

ELITE ADULT ATHLETE HEALTH AND SAFE SPORT EXPERIENCES IN ROWING

Executive Summary

February 2024



PROJECT OBJECTIVES

In light of growing concern regarding athletes' experiences of psychological, physical, sexual harassment, abuse, and neglect, World Rowing, in collaboration with ASOIF, took decisive action to measure the extent of the problem, as a first action to safeguard athletes through implementation of this pilot project.

This project aimed to evaluate elite athletes' past year experiences and contextual factors around harassment, abuse, injuries, illnesses, and mental health challenges. The ultimate objective was to equip World Rowing with timely and detailed information regarding elite athletes' recent exposures to harassment and abuse, as well as their health challenges. This information is intended to serve as a vital resource, empowering World Rowing to enhance and refine its athlete safeguarding strategies effectively.

METHODOLOGY

A self-report questionnaire was developed consisting of three sections:

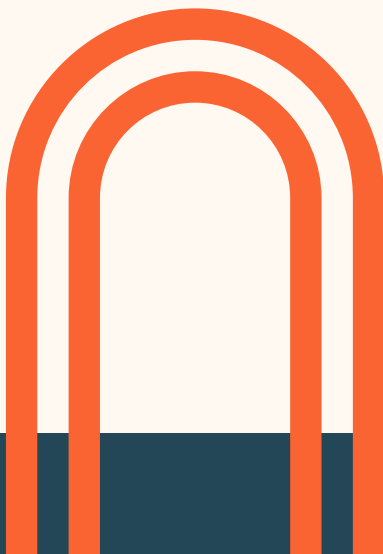
- 1) socio-demographic and sport characteristics of the participants,
- 2) questions on physical and mental health over the past year,
- 3) questions on experiences with in-person and online harassment and abuse in sport over the past year, the circumstances, and their reporting behaviour based on an internationally validated questionnaire (Violence Towards Athletes Questionnaire, Parent et al., 2019).

Four types of harassment and abuse were surveyed: psychological (e.g., insults, threats, humiliations), physical (e.g., hitting, pushing, punching), instrumental (e.g., forced weight-reducing practices, forced isolation, forced training against medical advice) and sexual (e.g., sexual remarks, behaviours without consent).

Targeted participants were athletes (18y+) participating in the following World Rowing events:

1. European Rowing Championships (Bled, Italy, 25-28 May 2023)
2. World Rowing Cup II (Varese, Italy, 16-18 June 2023)
3. World Rowing Cup III (Lucerne, Switzerland, 7-9 July 2023)
4. World Rowing U23 Championships (Plovdiv, Bulgaria, 16-23 July 2023)

In the unlikely event that the content of the questionnaire triggered concerns for the athlete, athlete support was available through the World Rowing Event Safeguarding Officer, Organizing Committee Medical Services, World Rowing Medical Committee, National Federation Medical Team and an anonymous helpline embedded in the questionnaire.



KEY RESULTS

A total of 72 rowers completed the survey, representing a 3% response rate. One in two rowers surveyed experienced at least one form of interpersonal violence.

The following table summarizes the experiences of rowers over the previous 12 months (incidence):

Experiences with harassment and abuse by peer athletes	Experiences with harassment and abuse by authority figures
Half reported experiencing harassment and abuse by peers with psychological violence being the most common (47%), followed by sexual violence (21%). Peer-to-peer harassment and abuse was more common than by authority figures in sport.	One third (35%) reported experiencing harassment and abuse by a person in a position of authority with psychological violence being most commonly reported (28%), followed by instrumental (24%), sexual (16%), and physical (5%).
Psychological violence	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reputational harm by spreading rumours or hurtful comments, as a form of psychological violence, was the most common form of psychological violence reported and was experienced by almost one third (28%) of the participants. Over two thirds (72%) indicated a negative impact from their experiences of harassment and abuse: mentally (28%), social life/ relationships (23%), sports performance (14%) and physical health (7%). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The most commonly reported form of psychological violence was indifference towards the athlete (17%). Over half (53%) of the time, athletes reported that the perpetrator was a coach, and most often male in gender (86%). Only 12% reported that the incident did not affect them, with approximately one quarter (23%) reported a negative impact on sports performance and one fifth (19%) experienced a negative impact on their social life.
Physical violence	
No reports of physical violence by peers were made.	Physical violence by an authority figure was relatively uncommon (only 2 athletes), with the most prevalent form being hitting, punching or kicking, or throwing an object.
Instrumental violence	
Instrumental violence, by definition, is not perpetrated by peer athletes, only authority figures, therefore this field is purposefully absent of results.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instrumental violence by an authority figure was most commonly reported to be in the form of forcing the athlete to reach an ideal weight by unhealthy means (18%), forcing the athlete train or compete against medical advice (16%), and forced social isolation (14%). The perpetrators were most often reported to be the athlete's coach (47%) and a male in gender (82%), occurring most often at a sports venue (53%) during all phases of the season. These incidents had negative effects across mental health (38%), social relations (21%), physical health (13%), and sports performance (29%).

Sexual violence

The most common form of sexual violence by peers were online or face-to-face remarks about athlete's sexual life, private life, or appearance (13%).

- Sexual violence by an authority figure most commonly occurred in the form of online or face-to-face remarks about athlete's sexual life, private life, or appearance (13%).
- Half of the athletes did not feel comfortable sharing the details of their perpetrator, with the other half reporting perpetration by members of the entourage, coach, and "other", most commonly men.
- The most commonly reported negative impacts were related to mental health (45%), followed by physical health (18%) and social relationships (18%).

Online/Cyber abuse

- Cyber abuse or online mechanisms were used to perpetrate sexual abuse by peers (13%) and authority figures (13%), as well as psychological abuse by peers (2%) and authority figures (14%).

Reporting

- Only two thirds (66%) of respondents reported having access to a safe space or trusted person, and one third (34%) said they did not have access or were unsure.
- Over half (53%) indicated awareness of the appropriate contact within their organization to report such incidents. The remaining (47%) did not know who to go to in their organisation to report these experiences. These are concerning findings.

Physical and mental health status

- Almost three quarters (72%) of the rowers reported a physical complaint over the past 12 months. Non-infectious illness was the most common physical complaints (60%) followed by infectious illnesses (43%) and musculoskeletal injuries (39%).
- Over half (57%) of the study population reported low mood and anxiety related complaints (54%), while one third complained of sleep disturbances or an eating disorder/disordered eating behaviour (31%).
- Rowers with these health problems continued to train and compete throughout the past 12 months.


Relationship between physical/mental health and harassment and abuse

The association between harassment and abuse and athlete physical and mental health are very important outcomes of this study, demonstrating the urgent need to address harassment and abuse in this cohort given the physical and mental health associations:


- The physical health complaints (injury and illness) were found to be linked with mental health complaints (i.e., an athlete with a physical health complaint was more likely to also have a mental health complaint, and vice versa).
- The overall score of harassment and abuse was associated with both physical and mental health demonstrating the link between abuse and health outcomes.
- Experiencing harassment and abuse (both by peer athletes as well as by authority figures), except for sexual violence, was associated with higher reporting of mental health complaints.
- Experiencing harassment and abuse (both by peer athletes as well as by authority figures), except for instrumental and sexual violence, was associated with higher reporting of physical health complaints.

TAKE-AWAYS


1. Even though the response rate in this study is relatively low, every single incident of harassment and abuse in sport is one too many. The findings show that harassment and abuse is indeed an existing problem in elite rowing.
2. Most concerning, some rowers surveyed reported that the experiences of harassment and abuse were ongoing.
3. Psychological violence is the most common form of harassment and abuse experienced by this cohort of elite athletes over the past year.
4. Peer-to-peer interpersonal violence is more common than harassment and abuse by authority figures in this sample of rowers.
5. Experiencing harassment and abuse negatively influences rower's mental health, physical health, social relationships, and performance.
6. Over one quarter (28%) of the rowers surveyed were either unsure or did not know where to report or felt uncomfortable experiences of harassment and abuse. This is an alarming finding.
7. Over half of elite rowers surveyed suffered a physical complaint in the 12 months prior to the event and over half suffered symptoms of low mood and/or anxiety. Rowers continue to train and compete with these health complaints, as reported by the participants in this study.
8. Experiencing harassment and abuse by both peers and authority figures increased the odds of the rowers having both mental and physical complaints.
9. Psychological and physical violence perpetrated by peers/and authority were associated with both negative mental and psychical health, while instrumental violence is only associated with mental health.
10. Implementation of this questionnaire at World Rowing events was feasible, however changes in implementation strategy are warranted to realize a higher response rate. This may include implementation of the questionnaire at pre-event at training camps, and/or designating a researcher on-site who is solely responsible for athlete engagement to encourage participation.



Interventions to address the specific characteristics of harassment and abuse are needed.



Further investigation into the causes and circumstances of the physical and mental health symptoms would assist World Rowing in developing intervention strategies to mitigate these health concerns to improve athlete health and sports performance.



Ongoing monitoring/ surveillance of physical and mental health, as well as experiences of harassment and abuse are indicated to assess for effectiveness of interventions and to monitor for changing trends.

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