



Unheard Stories of Doping: Insights from the TALE Project

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Aims

Co-create for knowledge and actions

- voice to athletes impacted by doping
- meaningful and pragmatic education for all athletes
- better policies and practices to manage AAFs and ADRVs



Examine the *impacts of doping* across diverse groups of athletes

Why do we care?

"In the hunt for doped athletes, little account is taken of the risk of condemning an innocent athlete. The doping hunters appear to be more concerned with catching all the guilty than with considering the risk that some test results may be false positives."

- or unintentional rule violations

Waaler et al, 2011

<https://tidsskriftet.no/en/2011/09/can-we-trust-doping-tests>

Methods

1. Literature

- Systematic scoping review (Lockett et al., 2026; doi:10.3389/fspor.2026.1651135)
- Qualitative studies (k = 12) with sanctioned athletes (n = 49)

2. Sanctioned athletes (ADRV)

- Athlete-led (peer) life-history interviews (n = 48); analytical approach: template analysis (full sample), narrative analysis (subsample of 6 interviews)
- Athlete co-researchers (n = 18) were also interviewed and trained

3. Charged but acquitted (AAF)

- Researcher-led life-history interviews (n = 10); narrative nonfiction storied approach

4. 'Clean athletes' impacted by doping (in their environment)

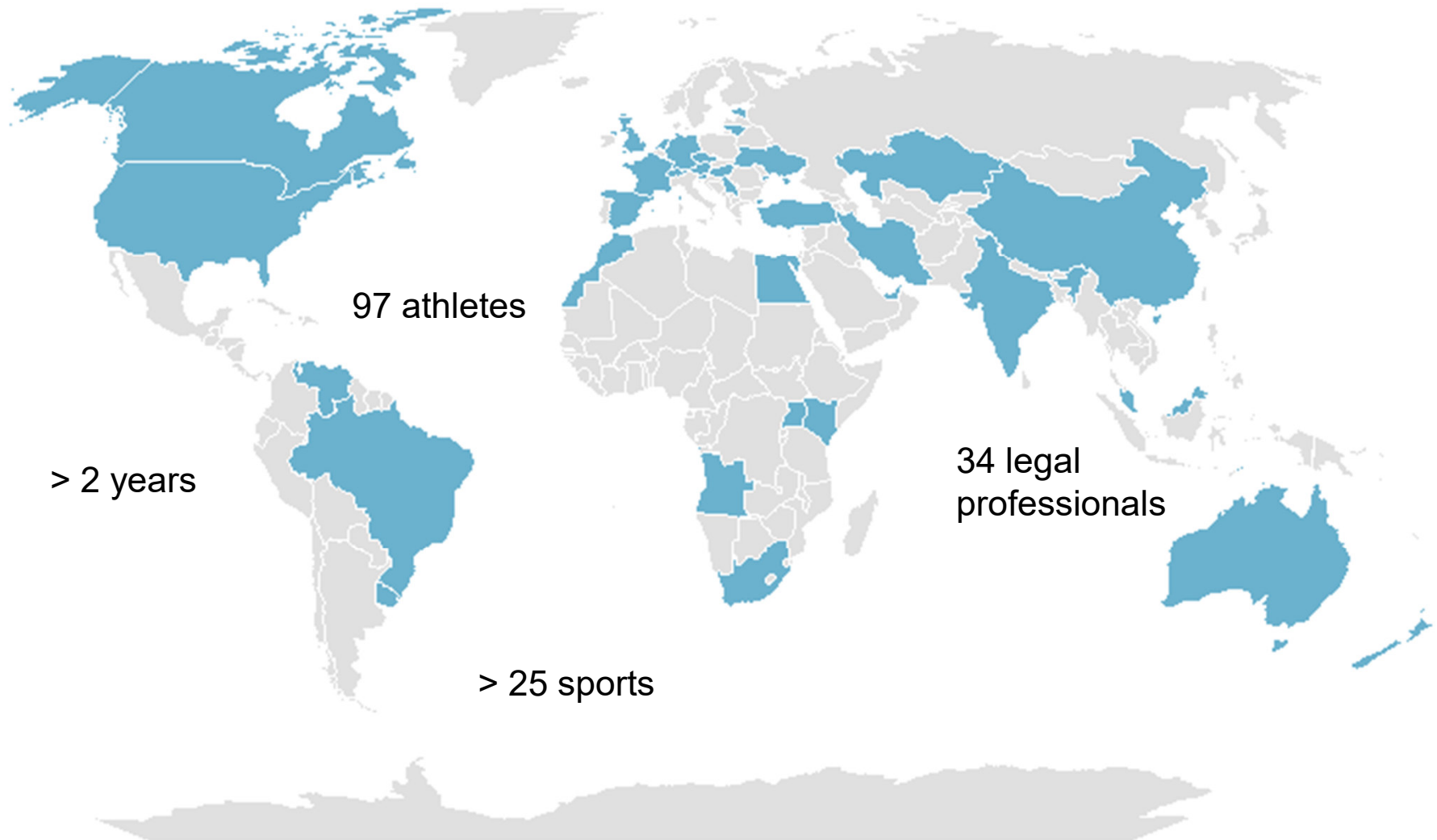
- Athlete-led semi-structured interviews (n = 6) capturing experiences; interpretive phenomenological analysis
- Athlete-led focus groups (n = 15) capturing reintegration challenges; thematic analysis

5. Legal professionals

- Defence lawyers → semi-structured interviews (n = 23), template analysis, reflexive thematic analysis
- Prosecutors / in-house legal counsel → semi-structured interviews (n = 11), template analysis



Our global reach (to date)



Findings

HUMAN COSTS OF BEING SANCTIONED

- Distress: physical, psychological and emotional
- Disruption: to sport career, athlete identity
- Stigma: labelled as cheats, social isolation
- Betrayal: institutional abandonment, feeling of injustice
- Silver lining and re-birth: stress-related growth and opportunity to do and be something else

NARRATIVE TYPES BEYOND PERFORMANCE

- Performance narrative: win at all costs
- Abuse and exploitation
- (continuing) discovery
- (In)justice

CLEARED BUT SCARRED

- Many lost out of major events (world championships / Olympics), and potential medals
- Guilty until proven innocent
- Experienced stigma and vilification in the media/social media
- Isolation and shame prevent seeking help
- Lack of organisational support
- Psychological impact and (mis)trust/disappointment in the system are in par with sanctioned athletes' experiences
- Luck played a significant role

Literature & Sanctioned athletes

Sanctioned athletes

Charged but not sanctioned



Findings (cont.)

HUMAN COSTS OF ANTI-DOPING

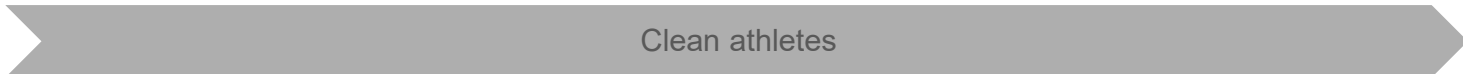
- Living in constant fear of unintentional ADRV
- Athletes are vulnerable to the system (e.g., testing flaws, their physical and social environment)
- Complex rules and system (hard to navigate)
- Education is a double-edged sword

HUMAN COST OF BEING AROUND DOPING

- The impacts are widespread, long-lasting, and painful
- The closer it is, the more it hurts
- Athletes know when something doesn't look or feel right
- The love of hard work and fairness are the essence of sport, and doping deeply undermines this

REINTEGRATION REALITIES FOR BOTH SIDES

- Being around athletes returning from sanction is challenging – torn between forgiveness and rejection
- Reception depends on the nature of the ADRV
- Reintegration as reform, not return
- Turning consequences into prevention



Clean athletes

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