



# ATHLETES' EXPERIENCES AND SUPPORT NEEDS FOLLOWING ANTI-DOPING RULE VIOLATIONS

WORK PACKAGE 2: STATUS REPORT MARCH 2025



## MISSION

- Give voice to a stigmatised group of athletes
- Gain insight into athletes' experiences, struggles, and coping mechanisms when facing doping charges and sanctions for anti-doping rule violations

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Understand lived experiences of athletes
- Explore athletes' coping strategies and situational management
- Identify athletes' needs
- Capture a diverse range of perspectives in the field of doping by affected athletes



## METHODOLOGY

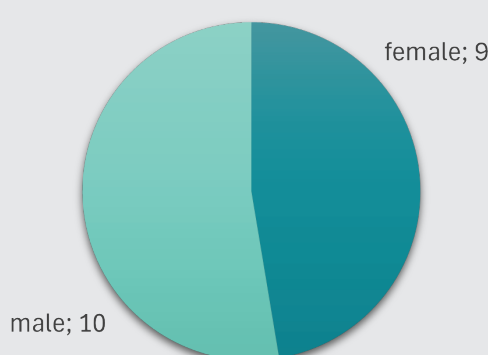
- Athlete-centred study using a qualitative research approach
- Peer-led life-story interviews conducted by trained athlete co-researchers
- Thematic template analysis to identify key themes and patterns



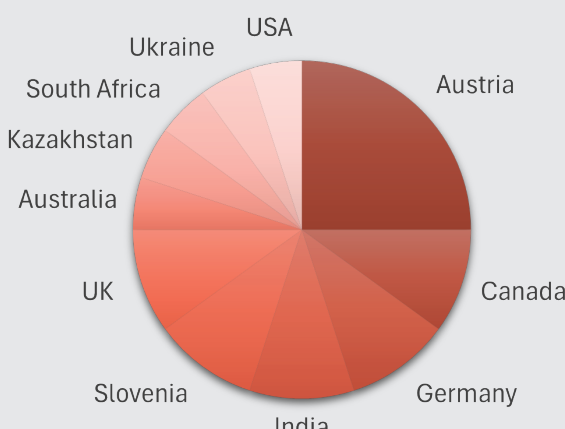
## PARTICIPANTS

- Athletes sanctioned for an anti-doping rule violation (since WADA Code 2003)
- Athletes with a positive test who were later cleared of charges

### Gender



### Countries



### Sports

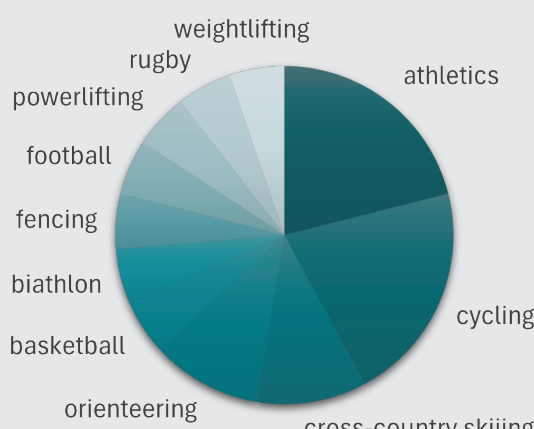


Fig. 1. Illustration of participants' gender distribution, range of countries, and diversity of sports disciplines among the 19 interviews analysed so far.



## FINDINGS

### Negative Emotional and Psychological Impact

- Feelings of stress, anxiety, helplessness and perceived lack of control over the situation
- Feelings of shame and guilt, particularly towards family and close ones
- Changed athlete identity following career disruption or retirement, leading to a loss in self-confidence and orientation in life, often worsened by public stigmatisation
- Strained relationships with family, friends, and teammates, feelings of isolation or abandonment

### Silver Lining

- For some athletes the sanction provided relief, ending pressure to compete or offering an escape from toxic environments
- Going through a period of personal growth, developing a broader perspective on life beyond sport, reconnecting with family, and exploring new interests

### Coping Strategies

- Support from close social environment, offering consolation, forgiveness and belief in athletes' innocence
- Engagement in alternative activities, such as new hobbies, education or career planning
- Acceptance and reorientation, shifting priorities and setting new goals beyond sport
- Athletes try to improve the system in acts of redemption, expressing a desire to give back to sport by taking on roles in athlete support and advocacy

### Support Needs

- Lack of structured support systems, athletes left to navigate process and sanctions alone
- Need for professional psychological support to cope with the emotional distress
- Access to knowledgeable legal counsel to navigate complex anti-doping procedures
- Greater empathy and understanding from authorities, ensuring athletes are treated as individuals, not just 'cases'

### Legitimacy of the Anti-Doping System

- Concerns about fairness, as rigid sanctioning processes fail to consider individual circumstances
- Extended length of process and long waiting periods robbing athletes of valuable years in their careers

## NEXT STEPS

Analysis is ongoing. More specifically, at the point of writing [March 2025] a total of 33 interviews were conducted. Data collection continues. Each completed and analysed interview will further broaden our understanding and the results will inform the next phases of the project:

**WP4: Policy Recommendations** - Developing guidelines on how to manage sanctioned athletes and facilitate their potential reintegration into the sporting community.

**WP5: Education Initiatives** - Creating educational programmes for emerging athletes to highlight the consequences of doping and designing tailored support and education for sanctioned athletes.



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