

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-418](#), a report to the Honorable Jackie Speier, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Media reports of the sexual abuse of youth athletes by their coaches have raised questions about how athletic organizations protect against such abuse. Research shows that the power dynamic between coaches and athletes aiming for high performance makes those athletes uniquely vulnerable to abuse. Although states are primarily responsible for addressing abuse, federal laws may apply, such as those that prohibit sex discrimination, including sexual abuse, in federally-funded education programs, require reports of campus crimes, and set minimum standards for state child abuse reporting laws. GAO was asked to review efforts to prevent and respond to the sexual abuse of youth athletes under age 18.

GAO examined (1) the role of federal agencies in preventing and responding to sexual abuse of youth athletes, and (2) steps selected athletic programs aimed at high performance take to prevent and respond to such abuse. GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, guidance, and literature; visited a nongeneralizable sample of 11 athletic programs in three states selected on factors including sport popularity, gender participation, and geographic diversity; and interviewed federal agencies, relevant associations, and experts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes no recommendations in this report. Education, HHS, and Justice provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-15-418](#). For more information, contact Kay Brown at (202) 512-7215 or brownke@gao.gov.

May 2015

YOUTH ATHLETES

Sports Programs' Guidance, Practices, and Policies to Help Prevent and Respond to Sexual Abuse

What GAO Found

Several federal agencies have roles in preventing and responding to the sexual abuse of a broad population of youth under age 18, which may include youth athletes. For example, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, a nonprofit organization that receives Department of Justice (Justice) funding, published suggested practices for preventing child sexual abuse in youth-serving organizations. These suggested practices include defining and prohibiting misconduct; screening staff using fingerprint-based criminal background checks and other tools; and training staff on how to recognize, report, and respond to abuse. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children also makes available information on child protection policies in youth sports settings, such as defining appropriate coach-athlete relationships. In addition, Justice may investigate alleged youth athlete abuse if there is a possibility the case constitutes a federal crime. These efforts may apply to youth in a range of settings. In addition, the Departments of Education (Education) and Justice oversee compliance with a civil rights law that protects individuals from sex discrimination, including sexual abuse, at schools that receive federal funding, which would generally include youth participating in sports camps on university campuses. Education also oversees postsecondary school compliance with a federal law requiring reporting of crimes, including sex offenses, that occur on or near campus. To ensure schools are meeting their obligations under these laws, Education and Justice conduct compliance reviews and investigations, and Justice participates in federal litigation involving claims of sex discrimination. Education also provides guidance and training to schools in areas such as developing codes of conduct, offering prevention and awareness training, and establishing reporting procedures.

The 11 athletic programs GAO reviewed all reported using methods, such as screening and training staff, to help prevent and respond to the sexual abuse of youth athletes. For example, the selected athletic programs, which included 8 private athletic clubs and 3 universities operating youth sports camps, all reported using name-based background checks to screen staff members for a criminal history. Two universities that operated sports camps reported they sometimes used fingerprint-based checks, while officials from other athletic programs cited the high cost of fingerprint checks as a barrier. Training for athletic staff in the programs GAO visited included how to identify signs of, respond to, and report suspected incidents of sexual abuse. Policies for all of these athletic programs also require staff to report suspected abuse to law enforcement. Further, the selected programs had response policies that generally included removing the suspected offender from the program and conducting their own investigations, which could result in lifetime bans from the program. Athletic programs' policies also included a variety of possible disciplinary actions, such as warning letters or required leave, for addressing inappropriate behavior that falls short of sexual abuse. Some of these policies have been created or revised in recent years, including the policies that private athletic clubs are implementing based on the United States Olympic Committee's athlete safety program, SafeSport, which prohibits various forms of misconduct, including child sexual abuse. GAO did not assess the effectiveness of any of the selected athletic programs' policies.