

# Engaging the National Youth Football Community in a Child Sexual Abuse Research Advisory Board

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Background:** While research advisory boards are common in community-based research, there are challenges with forming a board on sensitive topics and among communities who are less often engaged in research such as youth football organizations.

**Objectives:** We share our processes for forming a national board, challenges associated with engaging some football community members, and feedback from our board members.

**Methods:** Board members were recruited with a multidisciplinary team of youth football organization employees. Researchers compared demographic characteristics of interested individuals who joined the board to those who did not.

**Lessons Learned:** Board members were different in several ways to those who did not participate. Additionally, board members experienced minimal harm from participating in discussions on sensitive topics.

**Conclusion:** While several interested individuals joined the board, more than half of the interested individuals did not. It is important for researchers to make intentional efforts to engage underrepresented individuals and ensure the research is beneficial to all community members.

**KEYWORDS:** child sexual abuse, research advisory boards, community-based participatory research, youth serving organizations, prevention science

## ***Background***

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is a public health approach that emphasizes collaboration between researchers and community members in all stages of research, from development of research questions to data collection, analysis, and dissemination of findings.<sup>1</sup> Consisting of stakeholders and target community members (people with lived experiences), research advisory boards formalize partnerships between researchers and the community. Advisory boards ensure the research is aligned with their community's priorities. Their lived experiences can influence the direction of the research, ensuring it is relevant and culturally appropriate. Additionally, community involvement encourages trust between researchers and community members, which is important for communities who have been harmed by unethical research practices.<sup>2</sup>

When implemented poorly, community members may feel unheard or disrespected, further straining relationships with researchers.<sup>3</sup> Researchers have identified successful practices for recruiting and sustaining advisory boards including clearly defining roles, ensuring representation, maintaining regular communication, and investing in capacity building.<sup>4</sup> When tasks are entirely research driven, board members may feel power imbalances with researchers<sup>2</sup> and that their contributions are undervalued.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1990s, CBPR was popular in traditional healthcare settings to understand health experiences of patients and caregivers and identify opportunities to improve services.<sup>6,7</sup> Since then, CBPR and research advisory boards have spread across social and medical science fields and many funding sources require formation of advisory boards with stakeholders and community members.<sup>8</sup>

Researchers experience challenges across the socioecological model when engaging people with lived experiences in studies on sensitive topics. At the policy level, ethical concerns can arise around the potential for the research to cause distress or do more harm than good.<sup>9</sup> However, researchers have found the incidence and severity of distress is low while reports of benefits are high.<sup>10,11</sup>

At the community level, researchers must identify a community partner who will be dedicated to the project. This can be particularly challenging when studying sensitive topics. For example, researchers studying experiences of adults who care for parents that caused harm in their childhood were turned away from many healthcare organizations due to concerns of introducing new harm to families and beliefs that the research project was not relevant to their work.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, developing partnerships for research on sensitive topics may require more time and compromise than less sensitive topics. At the individual level, researchers may struggle to gain trust of community members who fear emotional distress or social consequences from participating.

In the current study, partner organizations include a national youth football organization and a child sexual abuse (CSA) prevention organization, Stop It Now! (Now!). Now! is a survivor founded organization and has pioneered the importance of primary prevention. Their work has had significant impact on research and CSA policy. Now! provides an adult-focused CSA perpetration prevention program that trains and educates adults on identifying and mitigating risky situations or behaviors. They also provide resources for adults who have concerns about their own thoughts, such as a confidential helpline, to prevent themselves from causing harm.

We, the Center for Violence Prevention Research (the Center), a nonprofit research organization specializing in child abuse prevention research, previously worked with Now! on a

different project and identified this as an opportunity to evaluate Now's! CSA prevention program on a national level. The Center led grant writing and received funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. One of the first tasks was to create a national research advisory board. As a nonprofit organization, we work with a private IRB for approval of studies as applicable. This effort was deemed exempt from IRB approval.

Given the sensitive nature of the study topic and the unique study population, forming a representative research advisory board presented unique challenges.

First, researchers are still understanding best practices for incorporating research advisory boards into sensitive research, such as CSA perpetration prevention. In fact, a recent systematic review of CSA perpetration prevention programs reported the reviewed studies indicate research advisory boards were not used.<sup>16</sup>

Second, our target community is not often engaged in research, especially research on CSA.<sup>17</sup> The community consists of predominately male (approximately 98%) youth football coaches and league leaders. Youth athletes served by the organization are also predominately male (approximately 87 – 98%), although female and co-ed leagues are becoming more common. This is notable because gendered perceptions of CSA remain widespread, often resulting in under recognition of its prevalence among boys.<sup>17</sup> This presents a unique opportunity to engage a predominantly male community, traditionally shaped by masculine culture, in conversations about how cultural norms influence CSA victimization and disclosure.

### ***Objectives***

We will share (1) our process of forming a national research advisory board on a sensitive topic with youth football stakeholders, (2) successes, challenges, and lessons learned

from forming and collaborating with the advisory board, and (3) feedback from board members on their experience participating in sensitive research.

### ***Methods***

Board members were recruited by a multidisciplinary team of the football organization's employees including those in the education, training, social media and communications.

Researchers and football employees collaborated to discuss what diversity means in their community and consider how different experiences and identities could impact perspectives on CSA prevention. We co-designed recruitment fliers so football employees could ensure the design and language aligned with their organization and community.

Football organization staff strategically contacted active members of their community who represented diversity in roles (league leader, coach, parent), geography, race, ethnicity, age, and time with the organization. Interested individuals completed an online information collection form to share demographic characteristics and contact information with researchers (Table 1). After receiving 36 responses from a diverse group of individuals, researchers closed the survey.

### ***Engaging Board Members***

We took several steps to maintain member engagement throughout the study including collaborating with board members and community partners to establish two standing monthly meetings to accommodate varying schedules and time zones. Scheduling is reviewed bi-annually, at the start of fall football season and beginning of summer, to ensure continued availability. Board members are compensated \$50 per meeting and at least one representative from the youth football organization and Now! are present during all meetings. To encourage engagement during the winter holiday season, researchers sent board members a letter in the mail and a small study gift (i.e., a blanket with the study logo).

Advisory board meetings are led by the research project manager. Prior to the first meeting, researchers created a month-by-month agenda aligned with the project timeline, structured around the youth football season. For example, early agendas focused on reviewing survey measures and creating a study logo and merchandise. As the youth football season and study recruitment approached, meeting topics shifted to developing recruitment materials and strategies. All meetings begin with group member check-ins, project updates, and then move into the tasks.

After seven months of meetings, researchers conducted an informal evaluation to better understand board members' experiences. We developed four open-ended questions to gather feedback on their overall experience as board members, as well as perspectives on discussing sensitive topics. We invited them to share any additional thoughts or information they felt was important anonymously after the meeting via Qualtrics.

### ***Lessons Learned***

#### *Discussing Child Sexual Abuse*

The advisory board played an essential role in adapting research and CSA prevention education to better resonate with their community. Of greatest significance was the advisory board's advice on how to talk to their community about CSA prevention.

Board members expressed when they first received the invitation email to participate on a CSA research advisory board, they were concerned "something happened." This prompted a discussion on how study language could unintentionally evoke nervousness or anxiety. Since the partnership between organizations was not established in response to an incident, the board recommended framing the project as *proactive* initiative rather than *reactive*. They recommended messaging such as "[Organization's name] is proud to take a leadership role in the prevention of

child sexual abuse in youth sports.” Board members felt this messaging would reduce fear and instead evoke pride, encouraging community members to participate.

Board members contribute diverse lived experiences and insight, enabling them to identify potential “language barriers” between researchers and the community before they arise. These conversations served as a reminder to the researchers that people generally underestimate the prevalence of CSA and believe their communities are unaffected. Researchers studying sensitive topics note the importance of unpacking commonly used words or concepts and considering how they will be understood by the community.<sup>12</sup>

### *Recruiting a Diverse Community*

We created an information collection form to measure several pieces of demographic information including gender identity, race, ethnicity, education level, and geographic region (Table 1).

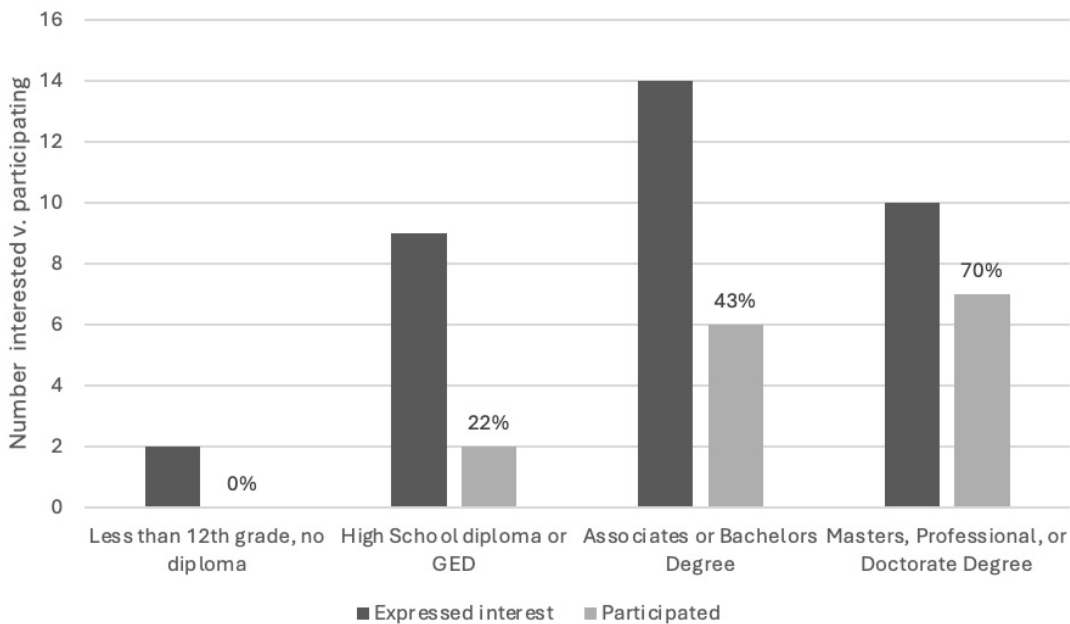
We observed gender and racial disparities between the 16 board members and the 20 individuals who opted out (Table 2). While less women overall expressed interest in joining the advisory board (which is expected for our community), all interested Black or African American women and all Hispanic women chose to join the board while 50% of White women joined. Overall, 71% (5 out of 7) of interested women opted to participate on the board. Yet, a different trend was observed for men. While 69% of White men opted to participate, only 13% Black or African American men and 33% of Hispanic men agreed. Men considered multiracial or American Indian/Alaskan Native opted out of participating. Overall, 38% of interested men joined the board.

The proportion of individuals who opted in was positively associated with educational attainment. Participation rates were 22% among those with a high school education, 43% among

those with an Associate’s or Bachelor’s degree, and 70% among those with a Master’s, professional, or doctoral degree.

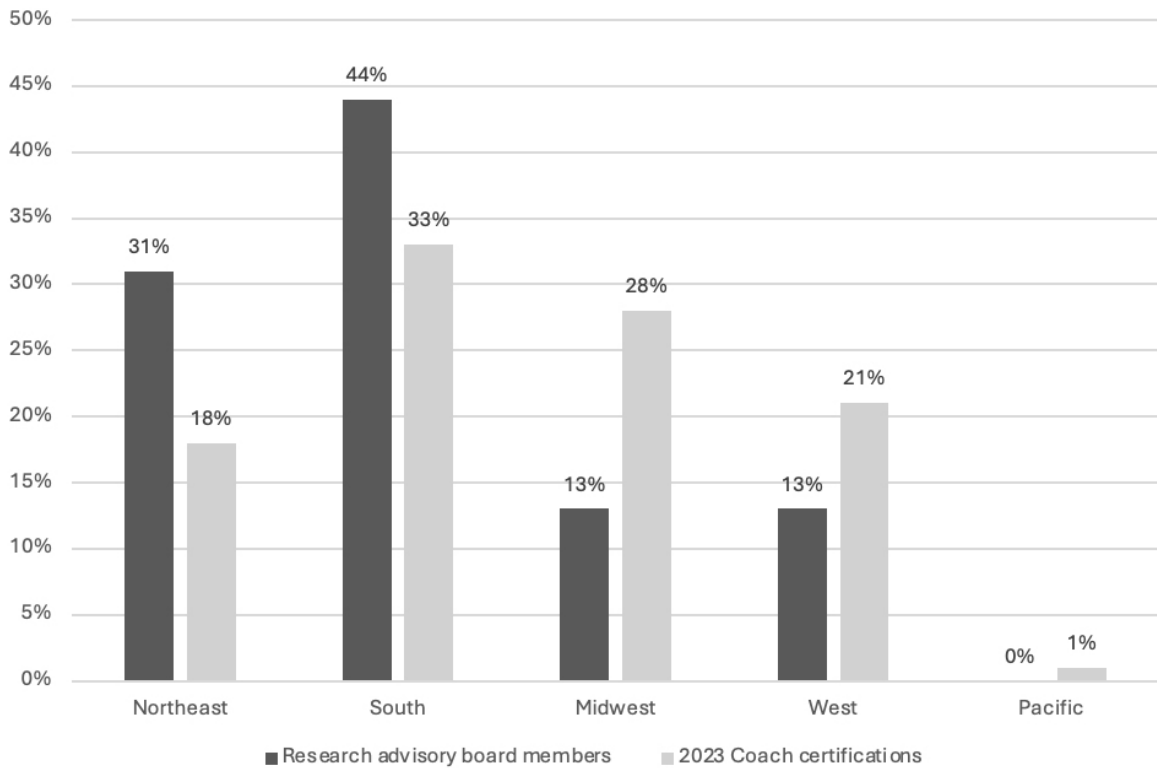
Finally, we wanted to recruit board members from different United States regions and community types. Of all (36) interested individuals, 27 (75%) resided in the Northeast (13) or the South (14), 6 interested individuals resided in the Midwest and 3 in the West. The 16 board members predominately reside in the Northeast (6) and South (6) with 2 residing in the Midwest and 2 in the West (Figure 1). Most board members live in a suburban community (8) while an equal number live in rural (4) or urban (4). One interested individual lived in a frontier community but decided against joining the board.

**Figure 1: Highest level of education for individuals who participated and expressed interest but did not participate**



To assess how geographically representative our board members are of the broader youth football community, we analyzed state-level coach certification data provided by our partner organization (Figure 2). Since all coaches are required to complete coach certification yearly, these data give an idea of coach density across the country. In 2023, 33% of coach certifications with our partner organizations occurred in the South. Therefore, it is not surprising we received strong interest from football community members in that region. However, Southern board members make up nearly half of our board – indicating slight overrepresentation relative to the number of coach certifications. The Midwest had the second highest coach certifications (28%) but are among the least represented on our board (13%). The West followed with 21% of coach certification, representing 13% of board seats. The Northeast represented only 18% of coach certifications but was the second most represented among board members (31%). Finally, coach certifications in the Pacific (i.e., Alaska and Hawaii) made up less than 1% of the total coach certifications and were not represented on the board.

**Figure 2: Regional Representation of research Advisory Board Members Relative to 2023 Coach Certifications**



### *Engaging the Youth Football Community in Sensitive Research*

After seven months of meetings, researchers held an informal, discussion-based session with board members on their experience participating on the advisory board. While they also had the opportunity to provide feedback anonymously via Qualtrics, no board members participated.

Feedback on discussing CSA was largely positive. Many acknowledged while the topic is uncomfortable to discuss, they felt “empowered” from learning more and contributing to a safer youth football environment. Others stated participating “opened their eyes” and “made them more aware” of how their behaviors or behaviors of others can enable an environment for CSA

to occur. Engaging in these conversations prompted them to think about how they can make changes as appropriate.

One board member expressed wanting more time to discuss CSA prevention and learn about the latest research. Researchers and board members decided to incorporate opportunities for discussion and learning in the last 10 – 15 minutes of meetings. Researchers now share an article or topic for conversation to board members approximately 1 – 2 weeks before meetings.

Finally, board members expressed gratitude for having the space to ask questions and talk about implementing prevention strategies in their lives. In one meeting, a coach asked advice on addressing an adult's display of aggression towards another adult. Other coaches offered recommendations, including how to talk to athletes about healthy ways to express anger. Several board members expressed support of the cultural shift happening in youth football in which health and safety is prioritized rather than traditional masculine values often associated with football.

### ***Conclusion***

More research on engaging diverse groups of men is needed to understand barriers of participating in research advisory boards. Researchers should track who opt out of participating and follow-up to determine why they opted out. While we did not have an opportunity to do this, we have a few thoughts on what may have deterred interested individuals from participating.

It is possible that people, especially Black men, felt underrepresented among the researchers and community partner staff. While two football employees attend board meetings (one male, one female), it could be beneficial to invite additional male football employees to the board to increase representation and offer participants relatable role models engaging in CSA prevention discussions. Men may also feel less comfortable than women discussing CSA, which

could also impact participation. Moving forward, we will conduct interviews with research participants to understand their experience participating in research on this topic.

We observed interested individuals with higher levels of education were more likely to participate compared to those with lower levels of education. It is important for us as researchers to understand if there was something about the advisory board and/or our behaviors that deterred them from joining.

Potential explanations for higher rates of engagement in the Northeast compared to the West and Midwest include cultural acceptance of research, cultural acceptance of discussing CSA, and/or recruitment biases. Additionally, for successful recruiting from the West and Midwest, later meeting times should be offered. Moving forward, intentional efforts to engage new board members from the Midwest and West will be prioritized.

For sustainability, researchers should check in regularly and offer an opportunity for anonymous feedback. In sensitive research, this allows researchers to understand how members are truly feeling rather than assuming or projecting their emotions. It also encourages board member satisfaction, maintains open communication, and prevents unintentional harm. While concerns for unintentional harm to board members must be acknowledged, we believe limiting community members' ability to participate can actually be harmful to the community at large. In our community, discussing and learning about CSA outweighed the minimal level of discomfort they experienced and helped them feel more confident in protecting athletes from harm.

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**Table 1: Research Advisory Board Recruitment Survey**

Question	Answer Choices
Which of the following describes your affiliation with your youth football organization? Select all that apply.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth football coach</li> <li>• Youth football parent</li> <li>• Youth football athlete</li> <li>• Youth football paid Staff</li> <li>• Youth football league leadership</li> <li>• Other</li> </ul>
How many years of experience do you have with youth football?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less than 1 year</li> <li>• 1 – 3 years</li> <li>• 4 – 6 years</li> <li>• 7 – 10 years</li> <li>• More than 10 years</li> </ul>
Please select your age range:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 15 – 26 years of age</li> <li>• 27 - 42 years of age</li> <li>• 43 - 58 years of age</li> <li>• 59 - 68 years of age</li> <li>• 69 - 77 years of age</li> <li>• 78 - 90 years of age</li> <li>• 91 years of age or above</li> </ul>
Please select your gender identity:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Female</li> <li>• Male</li> <li>• Non-binary/gender non-conforming</li> <li>• Transgender</li> <li>• Other</li> <li>• Prefer not to answer</li> </ul>
Please select your race (select all that apply):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• American Indian or Alaskan Native</li> <li>• Asian</li> <li>• Black or African American</li> <li>• White</li> <li>• Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</li> <li>• Prefer not to answer</li> </ul>
Please select your ethnicity:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hispanic or Latino</li> <li>• Not Hispanic or Latino</li> <li>• Prefer not to answer</li> </ul>
Please select the highest level of education you have completed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• less than 12th grade, no diploma</li> <li>• Regular high school diploma or GED</li> <li>• Associates or Bachelors degree</li> <li>• Masters degree, Professional, or Doctorate degree</li> <li>• Prefer not to answer</li> </ul>
Please select the choice that best represents your community:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural</li> <li>• Urban</li> <li>• Suburban</li> <li>• Frontier</li> </ul>
Please write the state in which you live:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [text]</li> </ul>

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**Table 2.** Gender and racial identities for individuals who opted-in and opted-out of research advisory board participation.

	American Indian or Alaska Native	Black or African American		Hispanic		Multiracial	White		Prefer Not to Say	Total
	Men	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Men	White Women		
# Interested Individuals	1	8	1	3	2	1	13	4	3	36
# Participating Individuals	0	1	1	1	2	0	9	2	0	16
% Participating	0%	13%	100%	33%	100%	0%	69%	50%	0%	44%

