

# Truth Project Thematic Report

## *Child sexual abuse in sports*

### Executive summary

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**truth**  
project

 INDEPENDENT INQUIRY  
CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

## Disclaimer

This research report has been prepared at the request of the Inquiry's Chair and Panel. The views expressed are those of the authors alone. The information presented in Truth Project research outputs does not constitute formal recommendations by the Inquiry's Chair and Panel and is separate from legal evidence obtained in investigations and hearings.

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# *Acknowledgements*

We would like to thank all of the victims and survivors who came forward to share their experiences of child sexual abuse in sports contexts, the impacts the abuse has upon their lives and their ideas about what needs to change to prevent similar abuse in future.

We are also grateful for the contributions of the Inquiry's Victims and Survivors Consultative Panel (VSCP), the Inquiry's Research Ethics Committee, and the report's peer reviewers.



# *Executive summary*

## Introduction

The Truth Project is a core part of the Inquiry alongside public hearings and research. It was set up to hear and learn from the experiences of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse in England and Wales. It offers victims and survivors an opportunity to share experiences of child sexual abuse. By doing so, Truth Project participants make an important contribution to the work of the Inquiry. With the consent of participants, the Inquiry uses Truth Project information in a variety of ways, including for ongoing research and data analysis carried out by the Inquiry's Research Team.

This is the fourth research publication in a series of thematic reports examining the experiences of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse shared with the Truth Project. We have previously published research reports on child sexual abuse in religious institutions, children's homes and residential care, and custodial institutions. This report details the research findings in relation to experiences of abuse in sports contexts. This study also contributes to the existing body of knowledge relating to child sexual abuse in sports, in particular by sharing the experiences of victims and survivors of abuse in sport across a broad time period and in relation to recreational sporting activities.

We have used the term 'sports contexts' in this report to describe environments and situations where children and young people take part in organised sports activities (including alongside adult participants), for example in sports clubs, sports institutions or sports associations or where they participate in sporting activity in a sporting or leisure location (for example, a public swimming pool) and the perpetrator works or volunteers there (for example, a leisure centre worker or swimming pool lifeguard).

This report presents the Inquiry's research findings about experiences of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse in sports and the response of institutions to such abuse. It describes the experiences of Truth Project participants sexually abused in sports contexts between the 1950s and 2010s, with the most recent cases in our sample beginning in the early 2010s. The research findings included in this report do not reflect all experiences of sexual abuse in sports contexts and are only indicative of the specific experiences of those who chose to share their experiences with the Truth Project.

## Sample and methods

Of the 3,939 people who shared an experience between June 2016 and March 2020, 64 (2 percent) described child sexual abuse that took place in a sports context. Fifty-eight (91 percent) of these 64 participants reported being sexually abused by a sporting coach or volunteer in a sports organisation. All perpetrators spoken about by this group were adult males. Sports clubs were most frequently reported as the location of the abuse (39 out of 64; 61 percent).

The report details findings in relation to child sexual abuse which occurred in a wide variety of different sports including team sports, individual competitive sports, contact and non-contact sports and those ranging from formally organised clubs to private coaching arrangements, as well as abuse which occurred within public sports and leisure facilities.

Given the small number of people sexually abused in sports who have so far participated in the Truth Project, we have adopted a qualitative approach in the analysis undertaken for this report. We have analysed 9 of the 64 Truth Project accounts relating to child sexual abuse in sports contexts in detail. The accounts selected include a range of characteristics and circumstances, such as the time period in which the abuse occurred, victim age and victim sex.<sup>1</sup> The wider analysis of Truth Project accounts is ongoing and we will publish a full report with a bigger sample size covering all contexts of abuse at the end of the Inquiry.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Inquiry's Research Ethics Committee prior to the collection and analysis of the data and information is only included where Truth Project participants have agreed to their accounts being used for research purposes.

## Key findings from the research

The research findings from this study are drawn from the nine participant accounts selected for the qualitative analysis.<sup>2</sup> Although Truth Project analysis is still underway, ongoing analysis and review of wider Truth Project sessions' data indicates that child sexual abuse in sports is generally very similar to abuse carried out in other institutional contexts. However, the research findings also indicate there are some particular characteristics of sexual abuse in sports contexts.

In contrast to the cases of child sexual abuse in sport involving high-performing or elite athletes that have garnered media attention in recent years, the experiences shared with the Inquiry by participants through the Truth Project reflect more diversity and more 'grassroots' contexts. Although there was clear exploitation and manipulation of victims and survivors by coaches and others involved in sports activities with children in the cases examined in this research, there was little evidence in the nine participants' accounts of perpetrators specifically exploiting the victims and survivors' future career prospects or sporting success as a method of grooming or coercion.

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed explanation of the process used for carrying out analysis of Truth Project information can be found in the separate report, *Truth Project Research: Methods* (King and Brähler, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Please note that these research findings are not necessarily representative of the wider population.

- The enabling factors for abuse to take place in sport were similar to those found in our other thematic reports into abuse in other contexts, and included: perpetrators actively approaching parents outside of the sports context to look after or take children out unsupervised; perpetrators arranging overnight stays with children; and a lack of supervision or oversight of adults working in sports, particularly those operating as leaders or as private coaches or instructors.

“ My older brother [name] and I had [sport] lessons at [sports venue] and we were part of the [sports club]. [Perpetrator] gave my brother [sport] lessons and he came to the family home to ask permission to take both of us on a trip to [city]. My abuse started on the trip to [city], but my brother was already being molested.

Truth Project participant abused in a sports context

- Physical contact was a more specific enabling factor found in participants' accounts related to sexual abuse in sports as it is more common in sporting activities and was sometimes used as a pretext by perpetrators to sexually abuse children, for example while swimming or in the foam pit in gymnastics.
- For most participants, taking part in sport was not a defining or central factor of their lives as children or the lives of their families, but rather it was part of wider activities and hobbies they enjoyed. However, the links between the families of perpetrators and victims and survivors fostered through sporting activities meant it was particularly difficult for some participants to disclose what was happening to them and some perpetrators were more easily able to abuse siblings as well.
- Sexual abuse by those involved in sports contexts was often perpetrated during overnight stays, trips away and visiting the perpetrator's home, sometimes, but not always, associated with the activities of the sports club or association. Perpetrators also sometimes used sports-related rewards, such as allowing the child to play in a more senior team, as a method of grooming or coercion.
- Although some participants experienced psychological and emotional abuse linked to grooming and manipulation alongside the sexual abuse, none of them described experiencing physical violence or other forms of abuse by perpetrators in sports contexts.
- Most participants did not actively or formally disclose their sexual abuse in sports as a child. A key theme discussed by participants was how much they wanted, or tried, to tell someone about what was happening to them but how difficult this was. Adults failed to respond appropriately to behavioural changes or other indicators of concern in children, even when these were very apparent. Participants who did manage to disclose as children were often dismissed or ignored and subject to victim-blaming responses by adults in a range of institutions.

“ No, this isn't over. This is never going to be over. This is never going to be clear and cut and dried just because he got convicted or went to prison. People are going to have – and it's not just in here – people are going to have those opinions, people are going to say, “Prove it”. People are going to say, “Why didn't you do x?”, or, “Wasn't your skirt too short?”, or like that.

Truth Project participant abused in a sports context

- The impacts of experiencing child sexual abuse in sports described by participants are extensive and diverse, with some participants describing the far-reaching impact of their experiences:

“ So, that first time was – I remember thinking to myself, “Please don’t, please don’t do this because you’re going to – you know, it’s going to ruin the rest of my life, you know.” And it’s that – you can’t describe it – the amount of pain you have from that first instant ... You’re never going to feel pain like that again.

Truth Project participant abused in a sports context

Despite their experiences of abuse in sporting contexts, participants did not report subsequently desisting from sport and exercising, as a child or later in their lives.

This report reflects victims and survivors’ experiences of child sexual abuse in sports, presented in the following chapters:

- Chapter 1 provides background information about the Inquiry, the Truth Project and the research aims.
- Chapter 2 provides information on the Truth Project dataset, some key characteristics of participants who have shared an experience with the Truth Project about sexual abuse in sports and the sampling framework used for this report.
- Chapter 3 sets out some key background information relating to child sexual abuse and safeguarding in sport to help situate our research findings.
- Chapter 4 provides socio-demographic information about victims and survivors who shared their experiences of sexual abuse in sports contexts with the Truth Project. It also provides a description of the family and early life backgrounds of the participants.
- Chapter 5 details the context and nature of the sexual abuse experienced by those who participated in sports as children.
- Chapter 6 describes the characteristics and features of the sports contexts and how these facilitated the perpetration of child sexual abuse. It considers what participants shared about what knowledge institutions and the individuals within them had about abuse that was occurring at the time.
- Chapter 7 presents information about participants’ experiences of disclosing the sexual abuse, both as children and as adults and the impact of the responses upon them. The barriers to disclosure shared by participants are also reported. It also describes participants’ experiences of the police and criminal justice system after disclosing or reporting the abuse.
- Chapter 8 describes the range of impacts of the sexual abuse shared by participants and what has helped or hindered their recovery.
- Chapter 9 relays ways participants have found of coping with their experiences of sexual abuse as children. It also describes their experiences of formal and informal support in helping them deal with the consequences and impacts of child sexual abuse in sports.

- Chapter 10 concludes the report by providing a summary of the key research findings and themes identified in the report. The chapter concludes by detailing the changes participants think are necessary to prevent child sexual abuse in sports in future and to improve responses to, and support for, victims and survivors.

## Reference

King, S. and Brähler, V. (2019). *Truth Project Research: Methods*. London: Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/document/truth-project-research-methods> [Accessed 5 May 2020].

### Note on language

Please see Appendix A for a glossary which contains definitions of various terms used throughout this report.

Where the term 'abuse' is used throughout the report we are generally referring to sexual abuse unless otherwise stated.