

Background Checks for Youth-Based Sports Organizations

Over the past ten years, the United States has witnessed two of the biggest youth sports sex abuse scandals in history. The first case involved Jerry Sandusky, a former Penn State college football coach who preyed on dozens of young boys through youth sports programs sponsored by his nonprofit organization, The Second Mile. The second case involved Larry Nassar, who molested at least 250 girls and young women through his roles with U.S. Gymnastics and Michigan State University. While these two men are cited as extreme examples of child sex abuse—and the corruption and cover-ups that allow it to happen—they are just the tip of the iceberg.

This white paper will look at the extent of child sex abuse in youth sports and the measures youth sports organizations can use to prevent these life-altering atrocities.

The Statistics

Sexual abuse in youth organizations, a category that includes not just sporting organizations, but also schools, religious organizations, and other youth-focused organizations, is statistically rare.

In 2016, JAMA Pediatrics, a peer-reviewed medical journal published monthly by the American Medical Association, released a study titled, “Children Exposed to Abuse in Youth-Serving Organizations.” For the study, researchers surveyed more than 13,000 subjects between the ages of 10 and 17 years as well as caregivers of subjects between the ages of 0 and 9. Less than 1 percent of respondents (0.4 percent) reported abuse in these programs. Most of the abuse reported was verbal. Of the responses the indicated abuse in a youth-focused organization, 6.4 percent of those cases involved sexual abuse.

The survey accounted for 13,052 kids spanning all types of youth organizations. According to the Boston Globe, “three out of every four American families with school-aged children have at least one playing an organized sport.” Statistically, that figure puts the total number of youth sports participants in the United States at about 45 million. Looking at the JAMA Pediatrics statistics as representative of the abuse problem in youth activities, that would mean 180,000 kids are victims of some form of abuse, and that more than 11,500 are victims of sexual abuse.

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It's also possible not everyone answered the survey honestly, or that parents answered on behalf of their children without knowing the truth. In the cases of both Sandusky and Nassar, abuse festered for years—either because the victims kept quiet or because parents, coaches, or other adults in positions of authority failed to take accusations seriously. These factors make it difficult to put together an accurate statistical rendering of the problem of sexual abuse in youth sports or other youth-focused activities.

What is undisputed is youth sports provides many opportunities for abuse. Coaches especially spend a lot of unsupervised time with their athletes. While many coaches are honest, upstanding, and ethical, others take advantage of these situations and use them to commit terrible crimes. Even if the chances of abuse in youth sports are statistically low, youth sporting organizations cannot take any risks with the safety of their athletes.

Child Sex Abuse Isn't the Only Problem

While child sex abuse is the top concern for youth-based sporting organizations, it isn't the only threat. A lack of oversight or controls can also lead to embezzlement and theft.

Such was the case with the Holbrook Little League team from Jackson, New Jersey. In 2017, the Holbrook team had a strong run in the Little League World Series. Six months after the World Series, two leaders of the Holbrook Little League organization were charged with stealing more than \$118,000 from the nonprofit. The charges implicated the organization's president and treasurer and indicated the thefts had been occurring since 2014.

Similar cases have occurred all over the country, and many others likely have yet to be detected. Many youth sports organizations are sloppy about reporting financial information to the IRS and other regulatory bodies. This factor, combined with a frequent lack of internal controls and protections, make these organizations easy targets for embezzlers.

Recognizing the Importance of Background Checks

How can youth sports organizations protect their young athletes from abuse (and protect themselves from theft and embezzlement)? One advisable strategy is for these organizations to run background checks on everyone involved. While background checks are not a guarantee of safety, they can significantly help to reduce risk.

Vetting policies for youth sports organizations should include checks for employees and volunteers alike. From presidents and treasurers to head coaches to the parents who volunteer for assistant coach or chaperone roles, everyone's onboarding process should include a background check. Precisely what these checks look like will vary from one organization to the next, but they should typically include some combination of the following:

- **Criminal Screenings:** Including a mix of county, state, federal, and multi-jurisdictional database checks.
- **Alias Checks:** Since most background checks are name-based, it's important to make sure a candidate isn't using a false name or alias. Background checks—along with additional criminal searches based on alternative names or previous addresses—are a must for youth sports.
- **Sex Offender Checks:** Anyone on a registered sex offender list should be detected and kept away from youth sports. Any background check for a youth athletic organization must include an offender registry search.

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- Verifications: Is a person qualified to coach a sports team, work as an athletic trainer, or serve as a team doctor in a youth sporting capacity? Verification checks for education, work history, and professional licenses can answer this question. Reference verifications can shed light on a person's past and character, sometimes illuminating past patterns of abuse.
- Additional Role-Specific Checks: A youth sports background check might also include a driving history check (if the coach or volunteer will be driving students) or a credit history check (if the person will have access to or control over funds).

If you are designing a background check policy for a youth sporting organization, simplify the process by using backgroundchecks.com's screening solution for youth-based sports organizations.

Don't Let Background Checks Generate a Sense of Complacency

Background checks can do a lot to protect a youth sports organization and the kids and families they serve. From flagging coaching candidates with histories of violent or sexual offenses to identifying adults who shouldn't be trusted to drive athletes to games or meets, these checks have the power to prevent catastrophic incidents. However, youth sporting organizations also need to understand these checks are not a bulletproof vest. Even with a background check in place, abuses can still take root within the walls of a youth sporting organization.

Consider this point: neither Jerry Sandusky nor Larry Nassar had criminal records. Both men worked for highly respected organizations and supposedly passed background checks to get those checks. Both men perpetrated hundreds of crimes against vulnerable, defenseless youths. In their cases, background checks weren't enough to prevent appalling crimes.

The cases of Sandusky and Nassar prove that organizations need to be vigilant beyond the background check.

- Regular background check updates or ongoing criminal monitoring: Background checks at the time of hiring are just a snapshot of a person's criminal history. It's essential to monitor coaches and volunteers on an ongoing basis on the off chance that new arrest warrants, charges, or convictions come to light and call their trustworthiness into question.
- A system that prevents coaches or volunteers from being alone with athletes: Daycares are often required by law to have at least two adults in the room with kids at any given time. Youth sports organizations could adopt this rule, too, requiring at least two adults on the field or in the locker room with athletes.
- A protocol for athletes or parents to follow if there are allegations of abuse: This point is especially important considering the Nassar/Sandusky scandals. In both cases, there was evidence to suggest other adults in the respective sporting organizations knew about the abuse and did nothing to stop it. To prevent a similar situation, youth sports organizations should establish:
 1. A clear way for athletes, parents, or bystanders to report allegations
 2. Requirements within the youth sports organization to take those allegations seriously and investigate them completely

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3. A policy for suspending any coach or volunteer accused of abuse until those claims can be substantiated or disproven
4. A zero-tolerance policy for anyone caught covering up allegations or evidence of abuse.

Without these protections in place, youth sports organizations are likely to mismanage abuse claims when they do come to the fore. This mismanagement can further damage the reputation of the organization, calling into question accountability and complicity from the top down.

Conclusion

Policies such as the ones outlined in this white paper are a must for any youth sports organization—not only to protect young athletes from incredibly damaging abuses but also to avoid lawsuits, scandals, and reputational blows from which no organization can ever fully recover. Especially for organizations that rely on volunteers and have limited financial capital, instituting these requirements can be daunting: organizations often fear they will scare off potential volunteers by demanding background checks, especially if volunteers must cover the cost of their own checks. Ultimately, these fears are secondary to the obligation youth sports organizations have to provide their athletes with a safe and supportive environment.

After watching what happened with Nassar and U.S. Gymnastics or MSU, or with Sandusky and Penn State, no youth sporting entity should be willing to take the risk of abuse to the athletes in their care due to poor oversight or shoddy protections.

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