

# Safeguarding policies and practices in International Federations: on the right track?

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Interpersonal violence in sport—whether physical, sexual, psychological or neglect—remains a pressing public health concern, casting a shadow over the well-being of athletes at all levels. The impact of interpersonal violence, often referred to as ‘harassment and abuse’ in sport policy documents, extends far beyond the individual, touching families, healthcare systems and society.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, safeguarding strategies have emerged as a vital strategy to protect athletes in the Olympic Movement, with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as a key actor. However, the landscape of safeguarding policies and practices within Summer and Winter Olympic International Federations (IFs) still reveals considerable variation, often lacking consistency and comprehensive implementation. Recognising these gaps, an internal quality control project driven by the IOC Safe Sport Unit set out to establish a framework for monitoring and evaluating the safeguarding efforts of IFs. By developing a set of indicators (see table 1), the project aimed to create a baseline framework for measuring safeguarding activities and to provide a tool for tracking changes over time. Through the application of this framework, it becomes possible to identify key challenges and areas in need of attention, resulting in the ability to support IFs in strengthening their safeguarding activities by pinpointing critical gaps.

## ARE IFs ON THE RIGHT TRACK?

All 39 Summer and Winter Olympic IFs participated, reflecting the importance placed on safeguarding by the sports community. As of 2022, 85% of these IFs

reported having safeguarding policies, while only just over half had fully implemented them. Safeguarding officers, who are critical to the success of these policies, were predominantly women (54%), but a significant proportion (38%) did not officially hold the title of safeguarding officer or did not receive specialised training (49%), suggesting that many are working without the full recognition, support or training their role requires. Notably, most

safeguarding officers have only been in their roles for less than 3 years, further indicating that safeguarding is still a relatively new priority for many IFs.

Effective reporting mechanisms are crucial to safeguarding athletes, yet five IFs still lacked channels for reporting concerns outside of major events. While systems should be in place to ensure that harm is appropriately addressed when it occurs, the lack of an escalation reporting mechanism to governing organisations may leave athletes vulnerable. Even among IFs that had reporting systems, many used the same platforms for other integrity issues, potentially diminishing the urgency, specialty and focus required to address cases of interpersonal violence. In 2021, over half of the IFs received reports of interpersonal violence—underscoring that this issue is not theoretical but is an immediate and pressing challenge that demands coordinated action. A major concern

**Table 1** Proposed set of safeguarding indicators for sport organisations

Indicator	Score 0	Score 1
1 <i>Safeguarding officer</i> Does the sport organisation have a trained safeguarding officer appointed?	Untrained	Trained
2 <i>Safeguarding policy</i> Does the sport organisation have a safeguarding strategy or policy in place?	Absent	Present
3 <i>Safeguarding policy implementation status</i> Is the safeguarding policy implemented?	Not yet or partly	Fully
4 <i>Safeguarding education</i> Does the sport organisation provide safeguarding education to at least one target group?	Absent	Present
5 <i>Reporting mechanism</i> Does the sport organisation have a reporting mechanism for safeguarding concerns?	Unavailable	Available
6 <i>Number of reporting channels*</i> Does the sport organisation reporting mechanism offer more than one reporting channel (eg, phone, email, web form, chat)?	0 or 1	More than 1
7 <i>Anonymous reporting*</i> Does the reporting mechanism allow anonymous reporting?	Not possible	Possible
8 <i>Reporting on behalf of others*</i> Does the reporting mechanism allow reporting on behalf of others?	Not possible	Possible
9 <i>Case support to national level*</i> Does the sport organisation provide case support to the national member federations?	Not sufficient or unknown	Sufficient (for minimum 1 actor)
10 <i>Number of past-year outside competition cases received</i> Did the sport organisation receive more than one reported concern in the past year?	None	1 or more
11 <i>Victim well-being support</i> Does the sport organisation provide well-being support to affected persons?	Unavailable or unknown	Available
12 <i>National safeguarding policies/leads data</i> Does the sport organisation have mapping data on National Federations’ safeguarding policies and leads?	Unavailable or unknown	Available
Total score	0	20

All indicators have a weight of 2, except for those marked with an asterisk (\*). Maximum score=20.  
\*Indicators with a weight of 1.

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## Box 1 Recommendations for monitoring and evaluating safeguarding policies in sport organisations

### 1. Establish standardised safeguarding indicators and metrics.

- ⇒ Sport organisations benefit from developing clear, quantifiable safeguarding indicators that cover policy implementation, education, reporting and support mechanisms. Regular assessment of these indicators helps maintain consistency and track progress over time.
- ⇒ Creating specific metrics for reporting and response mechanisms, such as the number of concerns raised, response times and outcomes, offers valuable insights into the system's effectiveness and areas for improvement.
- ⇒ Regular evaluation of the availability and quality of well-being support services like psychological and legal assistance ensures adequate support for affected persons.

### 2. Implement comprehensive and objective evaluation processes.

- ⇒ Periodic internal, self-assessment reviews of safeguarding policies, reporting mechanisms and support systems can help ensure they are functioning as intended.
- ⇒ Bringing in independent safeguarding experts/auditors allows for unbiased reviews of how effectively policies are operationalised, going beyond just having policies in place.
- ⇒ Evaluating feedback from stakeholders: gathering input from athletes, safeguarding officers, coaches and staff offers practical insights into the implementation of safeguarding measures and helps identify opportunities for enhancement.

### 3. Ensure implementation across all levels.

- ⇒ Ensuring that safeguarding policies are consistently implemented across all levels—from International Federations to national—helps maintain comprehensive athlete protection and prevent gaps in safeguarding.

### 4. Use data for continuous policy improvement.

- ⇒ Monitoring and evaluation results can inform timely policy adjustments, keeping safeguarding measures aligned with evolving needs and challenges, and driving continuous policy improvement.
- ⇒ Establishing a dynamic cycle where policies are regularly developed, monitored, evaluated and adapted allows organisations to proactively address safeguarding challenges and integrate emerging best practices.

### 5. Collaborate with experts for robust data collection and analysis.

- ⇒ Collaborating with academic and safeguarding specialists ensures that data collection and analysis are scientifically robust, providing evidence-based insights. This approach supports benchmarking progress and alignment with sector-wide best practices.

international sport, with some IFs making significant strides, while others lag behind.

Despite these gaps, there is reason to be optimistic. Safeguarding has rapidly gained traction in recent years, driven by increased awareness, media scrutiny and high-profile cases that have underscored the need for action. The IOC, through its Safe Sport Unit, is well positioned to spearhead a coordinated international response as the leader of the Olympic Movement, ensuring that IFs have the resources and guidance they need to close the gaps in their safeguarding frameworks. Similar to how antidoping compliance is enforced globally, safeguarding could benefit from a more formalised, top-down approach, ensuring that National Federations adopt robust and consistent practices that protect athletes from the grassroots to the elite level.

## PROMOTING SAFE SPORT: FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

Safeguarding is not just about policy—it is about culture. Good governance in sport requires that athlete welfare is placed at the centre of organisational priorities. While this project provides a valuable baseline, the real challenge lies in translating policies into practice. It is critical to ensure that safeguarding policies are not just documents existing on a shelf, but are living, operational frameworks that actively protect athletes. Moreover, safeguarding must be viewed as an ongoing responsibility, one that requires regular review, adaptation and independent verification. Relying solely on self-reported data, as this project did, may present a skewed picture of the true safeguarding culture within IFs.

Looking ahead, there are several steps that could enhance the safeguarding landscape by building comprehensive safeguarding education and support programmes. These efforts must go beyond policy to foster a cultural shift within sport organisations—one that prioritises athlete safety, inclusivity, health and human rights. Additionally, expanding this evaluation framework to National Olympic Committees and other international sport bodies would provide a more complete picture of safeguarding practices across the sporting ecosystem. Organisations such as professional leagues, continental sports bodies and multisport event organisers would also benefit from adopting a unified safeguarding framework, ensuring consistency in athlete protection globally.

revealed by the project is the limited capacity of many IFs to handle cases that occur outside of international competitions. More than half of the IFs acknowledged they lacked the resources to address safeguarding issues at the national level, where most athletes participate, leaving a significant gap in protection. Furthermore, 64% of IFs reported that they could not provide adequate well-being support for individuals affected by interpersonal violence whose cases were escalated from the national level, highlighting an urgent need for stronger support systems within sport organisations at the national level. For more details, see the dashboard of IFs' safeguarding activities in the online supplemental material. Key recommendations for IFs to implement now are presented in [box 1](#). By implementing these recommendations, sport organisations can ensure

continuous oversight of their safeguarding efforts and make data-driven decisions to protect athletes more effectively.

## A MONITORING FRAMEWORK FOR SAFEGUARDING

Aligned with international frameworks on violence prevention and good governance,<sup>2-4</sup> a monitoring framework with 12 safeguarding indicators to measure IF progress in safeguarding was developed ([table 1](#)). These indicators, which assess key areas such as policy, education, reporting and well-being support, revealed scores that ranged widely—from a high of 19 to a low of 0. The average score of 11 among IFs suggests that while progress has been made, many IFs still have substantial work to do. This variation reflects the inconsistent safeguarding measures across

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, safeguarding athletes from interpersonal violence is a core component of health promotion and good governance in sport. The framework presented offers an important evaluation tool that other sport organisations are encouraged to consider assessing their own internal safeguarding policies. These initial results for IFs provide a benchmark for tracking progress and holding organisations accountable for the protection of their athletes. By strengthening safeguarding measures, sport organisations fulfil their ethical responsibilities and contribute to the long-term health and well-being of athletes worldwide. As safeguarding becomes further embedded into the governance of international sport, the goal of creating a safe and supportive environment for all athletes is within reach.

Collaborating with academic and safeguarding specialists ensures that data collection and analysis are scientifically robust, providing evidence-based insights. This approach supports benchmarking progress and alignment with sector-wide best practices.

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