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Evaluation of Publicly Accessible Child Protection in Sport Education and Reporting Initiatives

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Abstract: Despite sport being a vehicle through which youth may achieve positive developmental outcomes, maltreatment in the youth sport context remains a significant concern. With increased athlete advocacy and research demonstrating the high prevalence of maltreatment in sport, and the urgent need to address it, many international organisations have created child protection in sport initiatives. Of particular focus to athletes and researchers is the provision of evidence-based comprehensive education and independent reporting mechanisms for athletes who experience harm. The current study examined the extent to which the publicly accessible information provided by three sport-specific child protection organisations regarding education and reporting is aligned with recommendations provided by researchers and athletes. With regard to education, the findings highlight accessibility, programming for various stakeholders, and coverage of topics of interest (e.g., forms of harm and reporting processes). However, educational information about equity, diversity, and inclusion and information on how to foster positive environments in sport was lacking. For reporting mechanisms, results showed that each organisation's approach to receiving reports of maltreatment varied, including their ability to directly intake, investigate, and sanction instances of maltreatment. The findings are interpreted and critiqued considering previous literature and recommendations for future research and practice are suggested.

Keywords: child protection; safe sport; education; reporting mechanisms



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1. Introduction

1.1. The Emergence of the Safe Sport Movement in Research and Practice

Sport is well-recognised as a vehicle to foster positive health and developmental outcomes for youth (e.g., physical literacy, life skills development; Holt et al. 2020); however, concerns about the safety and physical and psychological welfare of young people participating in these environments have been raised in sport scholarship for decades (Cahill and Pearl 1993; David 1999, 2005; Orlick and Botterill 1975). Scholarly concerns about sports culture characterised by control, power imbalances, and a singular focus on performance outcomes, in conjunction with the reporting of high-profile cases of athletes' abuses in the media, have led to the growing interest in child protection in sport.

Initial interests in maltreatment in sport focused on girls' and women athletes' experiences of sexual abuse perpetrated by their male coaches (Brackenridge 2001). Since this early work, researchers have expanded their focus to include boys and men as survivors of sexual abuse (Hartill 2009). Prevalence studies across several countries indicate that between 40 and 79% of athletes reportedly experienced psychological violence (Alexander et al. 2011; Ohlert et al. 2021; Parent and Vaillancourt-Morel 2021; US Center for SafeSport 2021; Vertommen et al. 2016; Willson et al. 2021). Across these same studies, physical violence prevalence rates ranged between 11 and 56% and sexual violence prevalence rates

ranged from 9 to 29%. Only two studies have explored prevalence rates of neglect with findings ranging between 36% (Parent and Vaillancourt-Morel 2021) and 76% (Willson et al. 2021). Further, athletes from equity-deserving groups, including girls and women, 2SLGBTQI+, racialised and indigenous athletes, and athletes with a disability, are at an increased risk of harm in the sport context (e.g., Gurgis et al. 2022; Vertommen et al. 2016; Willson et al. 2021; US Center for SafeSport 2021). To reflect the expanded research focus, this body of scholarship and corresponding public advocacy has shifted from a 'child protection' approach (i.e., reactive) to the provision of 'safeguarding' or 'safe sport' (e.g., proactive, safe, and caring environment, values-based, athlete-centred; (Lang and Hartill 2014).¹

Together, research studies and ongoing high-profile cases of athlete maltreatment across the globe have stimulated sport organisations to develop prevention and intervention strategies, including policy development, consensus statements, and the introduction of independent officers to investigate complaints (Brackenridge and Rhind 2014; Kerr et al. 2020). However, examinations of athlete protection initiatives of this nature previously implemented found that organisational adherence to policies and practices seemed to lose traction over time (Kerr et al. 2020), only to be revisited when new cases emerged in the public sphere. For example, a study of Canadian sport organisations revealed that despite mandates for independent reporting mechanisms as a requirement for federal funding, less than half of these organisations adhered to this requirement 20 years after it was instigated (Donnelly et al. 2016).

In another effort to stimulate change, several organisations were created with the primary goal of raising awareness and/or enhancing education related to maltreatment in sport, including Canada's Respect in Sport and Speak Out, Australia's Play by the Rules, and the United States' Safe4Athletes, among others. Following these developments, Kerr et al. (2014) examined seven international child protection in sport initiatives designed to enhance awareness of maltreatment and provide access to educational resources; they assessed the extent to which the initiatives were grounded in existing research and empirically evaluated in reference to their stated goals (i.e., awareness-raising and developing knowledge). The development of these initiatives was regarded as a positive step forward; however, the findings suggested that the initiatives were neither congruent with existing literature nor empirically evaluated. As a result, the authors recommended the initiatives endeavour to more closely align with research so that more effective measures could be created to facilitate safe and growth-enhancing experiences for youth sport participants (Kerr et al. 2014). Since this study was conducted, public awareness of maltreatment in youth sport has grown significantly, scholarship has expanded, and several new international entities have been created with the purpose of addressing maltreatment.

1.2. Evidence-Based Recommendations for Advancing Safe Sport

Advancing safe sport requires a systemic approach and cannot be solved by solutions implemented in isolation from one another (Brackenridge and Rhind 2014). Two recommendations for confronting existing safe sport challenges consistently advocated by researchers and athletes alike are to create independent, safe reporting structures for athletes and provide evidence-based comprehensive education designed to encourage prevention, intervention, and behavioural change in the sport context (Brackenridge and Rhind 2014; Kerr et al. 2014; Willson et al. 2022).

Researchers and athlete advocates across the globe have called on their respective countries to develop independent reporting mechanisms equipped with the expertise and capacity to receive concerns of maltreatment that occur in sport settings in a trauma-informed, confidential, and accessible manner, independent of the sport organisation (e.g., Willson et al. 2022; Brackenridge 2001; Donnelly and Kerr 2018; Kerr and Kerr 2020). Mechanisms of this nature may provide critical support for sport administrators and other stakeholders who are potentially conflicted, unfit, or unable to effectively facilitate tasks related to concerns of maltreatment thus allowing them to focus on prevention and the development of a positive organisational culture (Gurgis and Kerr 2021). Further, an

accessible and public reporting mechanism may address the lack of awareness reported by parents and athletes about where to seek advice or direct concerns of maltreatment (Brackenridge et al. 2010). In response to these calls, various countries have developed accessible reporting mechanisms (e.g., Safe Sport Netherlands, Council for Safe Athletics Sweden) and/or developed independent entities to receive, investigate, and resolve issues of maltreatment in sport (e.g., Sport Integrity Australia, US Center for SafeSport).

Recommendations have also been made for compulsory and evidence-based safe sport education designed for various stakeholders, including athletes, parents, coaches, volunteers, sport administrators, and integrated support teams (e.g., mental performance consultants, physiotherapists, team doctors; Gurgis and Kerr 2021; Wurtele 2012; Willson et al. 2022). Education is particularly relevant for youth in sport as research shows young athletes may possess a lack of awareness of behaviours that constitute unsafe sport and where to report information when witnessing or experiencing these behaviours (Mountjoy et al. 2020). Topics identified as imperative to preventing and addressing maltreatment include providing a clear philosophy of safe sport; defining all forms of harm and corresponding behaviours that can occur in sport; providing information on how to report concerns; outlining the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders in preventing and addressing harm; defining power dynamics and associated vulnerabilities for young people; providing information on the promotion of a positive culture; as well as advancing equity and inclusion (e.g., Cares et al. 2015; Gurgis and Kerr 2021; Brackenridge et al. 2010; Parent 2011; Kerr et al. 2014, 2020; Mountjoy et al. 2015).

1.3. Renewed Efforts to Address Maltreatment in Sport Contexts

In response to ongoing cases of athlete maltreatment globally, increased media attention, research evidence, and athlete advocacy, the last decade has seen unprecedented global efforts to acknowledge and address the full spectrum of maltreatment in the sport context and alleviate some of the critical obstacles to safe sport progress (Brackenridge and Rhind 2014; Brackenridge and Telfer 2011; Kerr et al. 2020). One of the most substantial and positive areas of advancement in international sport is the development of organisations specifically created to provide access to independent reporting and educational materials that address maltreatment and foster more safe, healthy, and equitable environments for sport participants in their respective countries. These organisations include but are not limited to, the United Kingdom's Child Protection in Sport Unit, Sport Integrity Australia, and the US Center for SafeSport. The organisations in Australia and the US originated at different times within the last five years, whereas the Child Protection in Sport Unit emerged more than a decade ago.

The purpose of this study was to assess the extent to which the publicly accessible information regarding education and reporting provided by three child protection in sport organisations aligns with the recommendations provided by researchers and athletes. Specifically, the following research questions guided the evaluation: To what extent does the publicly accessible information provided by these organisations address the reporting and educational needs identified by researchers and athletes?; and, What recommendations could be made to more closely align the publicly accessible information with scholarly evidence? A focus on publicly accessible information was made for several reasons. Previous research indicates that athletes are unaware of their rights and matters pertaining to maltreatment in sport. For example, athletes in Willson et al.'s (2022) study stated, "Athletes need to be educated to know their rights . . . I didn't realize that the way I was being treated was inappropriate (p. 7)" and "Athletes should be made aware of reporting procedures for all sports and the national federation should mandate this knowledge be part of national team induction events" (p. 7). Further, when athletes were asked for recommendations to strengthen their sense of safety in sport, they consistently referred to the need for a third party, an independent body athletes can turn to when maltreatment has occurred (Willson et al. 2022).

Having publicly accessible information may be an effective way of communicating information about athletes' rights and maltreatment, as well as avenues for reporting and addressing concerns about their safety. In addition, parents have also been identified as key stakeholders in children's sports. Researchers have recommended that parents receive education regarding athlete maltreatment to safeguard children in sport (Kerr et al. 2020) and parents are inevitably involved in any case in which complaints about child maltreatment are reported. As such, sharing information in a publicly accessible way may be a valuable way to educate parents about safeguarding in sport and about complaint mechanisms. Finally, the importance of publicly accessible information was heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic when in-person education and reporting processes were limited.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

To determine the existing international child protection initiatives that deliver educational and reporting or investigation services, we conducted a general search of Google using keywords such as "safeguarding in sport", "safe sport organisations", "national safe sport organisations", or "sport integrity organisations". To specify the search, we also attached country names to each keyword search such as "safe sport Australia" or "safeguarding in sport England". In addition, we canvassed colleagues at international safe sport advocacy organisations to cross-reference the organisations retrieved through our search and confirm any missing information. At the time of the search, approximately 13 potential organisations were identified across the world, including organisations, committees, or councils in North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. A total of three organisations were ultimately selected: the US Centre for SafeSport (United States of America), Child Protection in Sport Unit (United Kingdom), and Sport Integrity Australia (Australia). These three safe sport organisations were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: organisation exists as its own formal entity (e.g., it is not a programme/initiative/informal or ad hoc committee or alliance of another organisation); organisation receives public or external funding (e.g., government, national sport bodies, Olympic committees, donations); organisation provides education and engages in safe sport advocacy; organisation receives reports related to athlete protection; and the organisation operates or provides information in the English language. Consideration was also given to selecting organisations of comparable size and capabilities, as well as representing various geographic regions (e.g., inclusion of multiple countries and continents). The remaining ten organisations were excluded because they did not satisfy all of the inclusion criteria above. For the purpose of this paper, we will refer to the three organisations of focus as 'safe sport organisations', which we consider as encompassing the other related terms used by these entities to define their scope of work (e.g., integrity, child protection, well-being, safeguarding).

2.2. Background of Organisations

The following section will provide the background of each organisation selected including their origin, status, and funding partners. According to their website, the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) was established in 2001 as an affiliate organisation of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC; CPSU (Child Protection in Sport Unit) (2022)). The NSPCC is a registered charity in England, Wales, Scotland, and Jersey and serves as the UK's only children's charity with statutory powers that allows intervention with the intention to safeguard children from maltreatment. As an affiliate organisation, the CPSU functions to improve safeguarding and child protection within the sport context through policy development, expert guidance, education, and research. The CPSU is funded by Sport England, Sport Northern Ireland, Sport Wales, and UK Sport. Next, the US Center for SafeSport's website indicates that the organisation was created in 2017 in response to a number of high-profile cases of athlete maltreatment in the United States (US Center for SafeSport 2022). The Center is considered a non-profit organisation

whose scope and authority to resolve maltreatment in sport is grounded in the United States Safe Sport Act legislation. The Safe Sport Act requires the US Center for SafeSport to develop and enforce athlete protection policies and procedures as well as provide education and training to prevent maltreatment in sport. The Center is funded by the US Government, United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee, national governing bodies, foundations, and donations. Lastly, the website of Sport Integrity Australia indicates the organisation was established in 2020 in response to an external review commissioned by the Australian Government of Australia's sport integrity practices ([Sport Integrity Australia 2022](#)). As a result of the report's recommendations, Sport Integrity Australia was created with the mandate to serve as a "single nationally coordinated organization" to prevent and address issues of sport integrity through policy, investigation (via the National Sports Tribunal), education, and capacity building. Sport Integrity Australia is funded by the Australian Government.

2.3. Data Collection

A web-based approach to data collection was chosen for the current paper. Given the rise in safe sport issues over the past few years, many initiatives or organisations have relied on web-based platforms and e-learning to provide the sport community with widespread access to relevant and accessible information on safe sport. The focus of the data collection on organisations that provided relevant safe sport education, advocacy, and investigative procedures was informed by the increasing awareness and need for educating all stakeholders and independent reporting mechanisms to advance safe sport. Data collection began with a general Internet search for organisations that provided safe sport reporting, education, or advocacy. The search yielded several international organisations, initiatives, and ad hoc or informal committees that aim to address maltreatment in sport; these initiatives were provided in multiple languages. To refine the search, we developed the inclusion criteria cited above.

In addition to sample refinement, the inclusion criteria were also created to focus the evaluation on full-service safe sport organisations (i.e., education, advocacy, investigation/referrals) that have been developed in recent years to address sport safety issues. Upon meeting the inclusion criteria, data collection was then focused on retrieving information pertaining to three primary areas: the overarching purpose of the initiative/organisation, education (e.g., description of the educational programmes, courses offered, target audiences, methods of delivery), and reporting (e.g., channels to report, types of complaints accepted, potential adjudication processes, support services, etc.). As such, any accessible web-page information and affiliated documentation or modules provided by the safe sport organisations pertaining to these areas of interest were reviewed. Once the three organisations were selected, we identified and evaluated the content of their basic/introductory safe sport courses: Child Protection in Sport and Physical Activity–E-Learning (CPSU), SafeSport Trained Core Course (US Center for SafeSport), and Play by the Rules: Child Protection and Safeguarding (Sport Integrity Australia).

2.4. Data Analysis

An inductive thematic web-based content analysis was chosen for the current study ([Braun et al. 2016](#)). This approach was chosen as it is valuable for exploring content and key messages; specifically, it allowed for comparing and contrasting the educational and reporting information available from each organisation, as well as examining the connections between the initiatives ([Braun et al. 2016](#)). For example, the various educational courses, target audiences, and modes of delivery were assessed across each of the organisations for similarities and differences. Likewise, aspects of complaint processes, such as reporting, adjudication processes, and support services for stakeholders in sport were assessed. The safe sport literature was used to help inform data collection and analysis procedures. As an example, core concepts of the basic/introductory courses, including whether all forms of harm were addressed, factors impacting harm (e.g., power structures), grooming processes, and information on how to address maltreatment (e.g., reporting) were compared to the ex-

tant literature on recommendations by researchers and athletes in maltreatment education (Brackenridge and Rhind 2014; Gurgis et al. 2022; Kerr et al. 2014; Willson et al. 2022). Collectively, relevant content pertaining to these categories were organised into main themes and summary tables (e.g., Tables A1–A3). The following section will explore the two core evaluative themes of education (e.g., structure and accessibility, learning content covered) and reporting mechanisms (e.g., structure, capacity, and accessibility of reporting, supports, and resources) provided by each organisation.

3. Results

3.1. Education

The findings suggest that the three safe sport organisations possess key similarities and differences in the ways in which they design and deliver educational programmes to prevent and address maltreatment in sport. The following section will review and compare the general structure (e.g., approach to programme development and methods of delivery), access (e.g., intended audience, cost), and educational content of the three organisations with a specific focus on the content covered in the introductory/basic safe sport course.

3.1.1. General Structure and Accessibility of Safe Sport Education

In general, the organisations develop safe sport education in two ways; training content is created solely by the organisation or through partnerships with other entities who specialise in child protection awareness and education (in sport or otherwise). Sport Integrity Australia and the UK's Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) offer safe sport training to sport participants through partner organisations, such as Play by the Rules and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, respectively. Conversely, the US Center for SafeSport produces its own custom maltreatment awareness and prevention courses. Although educational content is predominantly offered through e-learning methods across all three organisations, additional methods of delivery are offered, which include but are not limited to podcasts, face-to-face training, applications, and virtual reality.

The intended audiences for the educational materials are a range of sport stakeholders such as coaches, parents, athletes, committee members, administrators, and volunteers involved in organised sport. The educational programmes usually focus on sport stakeholders' roles, with the CPSU further tailoring course content by the frequency and nature of stakeholders' contact with young people in sport. Specifically, the UK-based organisation brings an exclusive child-focused lens to athlete welfare education and thus, educational content is intended for those who work primarily with children and youth (as opposed to athletes of all ages).

In addition to basic safe sport training for various stakeholders, most entities also offer more specialised courses for specific audiences. For example, the US Center for SafeSport offers courses designed for youth athletes, adult athletes, athletes with disabilities, parents, volunteers, and health professionals. Sport Integrity Australia also offers a course in partnership with Play by the Rules for individuals who are seeking a role as a protection officer.

To access educational materials, all three of the safe sport initiatives require the creation of a member account. Of the organisations, Sport Integrity Australia is the only initiative that does not require a fee to engage with the educational courses. The US Center for SafeSport and the CPSU (UK) require a fee of USD 21 and GBP 25 (USD 31), respectively. However, both of these organisations provide forms of complimentary access to safe sport education including free condensed safe sport modules, webinars, and/or workshops.

3.1.2. Content Covered in Basic/Introductory Safe Sport Courses

Findings suggest that there are shared themes and key differences in the learning content covered in the basic/introductory safe sport course across the three organisations. Specifically, the CPSU and Sport Integrity Australia address the four types of maltreatment (e.g., neglect, physical, sexual, and emotional harm), whereas the US Center for Safe

Sport does not refer to neglect. All three sport organisations refer to power relations as foundational concepts in maltreatment; however, detailed references to the use or misuse of power were specifically lacking in the CPSU and Sport Integrity Australia courses. For example, in the Play by the Rules course, power is briefly mentioned in the section on coaching relationships and the section on sexual abuse in reference to the way that coaches may exploit their position of power and authority over athletes by forming private relationships with younger athletes, or by controlling the athlete's progression in the sport. However, there is no content provided on the definition of power, description of how power relates to other forms of harm, or the potential effects of abuses of power in sporting environments. In another example, CPSU identifies the misuse of authority as a risk factor for abuse and neglect, however, does not provide a definition of power. The course materials include examples of abuse alluding to the misuse of power but do not explicitly provide an example of what power imbalances look like in practice and in the sport environment. Further, the US Center provided content on the trust and power imbalance in a coach-athlete relationship that can leave athletes vulnerable to maltreatment. This includes controlling playing time and team placements, which can reduce the agency of an athlete's choice. Grooming, another foundational concept in maltreatment literature, was also absent in the introductory educational content provided by the CPSU. Across all three introductory courses, examples of maltreatment in the sport context were provided. Providing examples is key to improving stakeholder knowledge and awareness of potential maltreatment.

The most significant limitation in the basic safe sport course content was related to the recognition and integration of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) as necessary components in creating a safe sport environment for participants. Although some organisations offered general insights on EDI, such as increased vulnerability for ethnic minority communities, the content was superficial and lacked depth. Specifically, although the CPSU acknowledged the various social identities of athletes through images related to course content, through case studies, and by identifying various risk factors associated with EDI, the course would have benefited from a module specific to understanding the intersectionality of athletes. This would help to support coaches in understanding how various social identities may relate to power imbalances and in turn result in an abuse of power. In the Play by the Rules course, there are learning scenarios of inappropriate behaviour and in one scenario, a coach belittles an athlete for using discriminatory language in reference to the athlete's cultural background. This is used only as an example of behaviour that should be reported; however, there is no further explanation of discrimination or reference to EDI concepts in the main course content. However, there is information on EDI provided in one section of a downloadable PDF created by the Council of Australian Government on the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations. This 20-page document is embedded into the section on promoting a positive culture; however, unless the document is scrolled through or downloaded and read, the section on EDI would most likely not be seen by course users. Despite this apparent gap in EDI content in the basic safe sport course, the US Center for Safe Sport and Sport Integrity Australia provide separate specialised courses on equity, diversity, and inclusion in sport. Please refer to Table A1 for a more specific breakdown of maltreatment concepts covered in each organisation's basic course.

Reporting processes are another key area covered in introductory safe sport courses. Specifically, all three organisations have learning content about recognising the signs and symptoms of maltreatment as well as providing sport stakeholders with strategies or steps for responding to maltreatment disclosures from young athletes, such as ensuring the individual stays safe, being a good listener, and determining when to share concerns with parents or carers. Further, all three organisations provide information on reporting (e.g., where to report and steps for reporting) as well as information on how to create a detailed and comprehensive report of an occurrence of maltreatment (e.g., tips for keeping proper records). Please refer to Table A2 for a breakdown of the reporting processes referenced in the three introductory safe sport courses.

3.2. Reporting Mechanisms

The three organisations also possess independent reporting mechanisms and support resources (e.g., financial, mental health, legal) for concerns of maltreatment witnessed or experienced by individuals in the sport context. The following section will review and compare the organisations' strategies in structure, accessibility, capacity, and provision of support through their respective reporting mechanisms. Please see Table A3 to review and compare each organisation's approach to reporting.

3.2.1. General Structure, Accessibility, and Capacity of Reporting Mechanisms

In general, all three organisations identify mechanisms for seeking advice as well as for disclosing or reporting concerns of maltreatment. The US Center for SafeSport and Sport Integrity Australia receive formal concerns directly. Conversely, the UK's Child Protection in Sport Unit refers the reporting of concerns to the relevant national sport governing bodies or the overarching child protection body (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) for follow-up. To initiate a report, all three mechanisms provide a variety of modalities that may include a phone number or hotline, an email address, or an intake form to submit to their organisation. Examples of the details on intake forms include the role of the individual alleged to have engaged in misconduct, bystanders or co-conspirators, and the dates, locations, and type(s) of misconduct. To enhance the accessibility of reporting, Sport Integrity Australia and the US Center for SafeSport provide the option for intake forms to be submitted anonymously.

The organisations also vary in the characterisation of behaviours that can be reported. The US Center for SafeSport and Sport Integrity Australia accept reports of behaviour that violate specific policies (i.e., US Safe Sport Code, National Integrity Framework), whereas the CPSU adopts a more generalised approach by accepting any reports of "concerning behaviours or abuse in sport." The CPSU (UK) indicates that it accepts reports about any instances where a child/youth is concerned, whereas the US Center for SafeSport is more specific, indicating that reports can be made against anyone in the US Olympic or Paralympic Movement. In addition, Sport Integrity Australia only accepts reports of prohibited conduct from a sport stakeholder if the specific sport's National Governing Body (NGB) has integrated the National Integrity Framework. If an NGB has not signed on to the framework, reports will go directly to the NGB, which manages concerns using their organisational policies and procedures.

In addition to general reporting mechanisms, Australia and the United States have investigation and adjudication capabilities to resolve reported concerns of maltreatment. These countries outline multiple trajectories following the intake of a report, which include informal resolution, investigations, and/or alternative dispute resolutions, including mediations and arbitrations. These processes are outlined on the US Center for SafeSport and Sport Integrity Australia websites so that those who report can understand the next steps or options following an initial report of potential maltreatment. Upon the conclusion of an investigative process, the US Center for SafeSport and Sport Integrity Australia can implement sanctions, whereas the ability of the UK's mechanism to impose sanctions is unclear. Currently, the US Center for SafeSport is the only mechanism that has a public database of sanctioned individuals.

3.2.2. Provision of Support

All three organisations provide information for individuals about accessing support services such as mental health resources, child welfare services, counselling services, children's rights information, legal assistance, and financial support. The organisations' websites provide referral information for individuals, such as links and telephone numbers for support service organisations, as well as toll-free hotlines. For example, Sport Integrity Australia provides information for organisations such as Lifeline, Headspace (mental health resources), and Wellmob Online Counselling. To help individuals navigate the available resources, the US Center for SafeSport has advisors who can be accessed via a 24-h helpline

or anonymous online chat service; these advisors are available to answer questions and connect claimants, respondents, third parties, and witnesses with appropriate support services. The NSPCC (the CPSU's overarching organisation) and Sport Integrity Australia have their own telephone hotlines; however, the support offered through these helplines is not outlined. In addition to general referrals, Sport Integrity Australia and the US Center for Safe Sport also identify the ways in which specific populations may access free welfare-focused support services through external organisations. For example, Sport Integrity Australia provides a link to the Australian Institute of Sport Mental Health Referral Network, which can provide six free sessions to high-performance athletes, alumni, coaches, and support staff members. Similarly, the US Center for SafeSport provides information exclusive to Olympic and Paralympic athletes on how they can access free, confidential advice through the US Olympic Committee Athlete Ombudsman Office.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to review international safe sport progress by evaluating the extent to which publicly accessible information provided by three major international safe sport organisations addresses the reporting and educational needs informed by recent scholarly evidence and athlete advocacy, as well as to identify any remaining gaps. Broadly, the results demonstrated that the organisations' introductory educational offerings adequately addressed most forms of maltreatment, provided tips for recognising the signs and symptoms of these behaviours, and outlined the steps for responding to and reporting disclosures of maltreatment. These results represent an advancement in the comprehensiveness of the content covered in comparison to a 2014 review of educational safe sport programmes (Kerr et al. 2014), which highlighted a predominant focus on sexual abuse. However, information regarding key concepts and issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion remains limited or was not included in the main course content (e.g., only as a downloadable, external resource). As a result, information on EDI requires further attention across the three introductory educational programmes. In terms of reporting, the results showed that each organisation's approach to receiving reports of maltreatment varied; there were important differences in the organisations' ability to directly intake, adjudicate, and sanction instances of maltreatment. The following section will contextualise the results in light of recent safe sport advocacy and interpret the ways in which each organisation addresses systemic cultural factors inherent in the sport environment, minimises barriers to reporting, and attends to challenges in the design, delivery, and evaluation of safe sport education.

4.1. Systemic Cultural Factors in the Sport Environment

Organised sport contexts are often criticised for some of the cultural factors embedded and reproduced in the sport environment, including an overemphasis on performance excellence and 'winning-at-all-costs,' unequal and unquestioned power relations between athletes and those in positions of authority, the normalisation of harmful practices, and the socialisation of key stakeholders (e.g., parents; Jacobs et al. 2017; Roberts et al. 2020; Wilinsky and McCabe 2021; Willson et al. 2022). Over time, these cultural factors can encourage stakeholders to tolerate behaviours that may result in harm to athletes and/or influence sport stakeholders to be less inclined to intervene and/or report cases of inappropriate practices (Roberts et al. 2020; Willson et al. 2022). Further, when these systemic issues are prioritised over the holistic development of young people in sport programmes, the potential for creating safe, healthy, and welfare-focused environments is limited (Jacobs et al. 2017; Roberts et al. 2020; Wilinsky and McCabe 2021; Willson et al. 2022).

Each of the organisations recognises the systemic vulnerabilities present in the sport environment in their introductory/basic safe sport courses through the inclusion of information on power relations or the misuse of power, as well as the hyper-competitive sporting environment. Although it is imperative that educational material addresses these contextual factors that may enhance the vulnerability of young athletes to experiences of

maltreatment, it is important to note that the course information often lacked depth. For example, the educational materials rarely defined power or the factors that contribute to coaches' bases of power (e.g., expertise, age, access to resources, and decision making).

The US Center for Safe Sport and Sport Integrity Australia provide a contrast to the systemic cultural factors by outlining the core components of a positive environment (e.g., kindness, provision of positive feedback and reinforcement, and safety) and emphasising that all stakeholders play a role in creating a positive environment. Educating stakeholders on how to promote and foster a positive sport environment is of the utmost importance; specifically, it has been noted that the advancement of safe sport should move beyond the prevention of harm (what *not* to do) and focus on the optimisation of the sport experience through the promotion of positive values as well (what *to* do; [Gurgis and Kerr 2021](#); [Lang and Hartill 2015](#)). Future improvements to this basic course material might include an increased emphasis on 'upskilling' key stakeholders (e.g., coaches) by providing learning content focused on developing holistic, athlete-centred, and rights-based coaching tactics and building strategies that create a foundation for positive relationships with parents, athletes, and other sport practitioners ([Jenkins 2021](#)); educating stakeholders about soft skills and appropriate strategies (e.g., communication, motivation) for positively engaging athletes in the modern sport environment ([Howman et al. 2021](#); [Bennett 2018](#)); and, incorporating athletes' perspectives in the development and implementation of education ([Mountjoy et al. 2022](#); [Willson et al. 2022](#)). Further, recognising that maltreatment in sport is not a "one-person problem", organisations' efforts to design and deliver content for a variety of stakeholders, including parents, athletes, and sport administrators, is needed to challenge the socialisation and normalisation of poor practices ([Johnson et al. 2020](#); [Kerr et al. 2020](#))

4.2. Barriers to Reporting Maltreatment

In addition to underlying systemic vulnerabilities, athletes and researchers have identified barriers to reporting maltreatment as a significant obstacle to safe sport progress. Of particular interest, youth athletes may possess a lack of awareness of behaviours that constitute unsafe sport and may not know where to report information when witnessing or experiencing these behaviours ([Mountjoy et al. 2020](#)). Athletes who are aware of unsafe practices and who consider disclosing their experiences consistently describe a reluctance to report maltreatment or unsafe sport practices due to a lack of trust in the sport organisations to which they belong. Athletes report concerns about confidentiality and fairness, unequal power relations, perceived silencing, perceived threats of additional harm, and perceived fear of potential repercussions and/or not being believed ([Barrett 2021](#); [Brackenridge et al. 2012](#); [Cense and Brackenridge 2001](#); [Willson et al. 2022](#)). These factors present persistent challenges and obstacles for individuals experiencing or witnessing maltreatment to report unsafe practices to their sport organisations. A recent study provides evidence for these perceived reporting challenges; less than 15% of athlete survey participants who experienced maltreatment in their sport settings formally reported these experiences to their sport organisations ([Willson et al. 2021](#)).

From an awareness standpoint, the findings suggest that all three organisations endeavour to educate participants on how to recognise, respond to, and report instances of maltreatment in the sport environment through their basic/introductory course. When maltreatment is witnessed or experienced in the sport context, participants can report concerns to independent, expert-led intake services through both the US Center for SafeSport and Sport Integrity Australia, which may help address concerns related to trust, power relations, and confidentiality in reporting. The US Center for SafeSport further supplements its reporting processes with human resources to assist individuals with the intake of their concerns or follow-up care via a 24-h hotline. Supplementary resources of this nature have been recommended and may further enhance trust and minimise power differentials between the reporter and the receiver of the concerns. Although independent reporting

processes exist in Australia, these apply only to the sport organisations that have signed on to the mechanism.

In alignment with safety and confidence in reporting, recommendations for mandatory external, independent, expert-led investigation and adjudication processes for issues of maltreatment to combat the autonomous, self-regulating nature of organised sport have been advocated by athletes, researchers, and child protection experts (Jenkins 2021; Kerr and Kerr 2020; Willson et al. 2022). Specifically, if decisions about whether investigations are needed, how to initiate investigations, and how to assess or apply penalties remain decisions made by the sport bodies from which the allegations arise, conflicts of interest may occur (e.g., pressures to demonstrate performance success and maintain government funding may conflict with the prioritisation of athletes' needs; (Kerr et al. 2020). Accessible, safe, and confidential avenues to raise concerns about maltreatment are imperative to limit the overarching culture of perceived fear and silence that persists in sport. Entities of this nature may also have capabilities common in regulatory bodies, such as the ability to monitor the development and training of those in positions of authority, ensure compliance with appropriate practices, and enforce sanctions when behaviours fail to meet expectations (Bruyninckx 2011; Kerr et al. 2020). Of the three international organisations reviewed, only the US Center for SafeSport and Sport Integrity Australia have the capabilities to intake, facilitate investigations, and deliver sanctions if necessary. When sanctions are rendered, researchers and child protection experts suggest that this information is made publicly available in a centralised system (e.g., Jenkins 2021) to prevent the movement of sanctioned individuals across clubs, regions, or countries and to limit the risk that these individuals may commit harms elsewhere. To date, only the US Center for SafeSport fulfills this recommendation through their public disciplinary database.

It is also important to note that while the US Center for SafeSport's independent mechanism is mandatory for all NSOs, the reporting mechanisms for Sport Integrity Australia are only available to sport organisations that have signed the National Integrity Framework. Accordingly, the specific stakeholder populations covered and included by the reporting mechanisms and corresponding services are specific to each organisation. The limitations for who does and does not have access to the reporting mechanisms (e.g., certain sport organisations, athlete groups) may be interpreted as a potential drawback to safe sport advancement efforts, creating unequal access by athletes to safe and independent reporting mechanisms. In fact, maltreatment is a systemic issue and no age, sport type, or sport level is immune to instances of maltreatment (Lang and Hartill 2015). It is therefore imperative to consider how organisations may extend and provide equitable access to reporting mechanisms for various stakeholder groups, ages, sport types, and levels.

4.3. Challenges in Design, Delivery, and Evaluation of Safe Sport Programmes

Athlete advocates and researchers also identify challenges and gaps in the design, delivery, and monitoring of safe sport programming as deterrents to safe sport progress. Key barriers to effective culture change include strategic initiatives such as policy development that primarily focuses on sexual abuse (rather than the full spectrum of maltreatment); educational programmes that do not bridge evidence to practice; programmes that have ineffective oversights or evaluations; and challenges in the dissemination of information and the implementation of full-scale safe sport programmes, from grassroots to national levels, in a predominantly volunteer-based community (Kerr and Kerr 2020).

In accordance with the calls to action from athletes, researchers, and other child protection experts, the CPSU and Sport Integrity Australia include all forms of maltreatment (i.e., physical, sexual, emotional harm, and neglect) as well as corresponding sport-specific examples in their introductory/basic course content. Conversely, although the US Center for SafeSport's module includes most forms of maltreatment, it fails to include neglect, which is reflective of both the emerging area of research on neglect in sport and the previously identified gaps in safe sport education (Kerr et al. 2014). The US Center for SafeSport should integrate content on neglect into future iterations of their basic/introductory course

as recent evidence suggests that athletes perceive neglect to be one of the most prevalent forms of maltreatment in the sport environment (Parent and Vaillancourt-Morel 2021; Willson et al. 2021). Failure to provide adequate information on neglect, as well as its potential effects, in educational components may also further normalise common sport practices such as failing to provide adequate medical assistance or appropriate re-entry protocols post-injury. To advance safe sport, stakeholders must have a comprehensive understanding of all forms of harm as well as the potential effects of harm, influences of abusive practices on sport cultures, and available statistics on harm in sport.

In addition, all three of the organisations' basic/introductory safe sport courses would benefit from an increased focus on concepts and issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and the influence of EDI policies and practices on perceptions of safety in the sport environment. An enhanced focus on EDI is important in the introductory course as research shows athletes of equity-deserving groups (e.g., 2SLGBTQIA+, gender-diverse, racialised, athletes with disabilities) reported higher instances of harm (e.g., psychological, neglectful, physical, sexual) than their peers (US Center for SafeSport 2021; Vertommen et al. 2016; Willson et al. 2021). Although some of the organisations have a separate and specialised EDI learning module and the US Center includes some information, all the basic/introductory courses would benefit from an increased emphasis on equity, diversity, and inclusion as fundamental to safe sport environments. Including EDI learning material would also help to denounce discriminatory behaviours in sport and may help EDI-focused content reach a wider audience (e.g., variety of stakeholders, number of participants) than a more specialised or advanced course.

In addition to more comprehensive learning content, improved accessibility to each organisation's training programmes could be achieved by reducing the cost of introductory courses (i.e., US Center for SafeSport and CPSU), expanding participant eligibility (e.g., open to the general population), and/or decreasing technological barriers (e.g., removing the mandatory creation of a member account or specific participation criteria to complete courses). These recommendations may reduce the challenges associated with the widespread dissemination of educational content to a variety of stakeholders in volunteer-based sport communities.

Given the international nature of safe sport efforts, the educational content from all three organisations would benefit from clearer references to theoretical and empirical sources in the course material. A more robust approach to content development could encourage greater consistency in terminology and the corresponding behaviours that constitute maltreatment in the sport context. This could also reduce the role that sport leaders often play in determining what constitutes maltreatment. Accordingly, evidence-based course content is essential for effective change and safer sport.

Finally, previous research has indicated the importance of mandating educational programmes for a variety of stakeholders in the sport environment and ensuring appropriate monitoring and evaluation of the impact of these mandates to determine whether the programmes are decreasing instances of harm and altering behaviours and attitudes in practice (Kerr et al. 2014; Willson et al. 2022). It is unclear from the websites and the academic literature to-date whether these programmes have been empirically evaluated to assess whether the learning outcomes are achieved. Further, the compulsory nature of the educational programmes remains unclear.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

Given the small sample size of initiatives and an exclusive focus on Western countries, future research exploring safe sport developments would benefit from a more holistic, diverse, and international perspective. The scope of the current study (environmental scan of safe sport initiatives) must also be considered when contextualizing the findings; specifically, data gathered were limited to accessible website information and resources available in English. In addition, only the introductory educational modules associated with each initiative were examined. Future research seeking to critique existing safe sport

initiatives and areas of interest, including education and reporting, would benefit from reviewing supplementary information for data collection and analysis, such as additional educational modules and workshops, or related documents and reports offered by the safe sport initiatives. It would also be beneficial to obtain the perspectives of the stakeholders responsible for enforcing safe sport requirements and programming, such as safe sport directors, managers, or safeguarding officers. Understanding these perspectives may provide a more in-depth overview of the functions, operations, challenges, and perceived outcomes of existing safe sport entities.

The current study highlights safe sport advancements within the past few years, yet the processes of implementation, compliance, and monitoring over time remain unclear. Future longitudinal research is needed to examine the transferability and effectiveness of safe sport initiatives in creating lasting culture change in sport practice. Moreover, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of safe sport initiatives, the examination of stakeholder perspectives, including coaches, support staff members, athletes, and parents, is an important area for future consideration. The benefits of such research would be twofold; first, to assess if the needs of stakeholders are adequately accounted for through the content, resources, and support offered by safe sport organisations and second, to assess the extent to which stakeholders perceive that current initiatives contribute to positive, safe, and inclusive sport environments for all participants. Subsequently, such information may highlight the potential recommendations and improvements needed to foster safer sport and inform future safe sport initiatives.

In the current study, it was not possible to determine whether maltreatment survivors were engaged in the development and implementation of the safe sport initiative educational components and reporting procedures. Increased advocacy and literature highlight the importance of engaging survivors and/or athletes in the advancement of sport safeguarding initiatives (Mountjoy et al. 2022; Willson et al. 2022); therefore, this remains an area for future research and practice.

Finally, the current examination of the three safe sport organisations suggests that the issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion, and information specific to equity-deserving groups in sport, are lacking in the foundational educational modules. Considering the differences in sport experiences for participants who self-identify as Black, parasport athletes, 2SLGBTQI+, gender-diverse, and/or indigenous, inadequate attention to equity, diversity, and inclusion presents a limited and incomplete view of safe sport. Therefore, it remains important to integrate the perspectives of equity-deserving stakeholder groups, who are often absent from discourses of safe sport, in the development of education initiatives and reporting mechanisms.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study explored the publicly accessible information provided by three international sport-specific organisations regarding child protection in sport. From a broad perspective, the findings suggest that significant and positive progress in safe sport has been made in the past decade, particularly with the emergence of independent, specialised entities of this nature; however, a few key gaps in education and reporting remain. Specifically, the findings indicate that these organisations have advanced accessible safe sport education for multiple stakeholders that covers a variety of forms of maltreatment in course offerings. Educational gaps remain with respect to the meaningful inclusion of EDI concepts in basic/introductory safe sport courses. In terms of reporting, the findings suggest that organisations vary in their ability to directly intake, adjudicate, and sanction instances of maltreatment in the sport context. Gaps in the reporting mechanisms, such as limits on the populations covered and an inability or lack of a capacity to undertake investigative and sanctioning processes, were also observed. Future advancements may involve the inclusion of EDI content in basic safe sport education as well as the expansion of access to reporting mechanisms, mandating the mechanisms for all sport organisations in each

respective country, and expanded adjudication services to ensure issues of maltreatment are managed independently by experts from intake to resolution.

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Appendix A

Table A1. 1 Concepts Covered in Basic Safe Sport Course by Organisation.

	Physical Harm	Sexual Harm	Emotional Harm	Neglect	Grooming	Power Relations	Cultural Factors (e.g., Normalisation, Win at All Costs)	Promoting Positive Environment	Equity, Diversity, Inclusion
US Center for SafeSport	i. ii. iii. iv.	i. ii. iii. iv.	i. ii. iii. iv.	Not addressed	i. ii. iii. iv.	i. ii. iii. iv.	i.	i. ii. iii. iv.	i. ii. iii.
Child Protection in Sport Unit	i. ii. iii. iv.	i. ii. iii. iv.	i. ii. iii. iv.	i. ii.	Not addressed	i. iii.	i. iii. iv.	Not addressed	Not addressed
Sport Integrity Australia	i. ii. iii. iv.	i. ii. iii. iv.	i. ii. iii. iv.	i. ii. iii.	i. ii. iii. iv.	i. iii.	i. iii.	i. ii. iii.	Not addressed

Table: i.: Is the concept mentioned in the course content? ii.: Does the course content define/describe the concept? iii.: Does the course content provide examples of what the concept looks like in practice? iv.: Does the course content describe the importance of the concept in relation to maltreatment in sport (e.g., effects, influence on inappropriate practice, statistics)?.

Table A2. Reporting Processes Introduced in Basic Safe Sport Courses by Each Organisation.

	Recognising Signs and Symptoms	Responding to Disclosures	Where to Report	Steps for Reporting
US Center for SafeSport	YES	YES	YES	YES
Child Protection in Sport Unit	YES	YES	YES	YES
Sport Integrity Australia	YES	YES	YES	YES

Table A3. General Structure, Accessibility, and Capacity of Reporting Mechanisms.

	Direct Intake of Formal Concerns	Modalities Available to Assist in Reporting	Stakeholders Covered	Independent Investigation Services	Ability to Enforce Sanctions	Public Database of Sanctioned Individuals
US Center for SafeSport	YES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detailed intake forms online (secured form) Call hotline—24 h with an operator (helpline operated by RAINN—support via phone, chat, mobile app) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anyone within the US Olympic and Paralympic movement (employee or participant under USOPC) 	YES	YES	YES

Table A3. Cont.

	Direct Intake of Formal Concerns	Modalities Available to Assist in Reporting	Stakeholders Covered	Independent Investigation Services	Ability to Enforce Sanctions	Public Database of Sanctioned Individuals
Child Protection in Sport Unit	NO (refers to NGB or NSPCC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Referral contact information to NGB or NSPCC Template incident report form Safeguarding reporting procedures flow chart 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth athletes (no specification on age ranges or sport levels) 	NO	NO	NO
Sport Integrity Australia	YES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detailed intake forms Hotline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All sport stakeholders whose national governing body has integrated the National Integrity Framework 	YES	YES	NO

Note

¹ For the purpose of this paper, the term ‘safe sport’ was adopted as it is commonly used in North America and some international regions (Hayhurst et al. 2016).

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