

**Addressing the Silence:
Understanding Safe Sport for Indigenous Participants in Canada**

**Abuse-Free Sport Research Grant Program
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Abstract

Indigenous athletes regularly experience racism in Indigenous and mainstream sport in Canada. Yet, they rarely report their experiences to anyone in a position of authority. For this project we interviewed ten Indigenous athletes about their experiences with racism in Canadian sport, what actions they took to address the problem, who they leaned on for support, where they encountered resistance and roadblocks, and at what point they determined silence to be the best option. A systematic review of scholarly literature was also carried out, along with an environmental scan of policies and programs targeting anti-Indigenous racism in sport, and a media analysis of anti-Indigenous racism. Preliminary findings indicate the need to: 1) update anti-Indigenous racism education and training to account for its complex nature in sport, 2) make anti-Indigenous racism training mandatory for all participants in the mainstream and Indigenous sport systems, 3) require sport organizations to hire qualified researchers to carry out a trauma-informed assessment about anti-Indigenous racism in their sport and at their events to better understand how it manifests in their system and how to address it, 4) give oversight to external, independent experts to hold sport organizations accountable for taking clear and transparent steps to reduce and eliminate anti-Indigenous racism in their sport and at their events, 5) provide workshops to help athletes and coaches create an anti-oppressive team environment that reduces the stigma and fear of speaking out, and 5) create a confidential, culturally responsive, user-friendly way for participants to report anti-Indigenous racism.

Introduction

Indigenous sports participants are underrepresented at all levels in Canadian sport (Cragg, 2019) where racism and other forms of discrimination are known to be precipitating factors. Little is known about the discriminations they face, except that these problems are prevalent, complex, and deeply rooted. The present lack of detailed knowledge, especially where different forms of discrimination intersect (e.g., racism-sexism-disability), is a stumbling block to advancing Abuse-Free Sport in Canada because it means the system is unable to respond to their needs through prevention or intervention.

By way of example, a recent study by Gurgis et al. (2022) found that even with the promise of safe sport in front of them, Indigenous athletes expressed their lack of faith in sport being safe, saying they would rather stay silent than seek support and risk being re-traumatized through established systems as they do not believe people within the system understand or appreciate their complex concerns. Knowing that silence is a strategy that some Indigenous participants adopt to alleviate the stresses they face in

reporting highlights their already disengaged stance with efforts to work towards Abuse-Free Sport. It also underscores the need to restore their trust through research, dialogue, and action, which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada highlighted in Call to Action #90. It states: “We call upon the federal government to ensure that national sport policies, programs, and initiatives are inclusive of Aboriginal peoples, including, but not limited to, establishing ... anti-racism awareness and training programs” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 10). Taking the study by Gurgis et al. (2022) and Call to Action #90 as our jumping off point, in this study we asked: What happens in the space between the abuse Indigenous participants experience and their decision to remain silent? In other words, why do they not report the abuse they experience in sport? The answer to that question is the focus of our work.

This study focussed specifically on Indigenous athletes who encountered racism in the Indigenous and mainstream Canadian sport system. The purpose was to better understand what they experienced, what actions they took to address it, who they leaned on for support, where they encountered resistance and roadblocks, and at what point they determined silence to be the best option. We used an intersectional approach to explore how their Indigeneity overlaps with other forms of abuse, socio-demographic factors, and contexts to create a more fulsome understanding of their experiences. Anchoring this study in Indigenous identity, while paying attention to intersectionality, provides a more nuanced understanding of how different factors collide in this population group.

This study builds on research that recognizes anti-Indigenous racism as distinct from racism towards other individuals and groups. For instance, data from Canada’s 2019 General Social Survey on Canadian’s Safety clearly indicates that Indigenous and Black Canadians experience racism differently, including the places and spaces they experience it. As well, the study indicates that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples experience discrimination differently and have reported significantly more racism since 2014 (Cotter, 2022), necessitating the need for more nuanced inquiry into anti-Indigenous racism to address it meaningfully, substantively, and systematically. The main difference between anti-Indigenous racism and racism towards other groups is that anti-Indigenous racism is rooted in Canada’s history of colonialism and is entrenched in policy and legislation. The Government of Canada describes it as the “ideas and practices that establish, maintain and perpetuate power imbalances, systemic barriers, and inequitable outcomes that stem from the legacy of colonial policies and practices in Canada which continue today. Systemic anti-Indigenous racism is evident in discriminatory federal policies such as the Indian Act and the residential school system” (Government of Canada, 2023), which do not affect other population groups. Research on racism in Canadian sport has yet to explore this issue substantively, thus presenting a significant gap in terms of how to address it.

Objectives

Three objectives were identified for this study:

- a) to inform our understanding of why Indigenous athletes believe silence was their best option for addressing the abuse they experienced;
- b) provide clear insight on the critical constraints that need to be addressed in working towards safe sport for Indigenous athletes; and
- c) make effective recommendations drawn from our evidence-based findings on how to make the Abuse-Free Sport system in Canada safer for Indigenous athletes.

UNDERSTAND THE SILENCE: The first objective explores why Indigenous athletes choose to remain silent when they encounter racism in sport. Specifically, we focus on how racism intersects with other socio-demographic factors and contexts to create a complex system of discrimination and abuse. Understanding why they choose silence is the first critical step to making sport safer for them. To do so, we pay particular attention to the beliefs, ideas, and practices that shape their attitudes towards reporting.

IDENTIFY THE CONSTRAINTS: The second objective involves identifying and organizing the different types of constraints that Indigenous athletes face in reporting racism. This includes exposing the social, cultural, and economic roadblocks they encounter so that regulatory bodies are in a better position to address them. Whereas the first objective pays close attention to Indigenous experiences and attitudes, the second objective focuses on tangible processes that lead them not to report.

CREATE EFFECTIVE RECOMMENDATIONS: The final objective aims to provide evidence-based recommendations for the SDRCC to consider to effectively address the complex interplay of factors that shape Indigenous athletes' experiences with racism and abuse. As a one-year study, carried out with a limited pool of athletes, further research into Indigenous athlete experiences with racism is urgently needed. As well, since the data is still being analyzed, the preliminary recommendations provided herein should be viewed as a starting point for addressing anti-Indigenous racism in Canadian sport. Additional reports will be published when the results are finalized.

The following research questions were used to guide the three objectives. *Silences:* Why do Indigenous athletes 'opt out' of reporting their experience with abuse? What beliefs, ideas, and practices influence their decision to not report? *Constraints:* What types of constraints do Indigenous athletes encounter that lead them to not report? How can these constraints be organized to provide conceptual and practical clarity for Abuse-Free Sport? *Recommendations:* What needs to be addressed immediately? What issues

need to be addressed in the short- and long-term so that Indigenous athletes can trust Abuse-Free Sport is meeting their needs and be more engaged in addressing racism and abuse?

Methodology

Conceptual Framework

Three established procedures were used to create a robust, harmonious framework that allowed for an in-depth exploration of the topic while attending to cultural nuances and sensitivities.

First, *grounded theory* (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) was used to build new knowledge from the subject's point of view. This involved collecting original qualitative data from research participants and using that information to delineate and describe an understudied phenomenon, such as Indigenous athletes' underreporting of racism in sport. Grounded theory is ideal for building a strong empirical foundation for policy and program development because the new knowledge is created by and with the participants and focuses on a specific issue of concern. It also offers a sequential approach to carrying out research, while offering enough flexibility to integrate other methodologies (Birks & Mills, 2015), as is the case here.

Second, this project adhered to an *Indigenous research methodology* (Kovach, 2021) to ensure Indigenous needs and interests, as well as Indigenous ways of knowing, were prioritized throughout the research process. Using Indigenous research methodology requires at least one researcher to have a specialized understanding of and sensitivity towards Indigenous lived experiences, especially where Indigenous-settler relations in contexts of colonialism and settler-colonialism are concerned (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). This understanding not only shapes the methods for data collection, but also the types of questions that are asked and how that information is understood. The PI (Fisher River Cree Nation) has extensive experience conducting Indigenous research in Canadian sport; she provided this knowledge and expertise.

Third, given the sensitive nature of this topic, a *trauma-informed approach* to conducting research underpinned the interview portion of this project. This approach is important because it recognizes the possibility of overlapping layers of trauma in Indigenous peoples' lives, such that individual experiences with abuse are often compounded by historical trauma (also called 'intergenerational trauma'), specifically the social and emotional impact of dealing with their ongoing marginalization as a population in a settler colonial state (Gone et al., 2019). Our project adapted the four Rs of trauma-informed practice (Tebes et al., 2019), as described by Lee et al. (2021) in their review of mental health care policy in Canada, to address this unique research context. More specifically, our research process focused on ensuring receptive communication with our participants to "create safe and trustworthy interactions"

with them (Hémond-Dussault & Collin-Vézina, 2022, p. 17). The four Rs include: *realize* the widespread impact of trauma on Indigenous peoples' lives and understand how it shapes their interactions with ideas and structures; *recognize* the signs of trauma and acknowledge it as such; *respond* by integrating their experiences with trauma into the analysis and findings; and *resist* re-traumatization by making clear recommendations about trauma that decision-makers can incorporate into policy and practice.

Data Collection Methods

This study included two main data collection methods – a systematic review and individual interviews.

A ***systematic review*** was carried out to delineate the breadth of the literature on this topic, categorize the results, describe the findings, and pinpoint the thematic and methodological strengths and weaknesses of that body of knowledge (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Peters et al., 2015). The search strategy was carried out in a sequential process that involved collecting, sorting, and organizing the material by distinct sets of keywords, a list of individual and aggregate databases, a reference list of pivotal books, articles, theses, and dissertations, and five pivotal authors selected from the reference list. The search parameters focused on 1) scholarly, peer-reviewed publications, specifically books and book chapters, articles, theses and dissertations to ensure a basic level of quality control, 2) grey literature, specifically government, non-government, and university policies and procedures for sport in Canada to assess how public entities are addressing this problem, 3) research from 2000-2023, 4) in English, the language of the grant holders, and 5) full-text only, to be able to assess the information. The screening process included reviewing each item's record details, including title, keywords, and abstract, as well as scanning the full text publication for relevance. Items that marginally addressed the focus of this study were removed from the list (e.g., mere mention of racism vs. analysis). However, following a narrative synthesis approach (Popay et al., 2006), items that contributed theoretically to the project's conceptual development (e.g., studies that provided insight on anti-Indigenous racism in sport) were retained. The screening process produced a final total of 61 results that formed the basis for the review (see Appendix A). The entire review process was initiated and completed between August-December 2023. The analysis is ongoing.

Original data collection was carried out through in-depth ***semi-structured interviews*** (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) with 10 Indigenous athletes (6 female/4 male; 8 First Nations/2 Métis) who experienced racism in sport. The project attempted to include Indigenous coaches, but since only athletes responded to the call for participants, our focus shifted to them. All interviews were conducted online via Zoom with transcripts produced using Otter software. Although we were initially hoping for 20 athletes for coding and meaning saturation (Hennink et al. 2017), having 10 athletes is more participation than all other studies to date and still provides meaningful insight into their experiences. Participants were recruited through an open call

distributed online, through established networks in sport, and via the snowball method. Due to the short timeframe for this study, the analysis is ongoing; this should not affect the current findings substantively, but rather add nuance and detail. The 10 interviews were carried out between February-April 2024.

Two other methods were added after the project began – an environmental scan and media analysis.

A detailed *environmental scan* of all publicly available policies and programs on anti-Indigenous racism in Canadian sport was carried out to augment the grey literature that was captured in the systematic review. The limited number of items collected through the review raised questions about the search process and prompted the necessity for a secondary search. As well, a *media analysis* was carried out to supplement the interview data. Selected online Canadian news sources, including *CBC*, *Windspeaker*, *The Globe and Mail*, and *Toronto Star*, were searched for articles on racism against Indigenous athletes to understand how anti-Indigenous racism is framed in Canadian media. Both projects are ongoing with the analysis yet to be carried out; thus, we are currently unable to provide preliminary results for these projects.

Preliminary Results

At this point, we are able to provide four main preliminary observations from the interviews:

Anti-Indigenous racism in Canadian sport is pervasive and normalized. All ten athletes stated unequivocally that racism was widespread, going far beyond the spectacular examples that media sometimes broadcasts, which typically focus on derogatory comments against individual athletes, lending credence to the notion that racism is intermittent and is about individuals behaving badly. All the athletes we interviewed provided clear examples of the racism they faced in sport, including in competition, the locker room, on bus rides, in social settings, on social media, in team selection and funding, as well as from teammates, competitors, spectators, teachers, coaches, officials, and even journalists. Racism is everywhere and comes in many different forms, and they know it. They also tend to accept some forms of racism as ‘part of the game,’ such as comments made during competition, indicating they are not likely to report forms of racism they see as a normal or natural part of their sporting experience.

Athletes want a confidential, culturally responsive, user-friendly report mechanism. There are many reasons why the athletes did not to report the racism they encountered. Reasons cited included: not wanting to be perceived as a troublemaker, being scared to lose their friends and access to their social circle, scared of being vilified, worried about their ability to progress in sport because coaching and team selection staff would see them as not being able to ‘get along’ with everyone else, because of the toxic

masculine bro-culture in sport that might lead to bodily harm, believing that some forms of racism were 'not serious enough' to report, seeing reporting as a punitive measure when education might be a more appropriate and effective way to address some forms of racism, because they do not think people in positions of power will understand how to appropriately address anti-Indigenous racism, and because there is no confidential, user-friendly way to report their experience.

Indigenous athletes have diverse and diverging experiences with racism in sport. Though all Indigenous athletes we interviewed experienced racism in sport, the racism they experienced varied, sometimes dramatically so, depending on their social location. For instance, our preliminary analysis demonstrates that factors such as age and sporting experience, sex and gender, and skin colour shaped their view of what they encountered. Therefore, it is unproductive (and harmful) to homogenize their Indigeneity. A more complex understanding of their experiences in sport is needed to begin to address the way racism shapes their lives. The following three patterns, drawn from the interviews, illustrate this finding:

- 1) ***Age and sporting experience.*** Older athletes with more lived experience are more able to identify and describe how racism affects their sporting experience. While all ten athletes stated that racism permeates sport, the older athletes with more lived experience were more able to piece together its complexity and articulate the problems it created in a way the younger athletes with less lived experience could not. For instance, the older athletes were more able to explain how anti-Indigenous racism in broader society manifested in their sport. They were also more able to identify and describe the patterned racism they experienced in sport and provide clear and relevant examples to support their points. They remain deeply troubled by what they experienced, so much so that they are still healing from the wounds they covered up to protect their position on the team and to avoid having to deal with the social and psychological fallout of bringing this issue to light in the absence of any clear structure that might help them. In contrast, the younger Indigenous athletes acknowledged racism as a 'problem' in their sport and were typically 'disappointed' by its presence. Typically, the younger athletes viewed racism as a 'comment' or a 'one-off incident' that did not really affect them too much but were nonetheless uncomfortable with its presence. As a result, they were not as concerned about racism in sport as the older athletes because they were not yet able to connect it to a broader system of oppression or had not yet felt its cumulative effects on their experiences as athletes.
- 2) ***Male and female Indigenous athletes experience racism differently.*** Female athletes provided richer descriptions of the racism they encountered in sport and were more apt to speak about racism as a problem needing to be addressed. They also tended to be more concerned about losing their friends and social circle in calling out racism, while male athletes tended to be more concerned about the

physical violence and retribution they might experience, in addition to being more concerned about their future, professional career as athletes. Female athletes also tended to believe female sport was more supportive and accepting than male sport, and that they experienced less racism (or racism that was less concerning) than male athletes, in part because there was not as much ‘at stake’ for them. However, the older athletes with more sporting experience, regardless of sex or gender orientation, were more descriptive and assertive about their experience with racism in sport.

- 3) ***Racism affects black-, brown-, and white-skinned Indigenous athletes differently.*** Many of the Indigenous athletes stated they did not ‘look’ Indigenous and described how the colour of their skin influenced their sporting experience.
- a. ***White-passing in non-Indigenous sporting spaces.*** These athletes generally used what is commonly known as ‘white privilege’ to strategically hide their Indigenous identity in non-Indigenous, mainstream sporting contexts because they knew from experience that publicly identifying as Indigenous would harm their chances for success in their sport. For instance, they knew it would affect the way media reported on their performance, their access to resources, as well as opportunities for advancement, in addition to having to perform the grueling emotional labour of ‘having to explain who they are’ and/or ‘speaking for all Indigenous peoples’ whenever asked. Hiding their identity is thus a ‘survival’ strategy that creates its own form of trauma that these athletes must deal with privately and silently.
 - b. ***White-passing in Indigenous sporting spaces.*** By contrast, in Indigenous sporting spaces, being white-passing posed a different set of challenges associated with present-day concerns about Indigenous identity fraud. In these contexts, white-passing Indigenous athletes were often initially made to feel not Indigenous enough to be in Indigenous-only spaces. For instance, white-passing athletes were often asked by other Indigenous athletes, including their teammates, to show their Indian Status or Métis card to ‘prove’ their Indigeneity, even though they would have already provided their card to register for the event. Other times they were told to ‘stop acting Native’ by their teammates or competitors. While the white-passing Indigenous athletes joked about this form of racialization, it nevertheless made them feel a deep uneasiness about being in Indigenous-only spaces because they believed, if any place should accept and uplift them, it should be there. As a result, white-passing Indigenous athletes were habitually ‘forced’ to explain their heritage in Indigenous-only sporting spaces.
 - c. ***Brown-skinned in non-Indigenous sporting spaces.*** In mainstream sporting spaces, brown-skinned Indigenous athletes typically ‘stood-out’ on a team of white faces. Unable to hide their identity, they often felt disoriented, isolated, and helpless because they had no choice but to put up with the racism they encountered because no one else addressed the problem

publicly or privately, in effect, making them feel as though they were the problem by being uncomfortable with other peoples' behavior, including their own teammates and coaching staff. In a way, they struggled with the knowledge that their visible presence on the team – as someone who was 'obviously Indigenous' – legitimized racism because they 'did not complain' about it. In fact, racism is so prevalent for brown-skinned athletes that they 'expect it' as a regular part of their sporting experience in mainstream settings. Common examples they cited included being made the object of jeers and taunts both on and off the field of play, feeling like they could not speak their mind, or being made to feel as though they were 'wrong' or 'too sensitive' about anti-Indigenous racism in sport, and teammates 'playing Indian' in private social settings, such as the locker room and bus rides, to 'pump themselves up' before competition (e.g., doing 'war whoops' and frenzied 'dancing' to popular Indigenous hip-hop music).

- d. *Dark-skinned in non-Indigenous sporting spaces.*** Dark-skinned Indigenous athletes were perceived differently depending on the sport. For instance, in sports where black athletes are 'expected' to be seen, such as basketball or track and field, dark-skinned Indigenous athletes were perceived as 'black'. Like the strategy adopted by white-passing Indigenous athletes who hide their Indigenous identity via white privilege, dark-skinned Indigenous athletes judged to be 'black' sometimes assumed that identity position rather than explain to people who they 'really' are. Other times, when they tried to clarify their mixed lineage, the people did not believe them or it would result in so much confusion that the athletes deemed it hardly worth the effort, demonstrating the additional burdens that Indigenous athletes face in trying to help other people, including other Indigenous people, understand their Indigeneity.
- e. *Dark-skinned in Indigenous sporting spaces.*** Dark-skinned Indigenous athletes often had to defend their presence in Indigenous-only sporting spaces, making them feel as though they do not belong anywhere, resulting in tension, confusion, and emotional exhaustion about 'how to explain' who they are, as well as anger and frustration that they must do so in 'their own' sporting spaces. Of all the athletes, dark-skinned athletes were the most aware of the racial and ethnic binaries that structure Canadian sport. In a way, the backlash against these athletes best highlights the myriad tensions in sport where there remains a strong preference for devastatingly simple racialized binaries.

Education and awareness, alongside policing and discipline.

- a. *Policing and discipline for 'real' harms to individuals and groups.*** All athletes stated that policing and formal discipline is important for egregious forms of anti-Indigenous racism, especially when it results in 'real' harm to their mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual

wellbeing. Importantly, they also recognized the importance of dealing with anti-Indigenous racism for other people, especially their teammates, who sometimes were just as confused and scared as they were, demonstrating their awareness of the profound implications of allowing anti-Indigenous racism to thrive among teams and within sports.

- b. *Hold sport leaders accountable for ‘their’ sport.*** It should not be the sole responsibility of athletes to formally report racism, especially considering the problematic power relations where their involvement and success in sport relies almost exclusively on their ability to ‘fit in’ and not disrupt broader team dynamics. All athletes recognized the crucial role organizational leaders have in addressing anti-Indigenous racism in sport. Coaching staff were identified as being the first line of protection, but the athletes were also unanimous in their view that administrators, staff, and boards of directors are even more crucial and should be held accountable too, perhaps even more so than coaches since many of not most coaches are volunteers and are similarly in precarious positions. Athletes (and by extension coaches) should not have to shoulder the burden of addressing racism alone when their unpaid (and often unprotected) labour resources the paid labour of sport administrators and staff, and the privileges that come with being a board of director.
- c. *Monitor and regulate social spaces.*** Required actions include monitoring and regulating behaviors during training and competition, but also in social settings, such as locker rooms, bus trips, social gatherings, and celebrations. The athletes discussed how competitive spaces had some measure of control, often through officiating, but things changed in unregulated spaces where other athletes, coaches, administrators, and the public, including journalists, were more apt to be racist.
- d. *Education and training should be updated, expanded, and mandatory for all participants.*** All athletes agreed that education and awareness of how anti-Indigenous racism manifests in sport – and in specific sports – is crucial for helping everyone to understand what it is and why it must be addressed, as well as ‘how to’ address it. All athletes explained how anti-Indigenous racism is not the same in every sport, citing ‘chirping’ as being common in some sports but not others, locker-room rituals being part of some sporting cultures but not others, some elite sporting spaces tended to offer more social opportunities where racism was rampant, and so on. Every athlete in one way or another criticized decision makers for not doing more to address the problems they experienced, demonstrating poor leadership at the top.

Recommendations

Preliminary findings indicate the need to:

- 1) Update anti-Indigenous racism education and training to account for its complex nature in all sport settings, from the grassroots to elite level sport.
- 2) Make anti-Indigenous racism training mandatory for all participants in both the mainstream and Indigenous sport systems.
- 3) Require all NSOs, PSOs, and MSOs to hire qualified researchers to carry out a trauma-informed assessment about anti-Indigenous racism in their sport and at their events to better understand how it manifests in their system and how to address it.
- 4) Give oversight to external, independent experts to hold NSOs, PSOs, and MSOs accountable for taking clear and transparent steps to reduce and eliminate anti-Indigenous racism in their sport and at their events.
- 5) Provide workshops tailored specifically for athletes and coaches on how to create a team environment that supports anti-oppression, including reducing the stigma and fear of speaking out.
- 6) Create a confidential, culturally responsive, user-friendly way for all participants to report anti-Indigenous racism in sport and at sporting events.

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Appendix A

See attached excel sheet for additional references.