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# Investigating the Risky Behaviour of Elite Athletes

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## Abstract

In recent years there has been an increase in the amount of coverage regarding the off-field behaviours of elite athletes and they are often reported to engage in risky behaviour. There are many cases publicised in the media such as the Edward Lee 'Fast Eddie' Johnson, Jr. case, a former NBA player, who was involved with drugs and was convicted of sexual battery and child molestation. Another example is the more recent case of Adam Johnson, a former England football player, who was convicted of sexual activity with an underage girl. Much of the previous research has focused on collegiate athletes. The current research aims to explore the factors contributing to risky behaviours within elite athletes. A sample of elite athletes will be accessed and will be asked to complete a specifically tailored questionnaire consisting of multiple scales with the purpose of examining the factors which can lead to such risky behaviour. The paper discusses the implications of the expected findings as well as direction for future research.

## Introduction

A new incident of athlete crime emerges every two days, but this does not include crimes that were unreported in the media (National Coalition Against Violent Athletes, n.d.). With the ever increasing number of reports about the antisocial behaviour of athletes, who are publicised - through no fault of their own - as being role models, it is important to examine the central factors which can lead to such morally questionable and often illegal behaviours, as they can have a considerable impact on any victims involved and family members that are directly affected by the athlete's behaviour.

Risky behaviour is defined as activities such as rape, group sex, infidelity, gambling, drinking, violence, and substance abuse. The vast majority of research into the risky behaviour of athletes has been conducted on collegiate athletes (O'Brien & Lyons, 2000; Mastroleo, Scaglione & Turrisi, 2013; Cross, Basten, Hendrick, Kristofic and Schaffer, 1998), with little academic and/or empirical focus being applied to elite athletes. While the differences between collegiate athletes and elite athletes are not remarkable, elite athletes remain a distinct group because they carry out their role as a full time job. Reports of athletes being involved in risky behaviour, show no sign of abating. As such, efforts to try to understand how and why elite athletes engage in such risky behaviour should be of primary concern. This research is important because there have been many cases of athletes committing crimes such as sexual assault and drink driving and efforts must be made to understand why this group of individuals engage in this sort of behaviour.



Figure 1: A depiction of the two sides of athlete lifestyle. On the left Adam Johnson playing for Sunderland AFC and on the right Adam Johnson as he appears in court.

## Causes of Risky Behaviour in Athletes

Some of the aspects related to risk taking behaviour are the following:

- ❖ Celebrity status which brings them power (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006)
- ❖ Peer Influence (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005)
- ❖ Sensation seeking (Mastroleo, Scaglione & Turrisi, 2013; Yusko, Buckman, White & Pandina, 2008; Zuckerman, 1983)
- ❖ Aggression (Mărășescu, 2014; Grange and Kerr, 2011)
- ❖ Personality differences (Raab & Johnson, 2004; Gage, 2008)
- ❖ Attitudinal differences (Cross, Basten, Hendrick, Kristofic & Schaffer, 1998)
- ❖ Morality (Stanger, Kavussanu, Willoughby and Ring, 2012)
- ❖ Substance abuse (Shwenk, 2000)

## Why is the research important?

While there has been much research into the risky behaviour of collegiate athletes there is little research which focuses on elite professional athletes. Statistical information regarding athlete risky behaviour from around the world is also scarce, with the majority of statistics being reported on U.S. athletes (see figure 2). In addition to this, previous research in the field appears to focus on just one aspect of risky behaviour in athletes, such as attitudinal differences regarding risk-taking behaviour among athletes who gamble and those who do not (Cross, Basten, Hendrick, Kristofic and Schaffer, 1998) and the role of aggression in the risky behaviour of athletes (Mărășescu, 2014). Also, with certain types of risky behavior, such as sexual assault, there are victims involved and this is another factor as to why researching these behaviours is so important.

## Risky Behaviour Statistics

In 2010 there were 507 arrests of National Football League (NFL) players. Between 2000 and 2011 around 1 in 45 NFL players were arrested each year, with many of these arrests being related to driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, compared to a national rate of 1 in 144 (U.S. College Search, 2011). It has been reported that the conviction rate for accused individuals within the general population is 80%, with accused athletes only having a conviction rate of 38% (National Coalition Against Violent Athletes, n.d.).

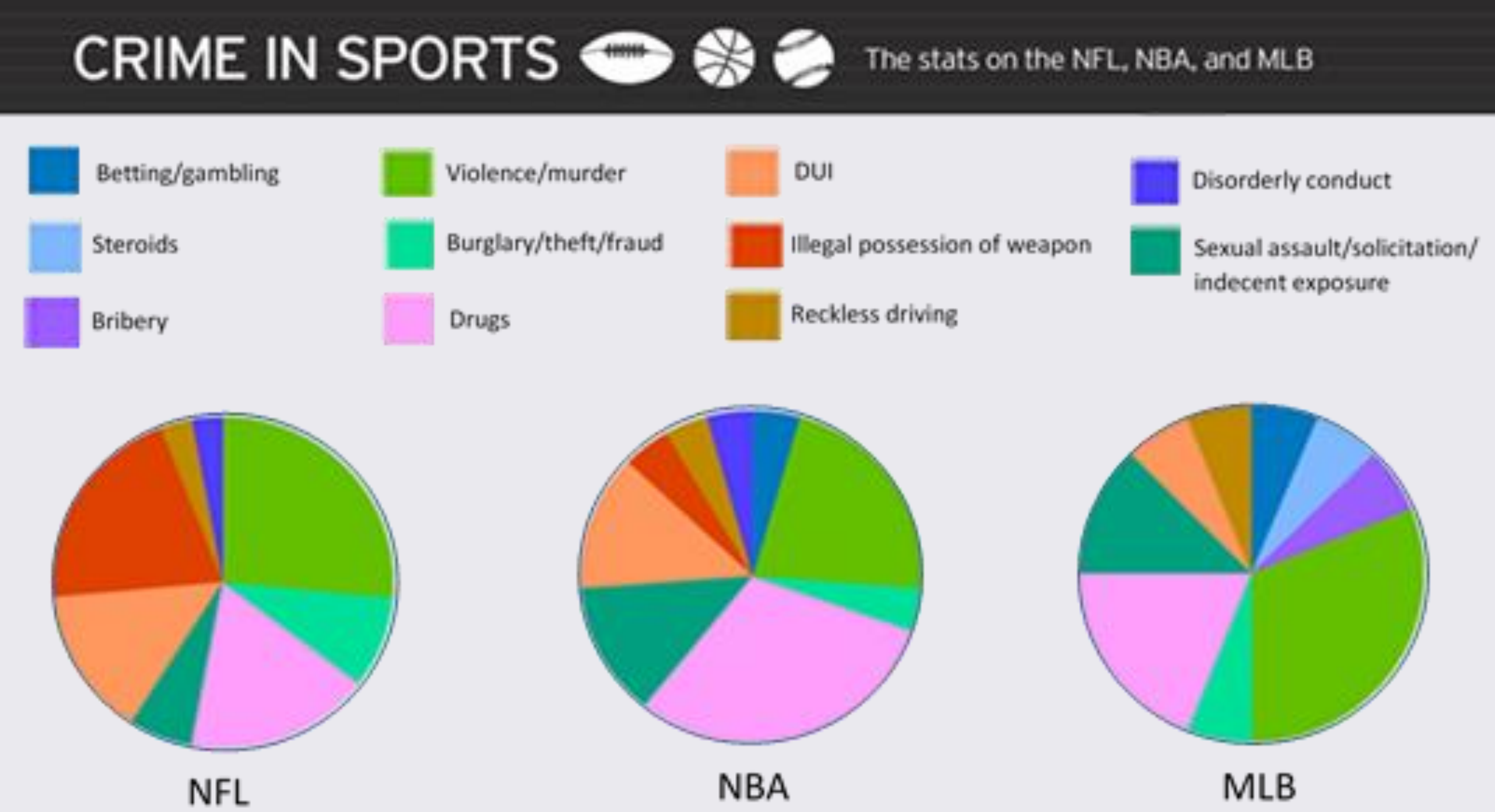


Figure 2: A comparison of the arrests across three major U.S. sport organisations: National Football League, National Basketball Association and Major League Baseball (U.S. College Search, 2011).

## Project Aims

### Aim

The main aim of this proposal is to gather unique information from elite athletes in regards to their risk taking behaviour.

### Objectives

- 1) To develop an understanding of risk taking behaviour in elite athletes.
- 2) To understand the factors as to why they might be at a higher risk of engaging in risky behaviour.
- 3) To build on previous research in the area which predominantly focuses on collegiate athletes.

## Method

The study will use a sample of elite athletes and amateur athletes (control group) from around the world in order to investigate their risky behaviour and the factors which contribute to these behaviours. To do this a specifically designed questionnaire has been constructed using various different scales and this will be distributed to the participants via a Qualtrics system for them to complete online. The questionnaire will comprise of the following scales:

- A demographic questionnaire.
- An informed consent form.
- The Sense of Power Scale (Anderson et al 2005),
- Personality Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) short form (Spence & Helmreich, 1978),
- Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRP-III; Paulhus Neumann & Hare, in press),
- Domain Specific Risk Taking Scale (DOSPERT) (Blais & Weber, 2006),
- The Zuckerman-Kuhlman Personality Questionnaire (shortened, ZKPQ-50-CC) (Aluja, Rossier, Garcia, Angleitner, Kuhlman & Zuckerman, 2006),
- The Sexual Sensation-Seeking Index (Kalichman, Johnson, Adair, Rompa, Multhauf, & Kelly, 1994; Kalichman & Rompa, 1995)
- The Comprehensive Alcohol Expectancy Questionnaire (CAEQ; Demmel & Hagen, 2003a, 2003b).

Using these scales the study will investigate the influences of the following main aspects on risk taking:

- Power status
- Personality
- Psychopathy
- Risk taking
- Sensation-seeking
- Alcohol use

Data collection will take place over a 3-4 month period in which follow up prompts will be administered to participants who fail to respond. Any participant not interested in taking part in the study will have an option, which will be built into the questionnaire, to decline involvement. Follow up interviews will be conducted on a randomly selected sample so as to collect in depth qualitative information otherwise not attainable via a questionnaire. The number of interviews will be determined based on the response rate of participants to the questionnaire.

## Implications of results

Through the findings it will be possible to devise a training scheme to help educate existing and upcoming athletes in both a professional and collegiate setting in order to reduce the prominence of these risky behaviours. A reduction of risky behaviours will be beneficial to a number of parties; it will create an improved image for sporting bodies and create more suitable role models for the general population, especially the younger population. By educating at collegiate level it may help to reduce these behaviours throughout their lives whether that be as a professional athlete or in another profession.

In the long term it is hoped that by reducing risky behaviours in athletes it may decrease these behaviours in the general population, as research shows that risky behaviour can be learnt from role models through vicarious and social learning (Hurd, Zimmerman & Reischl, 2011).

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