocacy groups (e.g., RALIANCE, CALCASA, NSVRC), with strong partnerships with academic and research bodies working in this field.



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## Gaps in the field

Still, some gaps remain in interdisciplinary collaboration between sport and SV research and prevention experts. SV prevention efforts need to increase work with youth and student athletes, including athlete survivors, and learn how we might better engage and support them. Others discussed the need to get athletic departments and community experts and organizations involved and to think more about the role and influence of health care providers (team physicians, athletic trainers, mental health) in prevention. Athletic trainer/provider partnerships can be difficult given that providers already have a number of responsibilities, and work in this area can yield an added burden unless we see greater institutionalization of research-practice partnerships. Another gap in collaboration noted was the less frequent collaboration of research and prevention experts with youth serving organizations (YSOs), such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of America and YMCA/YWCAs, regarding issues of sexual violence in sport. While these organizations do not solely provide sport specific activities, sport is often a strong component which involves many of the children/adolescents that they serve. Given the large number YSOs that include sport components, there is a critical need to better understand prevention in this area and to offer practical protocols to enhance safety.

We also continue to see inadequate involvement of leadership across the sport pipeline from schools and youth organizations serving minors to colleges, adult sport leagues and elite athletics.<sup>13</sup> Most interventions work with students/athletes and coaches/advocates directly, but engagement from leadership is also needed for buy in, reinforcement, role modeling and creation of high-level champions. Without institutional and leadership engagement, sustaining SV prevention programs will be difficult. Research suggests that our current prevention efforts may not be effective with those in more elite or powerful positions within a given structure, particularly in the absence of accountability from leadership.<sup>14</sup> Relatedly, we also need to think about what leadership training and development looks like, including what effective leadership looks like and what investments we need to see made from leadership.

## RESEARCH-PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

### Advancements

There have been a number of advancements in sport-based prevention interventions for SV. First, our group discussed the increasing number of programs for adolescents, the age group where sexual violence perpetration and victimization is often first occurring. To that end, we focused on “Coaching Boys Into Men,” an effective prevention program for middle- and high-school aged youth in reducing sexual and dating violence perpetration.<sup>15</sup> We also discussed “Athletes As Leaders,” a promising program for female athletes, though the evaluation of this program is still being conducted.<sup>16,17</sup> At the collegiate level, we also discussed the NCAA efforts to prevent sexual violence through their recently updated NCAA Sexual Violence Prevention Tool Kit and Association-wide policy that requires annual sexual violence prevention education and attestation.<sup>18</sup>

The field has also made progress working towards organizational change such as assessing what college athletic departments are doing around sexual violence prevention education<sup>19</sup> and in interventions such as the U.S. Center for SafeSport’s work with Dr. Kaufman on the Sport Situational Prevention Approach.<sup>20</sup> Dr. Milroy and members of this research group are developing a manuscript on this ecological approach to prevention, which focuses on applying the social ecological model for health promotion (SEMHP<sup>21</sup>) to the application of SV prevention in sport. Movement on this issue is important as current strategies at the organization level continue to be used despite a lack of evidence of its effectiveness. For example, organizations continue to use background checks as a means of trying to reduce risk for SV within the organization, but this shows no effect and has problematic legal implications.<sup>22</sup> Finally, we also discussed how there has been progress in assessing SV prevention education provided to sports management students, including the content and effectiveness of their current training.<sup>23</sup> This is promising because those students will be the sport employees of the future, operating at multiple levels of the sport ecosystem to affect change.



## Gaps in the field

A number of gaps were identified in the area of practical research implications, including gaps in implementation science, which was a particular sub-area of interest to the group. First, there are still limited prevention interventions with demonstrated impact. Additionally, while a number of interventions and system-level toolkits and other technical assistance documents have been developed in the past three years, there is little to no evaluation of these efforts. We also need to understand how risk and protective factors<sup>24</sup> for sexual violence perpetration in sport that have been identified can actually be intervened upon. The group also identified the need for tailoring prevention programs for specific populations and specific groups within sport by coaches, administrators, athletes, and type of sport. We also discussed how to expand program reach through online means as well as the importance of interpersonal relationships to support social norms change, and the potential conflict of trying to do both in the same program model.

There is also interest in better understanding the mechanisms of change in Sport and SV prevention interventions. In a given intervention, there are multiple components and modules covering topics such as bullying, consent, and gender norms. However, we do not fully understand which pieces are driving change. We also need to understand what other programs, or exposures, are occurring in the community so we can isolate the effects of the interventions.

Another gap is the lack of policy evidence and policy evaluation in the field. We know little about the effectiveness of policy-level interventions. Despite some work advancing this area, there is a need to track progress and hold institutions accountable for policy implementation as well as to work to create cultural change. The U.S. Center for SafeSport and the NCAA have each instituted their own accountability structures for their relevant membership that each show promise, but few others have followed.

Relatedly, there is a need to revisit zero tolerance policies for alcohol use on college campuses, because they can lead to an underreporting of sexual violence if victims and bystanders are afraid to report sexual violence incidents because they were drinking or knew of others who were drinking.

The group also discussed the need to look across the pipeline of institutions from little league to high school to elite amateur sports to pro sports and the developmental trajectory of athletes as they engage with these institutions to see if our prevention messaging is developmentally tailored. It would be beneficial to take a systems level approach to looking at the prevention messaging and the policies that dictate SV prevention programming, to understand better how we can lay the foundational components of sexual violence prevention and then build upon it throughout the lifespan of an athlete's career.

The day's most in-depth conversation focused on the how we can ensure accountability for people who commit sexual violence without reinforcing problematic criminalization practices. It brought to light some important and timely approaches we as a field have not integrated into sport and SV theory or implementation, including transformative and restorative justice practices.<sup>25,26,27</sup> Frequently, punishments for sexual violence perpetration tend to fall into two binary categories: the athlete faces no consequences or the athlete is permanently removed from sport. These punitive measures often result in the athlete facing no consequences. Outside of these punitive measures, there is no other way for survivors to seek accountability from offenders, which should be the goal of any process. Punishments are not accountability. Accountability requires the person who committed harm to take responsibility for their actions and make the survivor and relevant community whole. Punishment enacts a penalty but requires no acknowledgement that the offender has harmed someone and no attempt to make the survivor whole. Sport institutions need accountability structures with rehabilitation. More work is needed to consider how to provide opportunities for rehabilitation, behavior change, and accountability. The group concluded that an individual cannot be defined solely by the worst thing they have done nor should the punishment of that person be the goal of our response. We must consider cases holistically, remembering to respect the survivor and prioritize their well-being, while preventing future harm.

## ACTION STEPS TO MOVE THE FIELD FORWARD

After this discussion, attendees broke out into groups of three or four to further discuss potential aspirations for the next year and the next four years. We wrapped up the day by sharing these ideas with the larger group and solidifying action plans, with a reflection on addressing the above noted gaps in the field. We summarize concrete action steps, which fell under several overarching areas requiring focus to advance the field and address identified gaps:

### 1. **Greater clarity on the etiology of SV and how sport can be used to positively support prevention, including:**

- Focus on protective factors and the role of sport as a means of protection.
- Consideration of intersectionality and the role of the elite nature of sport or social positioning.
- Mixed methods research to understand mechanisms of risk and change.
- Additional social and behavioral research such as further social network analyses to understand the relationship between sport involvement and SV.

### 2. **Better understanding of what works and what doesn't, including:**

- Rigorous evaluations of already implemented interventions that have no evidence base.
- Further implementation science studies to better understanding the mechanisms of change in interventions by applying approaches such as the MOST (multiphase optimization strategy) to unpack which components of interventions have effect.<sup>28</sup>
- Cost analyses and return on investment studies of sexual violence prevention interventions.

### 3. **Taking interventions to the next level, including:**

- Next level interventions where schools and teams have the ability to tailor programs to be more specific to their community needs.
- Moving interventions to the next stage in terms of greater intensity, because the existing interventions are really the introduction to concepts and not large-scale change.
- Comparing gender-specific interventions versus gender-inclusive interventions and the combination of the two within a community.
- Creating coach surveys and evaluations to understand the effect of program engagement on coaches' behaviors and gender norms.
- Moving interventions beyond coaches to including other influencers, mentors, and peer leaders.
- Measuring beyond sexual violence outcomes to also looking at sexual and gender stereotypes and norms, and other outcomes where there could be positive change measured.
- Moving sports interventions to community interventions by thinking about athletic departments and sport as embedded in a broader community, and accountability in the broader community.
- Synchronizing sexual violence education across the pipeline of sports engagement from youth sports to elite amateur sports to pro sports to ensure consistency and clear and developmentally appropriate learning outcomes at different levels, building upon the knowledge and behavioral change needed for prevention over time.

#### **4. Pulling from and inputting into other fields, including:**

- Pulling from other fields, like workplace sexual harassment and youth serving organizations, to learn from the work they have done, and how we can apply some of those lessons to sport.
- Inputting SV measures into the evaluations of other interventions with sport, such as alcohol and mental health interventions.
- Inputting SV and sport participation measures into large-scale surveys on health and well-being.

#### **5. Effecting change at a higher socio-ecological level, including:**

- Examining existing organizational policies, standards, and ethics codes to start conversations with school leaders and athletic directors about proactively addressing sexual violence.

#### **6. Exploring restorative and transformative justice, accountability, and rehabilitation including:**

- Re-examining the consequences of SV perpetration in sports and the broader effects. Looking at the range of consequences that exist across institutions to see how SV is sanctioned differently in different contexts and where there are responses that are not a binary all-or-nothing response. Identify consequences that exist with the goal of behavior change, evaluate the impact of those interventions, and make recommendations.
- Research to understand the role sport can play in reducing problematic sexual behaviors and in mediating the negative effects of adverse childhood outcomes on SV in adolescence and adulthood.

#### **7. Better sharing of research with practitioners and among this group, including:**

- Identifying key pieces of research and translating it into formats for practitioners that point to clear practice implications and limitations of the research.
- Taking what's already on the RALIANCE website about interventions and adding effectiveness to it so that everyone can understand what's out there and what works with which groups.
- Creating an online space for this group and a broader group to engage on sport and SV and create and share resources and information.

#### **8. Getting the right people at the table and involved in SV prevention, including:**

- Adding NFHS (National Federation of State High School Associations) representation to this meeting group.
- Further engaging athletic trainers, sports medicine physicians, and medical directors to equip them with skills, highlight their important role in SV prevention, and help coaches understand this role.

## CONCLUSION

Three years into our effort to move research and engagement on SV and sport forward, we see important advancements in theory, etiological research, understanding of developmental tailoring of interventions for prevention, and building of research-practice interventions for impact. Collaborations have been built and research has been advanced to publication and dissemination. However, our work is not complete. We continue to see the need to expand work across institutional levels and to engage institutional leadership to better support these developing efforts and ensure sustained programming focused on these areas. We also need broadening frameworks on how to effectively engage affected populations into prevention programming, to guide consideration of how we can support those who have been harmed, and to hold accountable those who have harmed without impeding their opportunity for redemption. Finally, we need to work in a more coordinated fashion across the sports pipeline to help ensure that we expand prevention messaging tailored to youth and build upon it across the developmental trajectory. Such an approach can ensure both prevention—as youth transition from childhood to adolescence and young adulthood—and positive contribution for change—as young adults become the role models for the next generation of children and adolescents.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to the participants who have joined these convenings over the last three years for continually pushing the field forward and to the staff at GEH and RALIANCE that were able to make these convenings possible.

## APPENDIX

### LIST OF ATTENDEES AND AFFILIATIONS

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## ENDNOTES

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