

Violence prevention can transform Canadian hockey culture—but only if implemented properly

February 14 2024, by Maddie Brockbank



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The [recent charges against five members of Canada's gold medal-winning 2018 world junior hockey team](#) in connection with an alleged

sexual assault has thrust [Hockey Canada and its issues back into the public eye](#).

A woman [sued Hockey Canada in 2022](#), alleging she had been sexually assaulted in a hotel room by [eight Canadian Hockey League players](#), some of whom were members of the 2018 world junior team.

[In her statement of claim filed in April 2022](#), the woman accused Hockey Canada of failing to address systemic abuse in its organization and of fostering a "culture and environment that glorified the degradation and sexual exploitation of young women."

Police dropped the investigation in 2019, but reopened it in 2022, leading to [the suspension of the 2018 world junior team from international tournaments](#) and the recent charges.

Hockey Canada also faced criticism in May 2022 when news broke that it had paid out [\\$8.9 million in sexual abuse settlements since 1989](#) (excluding an undisclosed settlement in a \$3.5 million lawsuit for the alleged 2018 assault).

While coverage of this case continues to raise important questions about the systemic failures within Hockey Canada, many have been left wondering what can be done to prevent gender-based and sexual violence in the future.

As a public educator and researcher who has worked with men and boys in violence prevention for eight years, I urge us to invest in programs with proven effectiveness to reduce rates of abuse and harassment in sport.

Hockey Canada lacks accountability

Hockey Canada's response to the scandal has been largely reactive, which is typical of institutions when they are faced with mounting public pressure.

But, as [some critics have already articulated](#), their plans lack transparency, accountability and foresight in preventing violence. In November 2023, Hockey Canada said [they would not release their third-party report on the alleged 2018 sexual assault](#) to the public.

They did, however, say they have taken [measures to address the issue](#), including implementing a mandatory screening process, adopting a code of conduct, a third-party complaint process and [anti-violence training during key tournaments](#). Whether these measures will be effective still remains uncertain.

The spectrum of violence

This Hockey Canada issue is not isolated; there have been many [high-profile domestic and sexual violence cases](#) in professional and [competitive sports](#), including claims of hazing, harassment and sexual violence all the way down to the [amateur level](#).

[Gender-based violence](#) doesn't occur in a vacuum; it thrives in environments that facilitate it—particularly the [normalization of hazing](#) that is predicated on sexism, racism and homophobia.

Research indicates that [one in three coaches in Ontario](#) are aware of hazing rituals within their teams. One in five have heard sexist, racist or homophobic language within their organizations or at competitions.

These practices often go unchallenged because coaches either feel ill-equipped to address them or they share the belief that hazing is merely a [part of sport culture](#) or team building.

However, we know that hazing can have [dire consequences](#) on health, well-being and overall participation in sport.

Hazing rituals can sometimes [escalate to sexual assault within hockey teams](#). Practices like hazing also [create an environment](#) where misogyny, homophobia and racism can [escalate into tangible forms of violence](#) outside the locker room.

Efforts to address these issues commonly rely on framing it as a problem caused by a few "bad apples." However, this approach overlooks the normalization of these practices and the bystander behaviors that allow it to continue unabated.

Violence prevention programs

In my experience running gender-based [violence prevention programs](#) with young male athletes, many initially balk at violence prevention programs as they are seen as vilifying boys and men.

However, research indicates that [gender-specific programs delivered during youth](#) have some of the most positive impacts in [changing misogynistic attitudes](#), [reducing abuse perpetration](#) and [improving bystander intervention behaviors](#).

These programs are particularly effective when they are [sustained over longer periods of time](#), focus on [gender messaging](#) and take place in [key sites like schools or sports environments](#).

These findings contradict current models of violence prevention in professional or competitive sport, such as the [OHL's mandatory *Onside training*](#), which is a two-hour workshop for new players on [sexual violence](#).

Addressing violence in sport

To meaningfully address violence in sport, [gender-based violence programs must be ongoing and dynamic](#) instead of being treated like a mere checkbox.

An example of such a program is [Coaching Boys Into Men](#), a program created by [the Futures Without Violence non-profit](#) that has been [piloted in Hamilton, Ont.](#)

Coaching Boys Into Men equips coaches to have fifteen-minute weekly conversations for three months with their adolescent boys' teams about consent, healthy relationships and challenging harmful behavior.

Those who complete the program are [less likely to perpetrate abuse](#) and are [significantly more likely to intervene](#) if they see harm happening.

Rather than viewing violence prevention as a blame game, we should see it as an inherently hopeful endeavor that focuses on the humanity and wellness of our athletes and communities. Investing in violence prevention that is evidence-based and sustainable is the key to ensuring that this violence stops.

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