

# More than 80% say they've experienced violence in junior sports, especially women and gender-diverse people

August 11 2022, by Mary Woessner and Aurélie Pankowiak

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Every week millions of Australian children play community sport. Participating in community sports can improve children's mental, physical and social well-being, but only if the sports environment is [physically and emotionally safe](#).

Our [new research](#) shows community sports spaces aren't safe for everyone. We found 82% of 886 [survey respondents](#) said they experienced [violence](#) while playing community sports as a child in Australia.

Our study was one of the first in Australia to include the experiences of non-gender-binary individuals. We found gender-diverse people reported particularly high rates of violence while playing sports as [children](#). Some 81% reported experiencing [psychological violence](#) from a coach, compared to 55% and 50% for women and men respectively.

Women also had high rates compared to men of psychological (82% vs 74%) and sexual (40% vs 33%) violence.

So how can we change this?

## **Violence in community sports**

In recent years, cases of violence against children in elite sports in Australia have garnered national media attention. [Swimming](#) and [gymnastics](#) are perhaps the most visible examples of the widespread nature of violence against children in sports, but they aren't alone.

The media often focus on single sports and the abuse experienced by [elite athletes](#), which can lead to a false sense of security in other sports and in sports at the community level.

The short- and long-term [consequences of violence](#) are profound and include anxiety, depression, mistrust, impaired relationship dynamics and more.

Understanding how often children experience violence playing sports is critical to monitoring this violence and keeping children safe.

## What we studied

Our team at Victoria University completed the [largest study to date](#) in Australia exploring how often children experience violence in community sports.

We surveyed 886 Australian adults who had played organized community sports when they were younger than 18, asking them about their experiences of violence in sports. Specifically, they were asked about unsanctioned violence, that is, violence occurring outside the specified rules of the game. This could have occurred in diverse environments such as on the field, in the locker rooms, or during travel for sports.

It's important to note that because the study didn't use a nationally representative sample, the data can't be extrapolated out to represent the whole of community sports in Australia.

Respondents were mostly women (63%), but came from all states and territories in Australia and had participated in 68 different sports. Around 18% of respondents were between 18 and 25 years old, which highlights how recent some of the reported experiences are.

## Psychological, physical, sexual

We found 82% of respondents experienced violence while participating in sports as children in Australia.

Psychological violence was the most frequent form (76% of respondents), but rates of physical violence (66%) and [sexual violence](#) (38%) were also high.

The survey also distinguished between different types of perpetrators—peers, coaches and parents. Our respondents reported high rates of psychological violence by peers (68%), and high rates (>50%) of physical and psychological violence perpetrated by a coach.

We found non-gender-binary people experienced higher rates of several types of violence than both women and men combined. Peer-perpetrated sexual harassment was particularly high for these individuals (59%), as was peer physical violence (53%).

Women experienced more psychological and sexual violence, whereas men experienced more physical violence by their peers when playing sports as a child.

While our sample wasn't representative of the Australian population, our findings echo international research findings. A [Canadian study from 2020](#), which used the same survey in 14–17 year olds, also found [high rates](#) of psychological (79%), physical (40%) and sexual violence (28%).

## **How we can change things**

These data can be quite confronting, especially for those of us (ourselves included) who are so passionate about sports.

The aim of this article and study isn't to demonize sports. Instead, it's to acknowledge we need to understand the depth and breadth of violence against children in sports, in order to make sports safer.

In the long-term, a [national study](#) with a representative sample is needed to establish how often violence against children in community sports occurs. It's the only way to measure whether our policies and practices are preventing violence against children in sports. Such studies take time, expertise and funding, but they are achievable with the right support.

National [frameworks and policies](#) are essential to ensuring sporting clubs are complying with safeguarding standards.

However, national policies and campaigns take time to have impact at the grassroots level. This is complicated by a context where many community sports clubs are surviving on the capacity of very few, [burnt-out volunteers](#).

A top-down approach to behavior change isn't our only option. There's an opportunity to start creating change with and within community sports. This can help identify the most effective strategies for preventing violence against children in community sports.

Community sports can and should be a welcoming, inclusive and safe environment. We can only achieve this through a whole-of-community effort.

Awareness that violence in community sports exists is a first step.

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