

# Discrimination on the rise at the rink

## Hockey Canada maltreatment report shows 228% rise in intolerance-fuelled penalties

SCOTT BILLECK

**P**ENALTIES called for discriminatory behaviour across Manitoba's organized hockey programs increased more than 200 per cent last season compared to 2021-22, a new report from the sport's national governing body reveals.

Provincial hockey officials say it shows the system implemented to tally the maltreatment offences — verbal abuse and intimidation based on race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, among others — is working as intended, but some observers suggest the 2023-24 Hockey Canada report lacks meaningful data and ignores the reason the reporting process was developed in the first place.

According to the report published this week, gross misconduct penalties — resulting in indefinite suspension pending a disciplinary hearing — called on the ice for discriminatory taunts, insults and intimidation in rinks across the province spiked 228 per cent over two years, from 25 in 2021-22 to 82 last season.

Manitoba ranks first in Canada among provincial and territorial fed-

eration calls by officials for various forms of abuse at 3.47 cases per 1,000 players and first in unwitnessed allegations at 2.33 per 1,000.

"Any time you're introducing a change to the game or introducing a new rule, there's going to be an adjustment period for that, and an education, not only to the (players) that are being called, but also to the people making those particular calls," Hockey Manitoba executive director Peter Woods told the *Free Press*.

"It only seems like you're going to have an increase on those numbers being recorded for a period of time. If that remains consistent, and the numbers continue to go up, that may be a cause for alarm. But I don't think that this particular stage, three years into the program, that it is an issue."

Award-winning sports journalist Laura Robinson, author of *Crossing the Line: Violence and Sexual Assault in Canada's National Sport*, said it's difficult to know what the data really means.

"I don't think you can come to conclusions by simply looking at these numbers because I don't think there's enough evidence as to how they came to these numbers and what they repre-

sent," Robinson said.

"Is it an increase in reports? An increase in the reports being taken seriously? Or is it an increase in the instances? We can't tell by this. No one, including Hockey Canada and Hockey Manitoba, should come to any positive conclusions given how little information is given."

Robinson said she believes the report is merely scratching the surface, and points out a major failure by the federal government and the Office of the Sport Integrity Commissioner to not include the Canadian Hockey League and its three major junior leagues.

"The huge flaw in all of this is that all of this work and all of this money doesn't address the original reason it started in the first place," Robinson said, citing the allegations of sexual assault against members of the 2018 Canadian junior men's team — players chosen from CHL teams — and subsequent revelations that a portion of minor hockey fees submitted to Hockey Canada were being used to pay settlements to accusers in similar cases.

Fifteen of the 18 cases reported to OSIC, according to the report, couldn't

be assessed due to the federal agency not having jurisdiction to do so. The other three were still under review.

Hockey Canada's independent third-party investigators are expected to publish their report next week, which examines complaints off the ice.

The vast majority of assessed abuse penalties that contravened Hockey Canada's Rule 11.4 in 2023-24 were sex/gender discrimination, followed by disability and race. Those offences rose 41 per cent in 2023-24, up 2.6 incidents per 1,000 from 1.9 in 2022-23.

Across Canada, about three-quarters of those penalties came at the Under-18 and Under-15 levels.

"Those are pretty competitive programs and you've got to look at the age of those kids; there's a lot of bravado in the U15 and U18 kids," Woods said. "It's unfortunate, but there's a whole education process here. Society has gone through some significant societal changes. This type of behaviour wouldn't be acceptable in the workplace or a school setting, yet it's been part of the fabric of our game for far too long."

Penalties for gross misconduct under Rule 11.4 include a minimum five-game

suspension and can lead to further supplementary discipline.

"This year's report is critical in our efforts to continue to generate greater awareness of what constitutes maltreatment on and off the ice," Natasha Johnston, vice-president of sport integrity for Hockey Canada, said in an emailed statement.

"Our comprehensive report with data from the 2023-24 season will allow us to begin to better track trends with penalties and allegations related to maltreatment, and serve as a benchmark as we work with our members to enhance education of participants, parents, volunteers and other stakeholders."

Unwitnessed allegations of verbal abuse have also risen, from 41 incidents in Manitoba in 2021-22 to 55 last season.

Robinson said there needs to be a baseline of data and to get that, far more details under the broader umbrella of discriminatory behaviours need to be provided.

"In order to address something, you need to know where you're starting from," she said, noting the report doesn't say whether abuse happens more to males or females and whether it's more directed at players or referees.

scott.billeck@freepress.mb.ca