The Relationship Between Abuse of Student-Athletes, Mental Health, & Social Identities

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Student-athlete mental health (SAMH) has received significant attention, given the number of collegiate athletes dying by suicide (Jaudon, 2019; McCollough, 2019). As a result, the NCAA has mandated the distribution of mental health (MH) resources to athletic personnel and student-athletes (Adelson, 2019). The prevalence of depressive symptoms in student-athletes range from 10% - 48% (Ryan, Gayles, Bell, 2018). Female athletes are more likely to report depressive symptoms (Kaier et al., 2015; Storch et al., 2005) compared to male athletes and male athletes report fewer depressive symptoms compared to their male non-athlete peers (Proctor & Boan-Lenzo, 2010).

Researchers have documented the frequency of reported mental illness, including prevalence of depression among student-athletes, while paying less attention to contributing factors of MH. With increased awareness and investment of resources for SAMH (Adelson, 2019), it is important to examine potential contributing factors. The purpose of this study is to understand how physical, emotional, and sexual abuse contributes to SAMH. Research questions include: 1) Are student-athletes at greater risk of experiencing physical, emotional, and sexual abuse compared to their non-athlete peers; 2) Do student-athletes experience greater mental health distress compared to their non-athlete peers; 3) Does experiencing abuse increase SAMH distress? As athletic administrators seek to implement mental health initiatives, there is a need to be aware of student-athlete experiences with physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and their mental health.

The American College Health Association (ACHA) conducts a national, bi-annual survey of numerous colleges and universities. This study analyzes data from the Spring and Fall of 2016 to 2018 (N = 280,745 full-time college students and 22,185 student-athletes). Several items capture respondents’ experience with physical, emotional, sexual abuse and MH. Several respondent and institution level factors are controlled including race, gender, sexual orientation, international status, institution size, funding, and Minority Serving status. Previous research (Kroshus & Davoren, 2016) established three variables from ACHA survey questions on MH, including distress, exhaustion, and self-harm. A number of hierarchical linear regression models were created as data spans multiple institutions. The models examined student-athlete experiences of abuse and MH compared to their non-athlete peers, as well as the relationship between experiencing abuse and SAMH.

Preliminary findings indicate student-athletes have an increased likelihood of experiencing physical and emotional abuse but are not more likely to experience sexual abuse as compared to non-athletes. Student-athletes report lower levels across all three MH variables compared to their non-athlete peers. However, student-athletes of color, female, and non-binary student-athletes report higher levels of MH distress. Student-athletes of color and international student-athletes report higher levels of MH self-harm. Also, being a sexual minority student-athlete lowers MH distress compared to sexual minorities who are not athletes. Finally, there is no statistically significant relationship between student-athletes who experience any form of abuse and MH outcomes. Key findings for implementation of mental health initiatives include: Student-athletes who experience abuse report significantly higher MH distress, and policies and initiatives to support SAMH must account for student-athletes’ diverse social identities.