

► THE PROBLEM

For centuries, sport has operated as an unregulated body, meaning cases of physical, mental and emotional maltreatment tend to go unmonitored or evaluated by a third party, and perpetrators are often not held accountable.

For instance, 75% of current and retired Canadian National Team athletes have reported experiencing at least 1 harmful behavior in the sport context ([Willson et al., 2021](#)).

Continued high-profile cases of maltreatment in the Canadian and international media have amplified the need for more effective and evidence-informed sport programming.

Safe, welcoming and inclusive sport environments for all participants in sport, including athletes, coaches, officials, volunteers and others, are critical for ensuring that participants and communities experience the many benefits of sport involvement.

DID YOU KNOW?

In a survey of more than 1000 Canadian athletes aged 14 to 17 years old:

- **79%** reported at least 1 experience of psychological violence
- **40%** reported physical violence
- **28%** reported sexual violence
- **6%** reported neglect

-[Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2021](#)

► THE EVOLUTION OF SAFE SPORT IN CANADA

“**Safe Sport**” refers broadly to athletes’ right to participate in sport free of maltreatment (such as bullying, neglect, and physical, psychosocial and sexual abuse) or any form of violation against human rights.

Global research shows that between 40% and 79% of athletes have reported instances of psychological abuse.

-[MacPherson et al., 2022](#)

DEFINING SAFE SPORT

A Safe Sport environment is described by researchers as one that is respectful, equitable and violence-free for all individuals involved in sport. This includes 3 components ([Gurgis et al., 2023](#)):



Environment and physical safety

A safe environment that is free from issues of physical danger from equipment and doping



Relational safety

Relationships that are free from sexual abuse, physical abuse, and emotional or psychosocial abuse



Optimising sport

Programs that prioritize positive development, rights of inclusion, accessibility, fairness, and safety

In Canada, Safe Sport is conceptualized by some researchers through ‘**maltreatment**,’ which has been adopted in education and policies. For example, all Canadian National Sport Organizations must implement and adhere to the Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport (UCCMS). The UCCMS outlines principles, definitions, prohibited behaviours and sanctions for sport organizations to deliver Safe Sport.

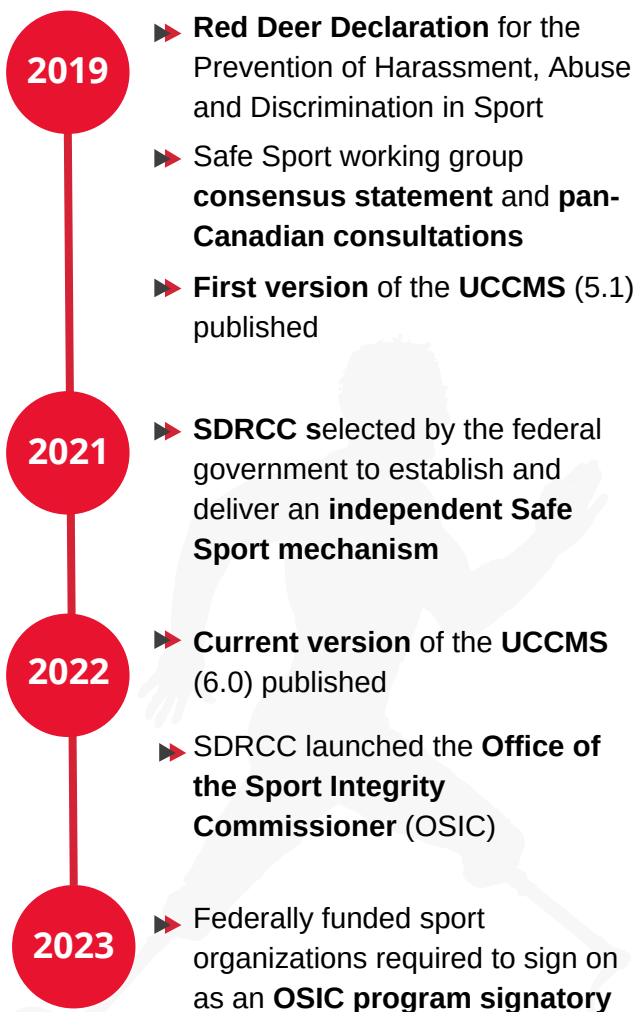
Here, maltreatment is described as any serious issue that undermines the health, well-being, performance and security of individuals, communities and society. It includes psychological, physical, and sexual maltreatment and neglect. Other Canadian scholars, like Kirby and Demers (2013), use terms like ‘**abuse**’ and ‘**harassment**’ in their definition of Safe Sport.

A TIMELINE OF SAFE SPORT IN CANADA

In Canada, advancements towards safeguarding have been made through, for example, the 2019 Red Deer Declaration whereby federal, provincial and territorial sport ministers stated their commitment to the prevention of harassment, abuse, and discrimination in sport. At this time, the National Sport Organization Safe Sport Working Group released a consensus statement outlining 7 core components to support the UCCMS in Canada. From here, consultations were conducted across Canada to further inform the development of the UCCMS. The first version of the UCCMS (5.1) was then published in 2019.

In 2021, the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (SDRCC) was appointed by the federal government to implement an independent third-party Safe Sport mechanism. In 2022, the Office of the Sport Integrity Commissioner (OSIC) was formed as an independent division of the SDRCC to oversee complaints, investigations, assessments, and monitor organizations’ compliance to the UCCMS.

Organizations receiving funding from Sport Canada, including NSOs and national multi-sport service organizations (MSOs), are required to sign on as an OSIC program signatory as a condition of their funding beyond April 2023.



SAFEGUARDING IN, AROUND, AND THROUGH SPORT

Initially, Safe Sport approaches were “protective” or “reactive” in nature, focusing on eliminating maltreatment at the individual level through educational programs and developing codes of conduct, policies, and procedures. However, given the long-lasting effects of maltreatment, scholars have begun to argue that proactive and preventative measures are needed. This call to action is reflected in the more recent surge of literature and programming that has shifted focus to “**safeguarding**.”

Research has shown that maltreatment can have long-lasting effects on a person’s physical and mental health ranging from headaches, injuries and bowel disease to anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

-Afifi et al. (2016)

Safeguarding is most often defined as action that is taken to promote the welfare of an athlete and protect them from harm, including the development of policy, educational programs, reporting pathways and investigation mechanisms. It differs from Safe Sport more generally in that safeguarding treats sport as a **vehicle to advance human rights and safety**. For example, safeguarding should function in ways that promote sport stakeholders’ fundamental right to participate in safe and inclusive sport.

Safeguarding can occur:

- **during** training and competition (adhering to practices and policies such as the UCCMS)
- **around** sport (promoting safe decision making like positive self-care practices)
- **through** sport (like in sport for development programs)

DID YOU KNOW?

Safeguarding is derived from child protection legislation and applied in sport-related legislation in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

It has 4 central tenets:

1. Protecting children from maltreatment
2. Preventing harm to children’s health or development
3. Ensuring children grow up with the provision of safe and effective care
4. Taking action to enable all children to have the best outcomes

► PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

INCONSISTENT TERMINOLOGY

There is no generally accepted definition of Safe Sport or a framework for understanding and advancing Safe Sport in academic literature. Consistent definitions and constructs are needed to allow comparisons across levels of sport, demographic groups, and countries. Without them, it is likely that programs, strategies, and initiatives will also vary, making achieving Safe Sport less effective, more challenging, and unsustainable

UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS

Most research on Safe Sport is limited to developed countries like Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Athletes in developing countries and from equity-owed groups, including athletes with disabilities, racialized athletes, and 2SLGBTQI+ athletes, are underrepresented in the research. More research is needed to understand and safeguard the sport experiences of athletes of all ages, abilities, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds around the world.

EVIDENCE AND EVALUATION

Despite a rise in the number of safeguarding initiatives in sport, cases of maltreatment continue to come to light. If Safe Sport and safeguarding initiatives are not grounded in theory and data, they are unlikely to be effective in the long term. More focused research is needed on all forms of maltreatment, including the gendered nature of maltreatment, mechanisms of disclosures and prevention methods, and athlete consultation methods.

Individuals should have the reasonable expectation when they participate in sport in Canada that it will be in an environment that is free from all forms of maltreatment and that treats every individual with dignity and respect.

-UCCMS version 6.0

Demographic groups including athletes with disabilities and 2SLGBTQI+ athletes are disproportionately affected by maltreatment in sport.

-Gurgis et al. (2022)

CULTURE SHIFT

Researchers and experts agree that training programs and workshops are not enough to cultivate Safe Sport environments. In addition to these programs, a cultural change needs to occur. Addressing the “win-at-all-costs culture” and promoting human rights at the systemic level is recognized as the most promising strategy for enacting change.

Researchers recommend that initiatives be informed by a human rights and safeguarding lens and be offered at the individual but also at the organizational and cultural level.

REACTIVE TO PROACTIVE

In general, responses to maltreatment in sport have been reactive, rather than proactive. More proactive measures are needed to promote Safe Sport and intentionally gather evidence to support effective guidance and measures in the long-term.

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