



Report: Five Key Findings of the Elite Athlete Survey

Updated 2.1.2021

By: Marci A. Hamilton, Esq., CEO

Carter E. Timon, MBDS, Lead Social Science Researcher

Suggested citation: Hamilton, M. A., & Timon, C. E. (2021). *Report: Five Key Findings of the Elite Athlete Survey*. CHILD USA. [url]



EAS: Five Key Findings

Introduction: The Elite Athlete Study

Twelve and a half percent to 15.8% of children will experience contact abuse – or abuse involving physical contact - before they turn 18. One in five girls and one in 13 boys will experience childhood sexual abuse. Tragically, this childhood abuse is often traumatizing and generates lasting painful effects for victims. Victims of such violence often suffer debilitating developmental effects, such as post-traumatic stress and substance misuse. Unfortunately, athletes are not immune to these risks. Recent cases in sport, including the discovery of serial child sexual abusers Larry Nassar of USA Gymnastics and Jerry Sandusky of Pennsylvania State University, have brought to the forefront the issue of athlete maltreatment and wellbeing.

In order to begin to understand the risks which athletes face, research in this area is necessary. Globally, such research on the prevalence of various forms of athlete abuse has begun. For example, previous research has found rates of physical abuse of athletes in Canada to be 12-19%; Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium to be 11%-24.9%; and Sweden to be 18%. However, research on elite athlete maltreatment in the U.S. is still lacking.

The Elite Athlete Study is a research project begun in collaboration between researchers at the University of Pennsylvania and CHILD USA and which is designed to assess the prevalence rates of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse among elite athletes in the United States. The Study is based on a survey which was administered in 2019 to 359 U.S. elite athletes. Those athletes are considered *elite* because they compete (or competed) at the national, Olympic, or regional level.¹

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to share relevant and timely findings from the Elite Athlete Study in a manner that is easily accessible to many readers. Below are five key findings from the survey data which, when taken together, help to describe the physical and mental abuse elite athletes experience in sporting contexts and the mental health diagnoses that are correlated with such abuse.

Finally, please note that this data is in preparation for submission to a scientific journal and has not yet undergone formal peer review.

¹ More specifically, elite athletes in our sample were identified as those who had competed in at least one of the following: AAU Regional Tournaments, AAU National Tournament, NCAA Regional Tournaments, Junior Nationals, Nationals, Summer Olympic Trials, Summer Olympics, Winter Olympic Trials, Winter Olympics, World Championships, or the Pan Am Games.

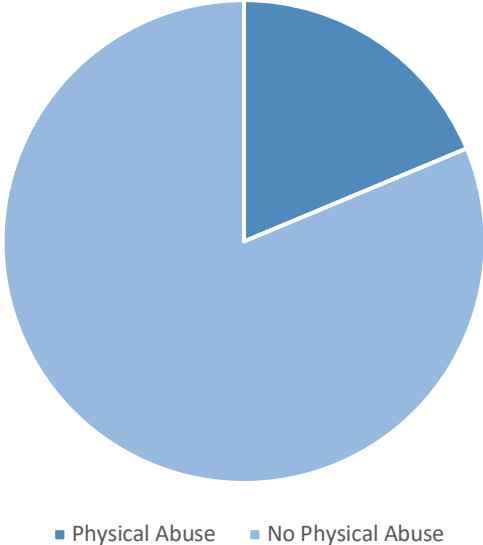
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Summary: Five Key Findings

- 1. **18.7% (nearly 1 in 5)** of elite athletes receive physical abuse from a sport official or peer athlete.
- 2. **3.6%** of elite athletes were sexually abused as a minor by a sport official or peer athlete.
- 3. **8.4% (about 1 in 12)** of elite athletes were sexually assaulted by a sport official or peer athlete.
- 4. **33.4% (1 in 3)** of elite athletes have received a mental health disorder diagnosis.
- 5. Elite athletes who have suffered sexual assault, physical abuse, or emotional abuse, are **more likely** to have a mental disorder diagnosis than those who did not suffer any of these forms of abuse.

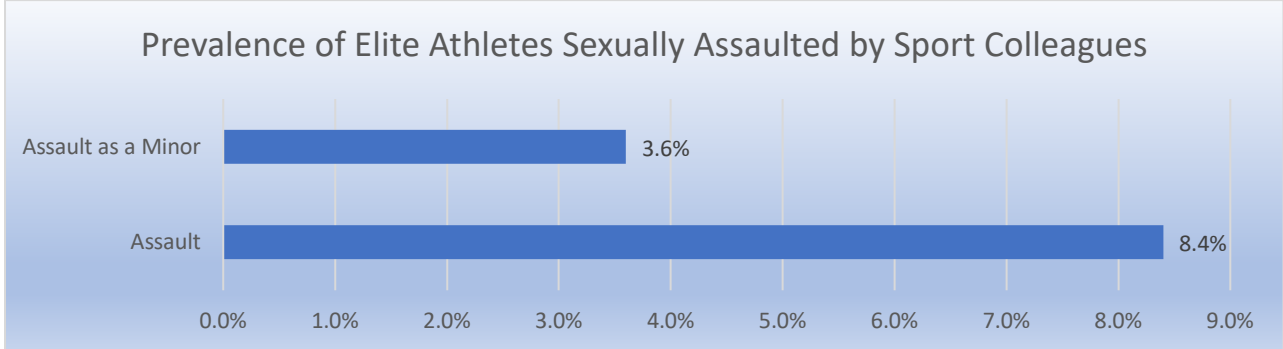
Physical Abuse

Physical Abuse of Elite Athletes



Takeaway: **18.7% (nearly 1 in 5)** of elite athletes in this sample were abused physically by a sport official or peer athlete. Physical abuse here includes withholding food or water, forced overeating, slapping, pushing, punching, kicking, and choking.

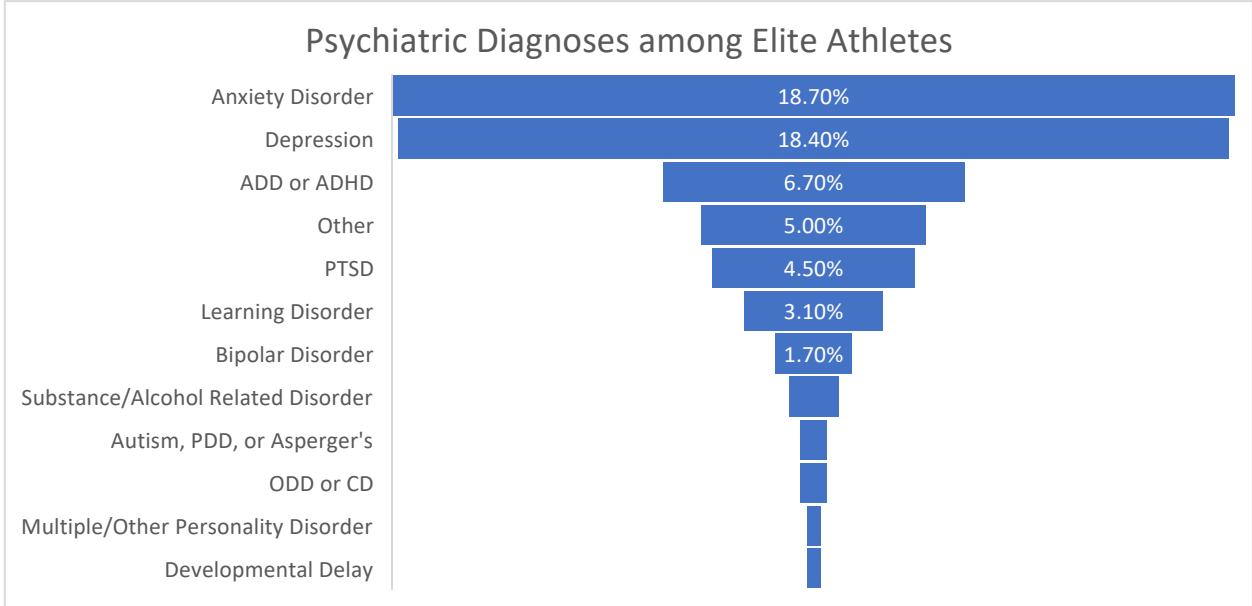
Sexual Abuse



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Takeaway: 3.6% of elite athletes were sexually abused as a minor. 8.4% (about 1 in 12) of elite athletes experienced sexual assault (whether as a minor or an adult) by a sport official or peer athlete.

Mental Health Correlations



Takeaway: 33.4% (1 in 3) of elite athletes are diagnosed with a mental health disorder. Elite athletes who have been sexually abused as children are more likely to have a mental disorder diagnosis. Elite athletes who have been physically abused are also more likely receive a mental disorder diagnosis. Elite athletes who were sexually assaulted are likely to have a mental disorder diagnosis.

For context, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), only 7.1% of adults in the U.S. experience a major depressive episode in a single year. In the United States, about 16.6% of adults have experienced depression in their lifetime. Our sample of younger adults revealed a prevalence rate of depression of 18.4% among elite athletes.

Furthermore, in the general population, 2.9% of people report having ADD or ADHD. In our sample, 6.7% of elite athletes report having ADD or ADHD (seemingly, over double the rate of the normal population).

Finally, one study found a maximum estimate of the prevalence of anxiety disorders among young adults to be 9.1%. In our sample, where most participants (54%) were between 21 and 30, anxiety disorders were the most prevalent disorders among elite athletes at 18.7% (approximately double the rate of young adults).

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