

# Non-accidental harms ('abuse') in athletes with impairment ('para athletes'): a state-of-the-art review

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective** Para athletes reap significant health benefits from sport but are vulnerable to non-accidental harms. Little is known about the types and impacts of non-accidental harms Para athletes face. In this literature review, we summarise current knowledge and suggest priorities for future research related to non-accidental harms in Para athletes.

**Design** Six electronic databases were searched between August and September 2017. 2245 articles were identified in the initial title/abstract review, and 202 records were selected for full-text review following preliminary screening. Two independent examiners evaluated each full text, and eight citations were selected based on inclusion/exclusion criteria.

**Data sources** MEDLINE, Embase, PsycInfo, Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature, Scopus and Academic Search Premier.

**Eligibility criteria for selecting studies** Inclusion criteria: (A) human participants; (B) written in English; (C) descriptive, cohort and case series, case-control, qualitative, mixed methods studies and all clinical trials; and (D) data pertain to harassment/abuse of youth, recreational, collegiate, national-level and/or elite-level athletes with a physical and/or intellectual impairment.

**Results** Most studies focused on young, visually impaired athletes and approximately half of all studies described high rates of bullying and its social implications. One study confirmed remarkably high rates of psychological, physical and sexual harms in Para athletes, compared with able-bodied peers.

**Conclusions** Bullying in young, visually impaired athletes is described most commonly in the available literature. Due to the limited amount of data, the prevalence of non-accidental harms in Para athletes remains unclear and information on trends over time is similarly unavailable.

## INTRODUCTION

### Ideals of the Paralympic Movement

As stated in article 30 of the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, persons with impairment are entitled to take part in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport on an equal basis.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, persons with impairment have a right to the well-documented emotional, physical and social benefits of sport.<sup>2–7</sup> The highest level of Para and adapted sport is represented by the Paralympic Movement, the vision of which is 'to enable Para athletes to achieve sporting excellence and inspire and excite the world'.<sup>8</sup> One of the Movement's missions is to ensure that in

Paralympic sport, 'the spirit of fair play prevails, violence is banned, the health risk of the athletes is managed and fundamental ethical principles are upheld'.<sup>9</sup> These ideals serve as a check against unfair practices that harm Para athletes.

Enabling environments that encourage athletes to participate and achieve in sport typically include healthy interpersonal relationships within which equality, respect, integrity and trust prevail.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, disabling environments that discourage athletes (Para and other) from participating and achieving in sport are poisoned by fear, distrust and severe power imbalances—the same values that underscore unhealthy interpersonal relationships and the cycle of interpersonal violence.<sup>11–15</sup> The ethical principles that govern the Paralympic Movement set a behaviour standard for all Para sport actors—athletes, teammates, coaches, parents and administrators,<sup>16</sup> where healthy interpersonal relationships are expected.

### Non-accidental harms in Para sport

Both children and adults with impairment are at alarmingly high risk of physical, social, sexual and psychological harassment and abuse at home, and within educational, community and healthcare institutions.<sup>17–25</sup> Within sport, this vulnerability has been little studied, and the impact non-accidental harms have on youth and senior Para athletes is less well known.<sup>26–27</sup> Scientists at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) estimate that athletes with a physical and/or intellectual impairment may be up to four times more likely to be victimised<sup>26</sup>; however, there is no comprehensive research on the nature and scope of abuse in these athletes.

Risk factors for abuse in athletes and non-athletes with impairment include general dependency, vulnerable living arrangements (eg, family isolation, stress and separation from the home), social powerlessness, communication skill deficits, diminished ability to protect oneself due to lack of instruction and/or resources and impaired judgement (eg, the inability to detect who is safe to be around), learnt compliance, the reluctance to challenge others, and the misinterpretation of affectionate behaviour.<sup>21–28–29</sup> Athletes with impairment may be viewed as 'safe targets for abuse', and opportunities for inappropriate touching can arise during routine health interventions and/or drug testing. These are just some of the vulnerabilities facing athletes with impairment.<sup>21–28–29</sup> Additional predisposing factors include negative public attitudes towards disability



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