

The Struggle for Safe Sport in Canada

The Failure of Policy – 1996-2015

Peter Donnelly
Centre for Sport Policy Studies

1990s: Recognition of abuse in sport as a policy problem

1988-92: “the good, the bad and the ugly” – interviews with almost 50 retired national team athletes

- early '90s: growing awareness of sexual abuse in sport
- Todd Crosset in USA; Celia Brackenridge in the UK; PD in Canada; Laura Robinson in Canadian media
- 1993: growing media attention -> *Fifth Estate* documentary
- 1994-96: CAAWS, NSOs, Sport Canada – development of Policy to prevent harassment and abuse

The Policy grew out of this 'cultural moment'

- required all NSOs to have a policy to prevent harassment and abuse in their organization
- linked receipt of federal funding by NSOs, under the Sport Funding and Accountability Framework (SFAF), to having harassment policies and arm's length/ independent harassment officers in place (preferably 1 woman and 1 man)

Subsequent events

The policy was world leading, and subsequent events immediately demonstrated its need:

1997: Graham James and sexual abuse of young male hockey players (NHL connection)

1997: Maple Leaf Gardens sex scandal (NHL connection)

Tellingly, both events involved the abuse of boys; and they garnered major media attention in Canada

2000-2014

- Little evidence that the policy, or at least its intent to prevent harassment/abuse, was working
- Occasional information from NSO that a coach, for example, had been suspended
- Ongoing media coverage of cases involving various sports -- criminal charges against (usually) coaches for harassment/abuse

2013-2015

- Donnelly and Kerr study to determine how Sport Canada policy was working
- Had anything changed as a result of the policy?
- Results
 - 1) No evidence that Sport Canada had ever withheld funding to an NSO for failing to have a harassment policy or arm's length harassment officer;
 - 2) No evidence that any of the 42 NSOs studied had an arm's length harassment officer (5/36 NSOs identified an HO – none independent/arm's length)

Results cont'd.

3) Mixed evidence of policies in place:

- we were able to find, sometimes with great difficulty, some form of harassment policy for 36 of the 42 NSOs

- of those 36, all **identified** and most **defined** harassment and/or abuse, 70% defined and/or gave examples of sexual abuse; few identified or defined other forms of abuse; only 6/36 identified sexual relations between coach and of-age athlete as inappropriate

Results cont'd.

- Policies are very mixed in terms of the way they outline the roles of Harassment Officers, the rights of respondents, and the actual complaints procedures
- 4) Policies often found 3, 4 or more steps into an NSO web site; and were sometimes fragmented (e.g., part of the policy in the ethics section; another part under code of conduct)

Research to practice

Donnelly and Kerr re-worked their research into a *Position Paper* that advocated:

- independent/arm's length investigation and adjudication of complaints
- a Duty to Report suspected abuse, with penalties for failure to report
- protection from retaliation for those who filed complaints

The *Position Paper* was released in 2018, at what proved to be another key 'cultural moment' for policy development in this area