



UNABHÄNGIGE KOMMISSION
ZUR AUFARBEITUNG
SEXUELLEN KINDESMISSBRAUCHS

Summary

CASE STUDY

Sexual violence and child sexual abuse in the context of sports

**An analysis of confidential accounts and written reports from
the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in Germany**

Prof. Dr Bettina Rulofs, Dr Kathrin Wahnschaffe-Waldhoff,
Marilen Neeten, Annika Söllinger



SUMMARY

“If you don’t receive help as a child, you learn to stay silent.” (Senta)

As much as their experiences with sexual violence may differ, one thing that usually unites survivors is that in their youth, they were often not listened to, believed or helped and therefore fell silent. Reports shared by survivors of sexual violence and sexual abuse within sports are harrowing. They create an image of sports that does not fit in with its generally positive image. Yet exactly that makes it so difficult for survivors to receive help and attention for the suffering they have experienced within sports. Their reports shatter the positive sports narrative – which is precisely why they need to be heard.

The present study analyses reports collated by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in form of written reports and confidential oral accounts from people affected by sexual violence within sports. Sixty-one people told their own story; in eleven other instances, contemporary witnesses described sexual violence in sports. A total of 72 cases and their associated documents were included in this study. The inquiry also has access to further reports and accounts within sports; however, the present study is limited in scope to the cases available to it in transcribed form as of autumn 2021.

The following text provides a summary of the key elements and findings of the [study](#), whereby the experiences of survivors cannot be captured in their complexity, but can only be reproduced in abbreviated form.

What types of violence were reported and by whom?

The reports and accounts concern sexual violence experienced by children and adolescents in sports. A wide spectrum of sexual violence was reported, ranging from sexual violence without physical contact (e.g. in form of verbal harassment or text messages with sexual content) and acts of violating or pushing sexual boundaries (e.g. unwanted touching while receiving assistance during an exercise or exhibitionist acts in changing room or shower situations) to sexual violence with physical contact. This last form of violence, in other words physical sexual assault or “sexual child abuse” under criminal law, were by far the most frequently addresses in the reports. The reports above all relate to violence through sexual touching or rape of children and adolescents in the context of sports. In connection with sexual violence, other forms of violence such as punching, kicking and strangling as well as emotional violence were also reported.

Around three quarters of survivors are female, while just under a quarter are male. The ages of survivors differ at the time of their interviews: Around one third is 50 years and older, one third is 30 to 50 years old and about 15% of survivors are younger than 30 years at the time of the interview (some of the survivors did not indicate an age).

This means that both, recent incidents as well as incidents that took place some time ago, were reported. In many cases survivors remained silent for a long period of time and only found the opportunity to talk about their experiences of violence many years later. Most of them experienced sexual violence not just once, but regularly (in almost two-thirds of cases).

In the majority of cases, the organisational context of these experiences of violence in sports is a club: around 80% of the reports relate to organised sports in clubs and associations. Additionally, the reports also list sexual violence experiences during physical education at school, sports events at school or other sports-related activities, e.g. within private or commercial organisations. 17% of the reports concern sexual violence in the sports-context within the former GDR (German Democratic Republic).

In total, at the time of the experience of violence, around 40% of the survivors actively participated in competitive (youth) sports and took part in national and international competitions, another 40% participated in competition-oriented sports at grass-roots level, and around 20% engaged in leisure sports (not competitively). Survivors reported experiences of violence in a large variety of sports. The most frequently cited sports were gymnastics (17% of cases) and football/soccer (10% of cases), listing the two sports with the largest member base in Germany that are frequently carried out by children and adolescents. Additionally, judo, horse riding and swimming (7% of cases each) are also mentioned comparatively often. Moreover, another 50% of the reported incidents refer to a wide variety of other sports. In a clear majority of cases, the sexual violence stemmed from a single perpetrator. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of perpetrators were male. In four out of five cases, sexual violence in sports was committed by a coach.

What questions does the study address and how is the study organised?

The overarching question of the study is: How is sexual violence in sports reconstructed in the reports by survivors or contemporary witnesses? To find systematic answers to this question, the following aspects were included in the study:

1. **The individual-biographical perspective:** Here the key questions are how survivors recall the experienced violence, how it affected their personal lives, and what consequences it had for them. It was also examined what role these experiences of sexual abuse had on the athletic development of survivors.
2. **The organisational and system-analytical perspective:** This aspect examines – from the perspective of survivors and contemporary witnesses – which social structures within the sports system and which structural and cultural backdrops within the sports organisations enabled sexual violence to be carried out and to be covered up.
3. **The historical perspective:** This perspective analyses how the experiences of violence fit within a historical context. Here the reports of survivors in former GDR have been analysed separately. Thus, the present study also provides, for the first time, information on incidents of sexual violence in sports that are significant to the historical inquiry into former GDR sports.

Beyond these three analysis perspectives, information was collected on how the perpetrators operate within sports, what strategies they employ, and what perpetrator typologies can be identified from the reports of survivors. Finally, survivors share their perspectives and recommendations concerning prevention, intervention, and inquiry in sports.

In order to find answers to the study's questions, qualitative reconstruction methods from empirical social research were used. Here the research team endeavoured to reconstruct the individual stories of survivors while also applying a comparable method to identify overarching patterns and collective experiences of exposure to violence. The study relies solely on accounts from survivors as well as contemporary witnesses, and recognises these as their individual perspectives. Therefore, this inquiry does not set out to ensure an objective, fully verifiable ascertainment of truth that is admissible in criminal court. Rather, it focuses on the subjective perspectives of those who experienced sexual violence in sports.

The findings of this study confirm a number of results from the few studies carried out on survivors in sports, but go considerably further: This is the first time that such a large number of reports from victims of sexual violence in sports was examined in Germany using qualitative reconstructive methods. In the following an overview of the key findings is outlined:

Findings on the individual-biographical perspective

Even if the biographies of survivors have in common that they have experienced sexual violence, each individual's story remains unique. Some see themselves as survivors of violence, others feel abused and see themselves as victims. Some believe that the sport robbed them of their childhood, some say they were not solely harmed through this sexual violence as children, but also once again as adults when trying to talk about it and people did not listen or believe them.

Looking back, for most of the survivors the experience of violence represents an important element of their life path with far-reaching, life-changing and often highly traumatic impact. Some survivors assess the experience of violence as less significant to their personal lives, but important enough, nonetheless, to contact the Inquiry Commission with the desire to talk about it, often to attain a special purpose, namely to better protect children in sports in the future. Nobody should have to experience such a thing once more; this is the wish of many survivors.

The reports indicate that many of the children and adolescents affected were particularly vulnerable on account of their personal circumstances. This supported the facilitation, as well as the cover-up of violence experienced in sports (and led to a particularly high burden). Such personal circumstances that help enable violence include a family background with a lack of security or emotional affection, as well as protection and support.

These children needed someone in sports, e.g. their coach, who would give them attention and encouragement. They sought the emotional acceptance and warmth in sports that they did not experience at home. This need was deliberately exploited by some perpetrators. In this context, multiple victimisations are also of particular significance. Some of the survivors report that they experienced sexual abuse repeatedly and in different contexts, as well as by different people. Survivors had, for instance, already been suffering at home from abusive parents and initially found emotional warmth and security through sports, only to be further abused by their coaches.

Additionally, many of the life stories of survivors show that the experience of violence remained secret and hidden for a long period and only re-emerged when prompted by certain events or therapies. For many survivors, the experience of violence represented a key event in their lives: They split their lives into "before" and "after" the event, where the "after" is described as highly traumatised.

Most of the survivors report having severe and recurring feelings of shame and guilt to some degree. Here it is important to note that the coaches, while simultaneously perpetrators, also helped the affected children and adolescents excel in their sport and attain positions of privilege. The sexual acts thereby gain a transactional element. Even as adults, survivors feel partially responsible and ashamed: They often cannot recognise that as children or adolescents they were not to blame. Rather, it was the adults in positions of power and authority within the sport who were abusing them sexually and otherwise, who were at fault.

In addition, among many of the survivors, the experiences of violence are associated with life-long trauma and limitations. They trigger a series of health-related consequences. These include severe limitations and illnesses of a physical, psychological or psychosomatic nature. Some survivors also experience enormous difficulties building up social connections, with their partners and sexuality, with their education as well as their career. It can therefore certainly be argued that experiencing sexual violence in sports harms individuals for their entire life. The experience of not being protected in sports as a child also hindered them from developing and being healthy as adults. How damaging this is for individuals and what massive limitations are associated with it can barely be touched upon in this brief summary.

Often the athletic development was also significantly impacted by the experience of sexual violence. Many survivors were unable to further develop their athletic abilities on account of the experiences of violence. Opportunities were stolen from them, career choices were destroyed, and the sports lost their talent. Survivors felt paralysed and unable to continue to perform. At some point, some of them left this offending environment and turned their back on a sport they used to love, which some still see as a heavy loss. However, other individuals also report how the sport (or a new type of sport) helped them survive and gave them renewed strength and energy.

With respect to the individual-biographical aspect, one key conclusion from this study is that experiencing sexual violence in sports stands in clear contradiction to its therapeutic premise. For those people who had to experience sexual violence in sports when they were younger, sport does not fulfil, in their minds, the promise of health, of fostering their personal development and their athletic abilities. On the contrary: Numerous victims of sexual violence in sports sustained lifelong physical and psychological harm and they lost the ability to participate in the sport and within society as a whole.

Strategies used within sports by the perpetrators

Most of the perpetrators stem from the victims' immediate surroundings and are coaches, caregivers, teachers, and male. The perpetrators are usually in positions of power. Above all, this applies to coaches that athletes depend upon in order to advance in their athletic development. The perpetrators of sexual violence in sports are (mostly and outwardly) friendly, charming people with a high reputation, who have made themselves indispensable through their helpfulness, professional expertise, and consistent commitment. But there are also perpetrators who operate in an authoritative manner, creating an environment of obedience, discipline and oppression. Sports structures appear to provide fertile ground for both approaches, either through a high degree of commitment or the exercise of authority.

Here the perpetrators use various grooming strategies and spin a web of social and emotional intimacy, favours, affection and special treatment around the young athletes, but also their parents, so that it is almost impossible for the children and adolescents to escape their influence. Economic aspects can also be a factor when young athletes are financially dependent on their coaches. Frequently, the reports described supposed “love affairs” between coaches and young athletes, and that the coaches often had simultaneous “love affairs” with multiple adolescents within the same club.

Findings on the organisational and system-analytical perspective

The reports and accounts provide remarkable insights into the social and cultural structures of the system and organisations within sports that allowed the perpetrators to commit sexual violence and helped cover up those deeds. These structures are characteristic of sports, meaning that they do not exist in the same form or constellation in other areas of society. Highlighted are particularly risky structures that offer important starting points to help prevent sexual violence and protect children in sports.

Striking here are, for instance, the hierarchical and heteronormative gender relationships, which generally also exist in other areas of society, but seem to have a particularly strong impact in sports. Many of the women affected felt fundamentally disrespected in their sports club through the sexist behaviour of the overwhelmingly male stakeholders. The normalisation of sexism in the sports setting made it particularly difficult to stand up to sexual harassment and violence. Heteronormative structures and widespread homonegativity made it more difficult for men affected to expose sexual assaults by male coaches, since they feared stigmatisation, exclusion and disrespecment within the sports-related environment.

Besides these gender-based power structures, other power constellations also play a key role with regard to sexual violence in sports. This, for instance, includes the coaches’ power to make selections or apply sanctions. Female and male athletes described how they were disciplined and punished by their coaches in many different ways during training so that they completely subordinated themselves. This aspect of exercising power and discipline is particularly connected to a focus on success in competitive sports – in other words, to the continuous pressure to succeed, a goal that the young athletes also often have their sights on, eclipsing anything else. Hard training, emotional, physical and sexual violence are endured when one’s sights are set on the desperate goal to succeed. At the same time, athletes undoubtedly see themselves in an elevated and particularly privileged position if they are selected for teams or are the sole recipients of support from the coach. They do not want to endanger their special position by exposing the violence. Among a number of survivors, they see their sport, the sport’s context and the club as a very important social environment, similar to a family characterised by strong emotional bonds and trust, within which parents and siblings are also involved. Here the boundaries of emotional, social and physical proximity are often unclear and are frequently moved so that over time violence is not perceived as a transgression.

The reports clearly indicate that these structures made it especially difficult for the athletes concerned to recognise the sexual violence as wrongful and as an attack on their physical integrity, and therefore to disclose it as such. Here the bystanders within the sports clubs also play an important role: In many cases, survivors knew very well that adults in the environment were aware of these assaults. But since they did not intervene, for survivors, the experience of violence also became normalised as part of the system.

Those who attempted to disclose sexual violence within the sports context unfortunately often found their experiences denied, trivialised and covered up. Here, once more, specific structures within sports appeared to play a role, for instance the idealisation of volunteer work and the shortage of voluntary coaches. Sports clubs evidently did not want to accept that volunteers could be capable of exercising violence and thus closed their eyes, so as not to lose the few committed volunteers. Clubs that were engaged in professional and competitive sports and wished to win over sponsors had to maintain a good public image and focus on avoiding scandals. Suspected cases and even reported assaults were therefore covered up. This was experienced by survivors as well as contemporary witnesses as extremely painful and re-traumatising. The structural environment within sports therefore rarely prompts those affected to confide in others about experiences of violence. When they do so – often many years later – they all too often find themselves confronted with a defensive attitude at the decision-making levels. This throws survivors back to fending for themselves. Responsibility is denied and often unilaterally individualised to the detriment of survivors by concealing structures that enable violence as well as trivialising reproachable and punishable behaviour for which offenders can be held accountable.

This means that sports clubs and associations neither adequately fulfil their duty of care for children and adolescents, nor their duty to society.

Sexual violence in the context of sports within the former German Democratic Republic (GDR)

The reports and accounts from people who experienced sexual violence in sports as children or adolescents in former GDR, on the whole demonstrate many similarities with the previously mentioned aspects, but also differ in specific ways. This includes, just like with other delinquent behaviour, sexual violence having been treated as a taboo topic among families and institutions within former GDR, to uphold the outward appearance of a well-functioning system. This contributed to a multiple-victimisation of some of the survivors. They not only experienced sexual violence within the family or home, but also in sports. Here the experience of violence in sports is experienced as particularly traumatising because it initially represented a promising opportunity to escape the neglect and lack of warmth within the family.

In sports, specific structures helped facilitate the exercise and cover-up of violence. This, for instance, included the very early talent scouting and selection of children with sporting talent through systematic selection procedures and housing them in special schools for children and adolescents with associated boarding schools. These children lived separated from their parents for long periods of time. The talent selection procedure was seen as gravely important by the children. They did not want to risk their special position elevated by the political system by exposing the flaws. As athletic success trumped anything else, the children concerned endured the experiences of violence to avoid bringing shame on their families. Worse yet, beyond peers of the same age, within the sports and boarding schools there was no one to confide in. Children were therefore wholly defenceless to acts of violence by coaches, medical practitioners and other sports officials. Disciplining, punishments and exposure to pressure were often part of the children's sports-related routine and regularly occurred during daily training. Not talking about the violence and accepting it as an element of the disciplining was part of the norm. The life stories of survivors of sexual violence in sports within former GDR were characterised by multiple types of trauma: They became victims of sexual violence, were consistently driven to

exceed their physical limits, and already performed extreme physical feats as children. They were deprived of their autonomy and emotionally neglected. Additionally, they were subjected to a system of enforced doping. The consequences of these multiple traumas are often severe and remain with those affected throughout their lifetime.

Recommended protective measures

A series of suggestions to protect against sexual violence can be derived from the reports of survivors. Their desire and wishes validate many of the measures pushed forward in organised sports over the last years. These include, for instance, the broad and continued sensitisation of all stakeholders to sexual violence, vulnerable structures within sports, and strategies used by perpetrators. In addition, survivors demand that stricter situational preventive measures be introduced to reduce the opportunities to exercise sexual violence within sports.

For example, coaches should not be left to train alone with children, but only in the presence of another adult. Many survivors demand a “glass sports hall” as well as a transparent club structure that allows an unhindered view and supervision from the outside.

Furthermore, survivors surprisingly often report that sports require trustworthy and competent points of contact (safeguarding officers) that are independent from the club and association structures. Above all, this demand derives from the fact that survivors themselves too often had to experience how their statements and cues were not followed up by those in power in sports. Instead they came to nothing, were trivialised or in the worst-case scenarios even had negative consequences for them. The reports of survivors therefore reinforce current efforts within sports policy to introduce an independent institution of call or a centre for safe sport. In this connection, survivors emphasised the need of pro-active information that is comprehensible for children as well as regular direct outreach to children in order to ensure young people are aware of and make use of such ports of call.

Furthermore, in their reports survivors frequently demand a fundamental shift in competitive sports wherein the self-determination, participation and empowerment of children and adolescents should play a key role.

This concludes with the fundamental demand that critical scrutiny of the often-cited positive accomplishments of children’s and adolescents’ sport must be allowed. All too often people who were abused as children in sports have had to undergo the experience of not being believed, both as a child, and as an adult. Evidently, the imaginative and perceptive horizons of many of the bystanders, people they turned to, parents and club members were not sufficient in order to pick up on the children’s cues and recognise the wrongdoing occurring in sports. This was and is explained by the need to consistently uphold the romanticised fairy-tale of a healthy, fair and beautiful sport and that many people are more than happy to buy into it. One of the objectives of this study is therefore to disrupt this narrative and clearly identify and name the violence exercised in sports as well as its ensuing suffering for what it is.

PUBLICATION DETAILS

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AUTHORS

Prof. Dr Bettina Rulofs, Professor on Diversity Studies in Sports in the Institute of Sociology and Gender Studies at the German Sport University Cologne; previously: Professor on Sports Sociology in the Institute of Sports Sciences at the University of Wuppertal

Dr Kathrin Wahnschaffe-Waldhoff, certified social scientist, research assistant for the Department for Diversity Studies in Sports in the Institute of Sociology and Gender Studies at the German Sport University Cologne; previously: Research assistant in the area of Sports Sociology in the Institute of Sports Sciences at the University of Wuppertal

Marilen Neeten, M.A. Sports scientist, research assistant in the Department for Diversity Studies in Sports in the Institute of Sociology and Gender Studies at the German Sport University Cologne; previously: Research assistant in the area of Sports Sociology in the Institute of Sports Sciences at the University of Wuppertal

Annika Söllinger, M.A. Sports scientist, research assistant in the Department for Diversity Studies in Sports in the Institute of Sociology and Gender Studies at the German Sport University Cologne; previously: Student assistant in the area of Sports Sociology in the Institute of Sports Sciences at the University of Wuppertal

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Glinkastrasse 24, 10117 Berlin

Further information

Website: www.aufarbeitungskommission.de

Portal: www.geschichten-die-zaehlen.de

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