



Article

Behind Closed Doors: Law, Institutions, and Culture in the Minimization of Sexualized Hazing in Men's Sports

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Abstract

Sexualized hazing in men's sports is a systematically minimized form of gender-based violence that remains underexamined in scholarly literature and legal practice. This study examines how institutions, law enforcement, and cultural norms rooted in hegemonic masculinity collectively enable and minimize sexualized hazing in high school male athletics. Drawing on a qualitative content analysis of 25 documented cases among high school male athletes in the United States (2010–2025), incidents were coded across four dimensions: severity of the hazing act, legal responses, institutional responses, and framing by legal and institutional actors. Findings reveal that 60% (15 of 25 cases) involved sodomy; yet only 3.9% of perpetrators were incarcerated. Of 103 identified perpetrators, 28% were never charged; of those formally charged, at least 43% had charges reduced or dropped. Institutional responses prioritized reputation over accountability—coaches were suspended or formally removed in 40% of cases, but players were expelled in only 24%. Cover-up behaviors, including evidence destruction and non-disclosure agreements, were documented across multiple cases. Within this sample, these findings indicate that the “hazing” label functions to minimize sexual violence, and that reform requires clearer legal standards, mandatory reporting protocols, and cultural interventions targeting hegemonic masculine norms in sport.

Keywords: gender-based violence; sexualized hazing; hegemonic masculinity; sport violence; hazing law; qualitative content analysis; institutional minimization; men's sports

1. Introduction

In 2015, three older members of a Chattanooga, Tennessee high school basketball team repeatedly assaulted and sexually abused four freshmen members over the course of a three-day tournament. During one incident, a freshman was anally raped with a pool cue requiring emergency surgery for a ruptured colon, bladder, and prostate to save his life. After the assault, the coaches did not report the incident to the victim's parents, and the perpetrators were allowed to play the next day (Barr 2016). While this case shows an extreme instance of violence, it is not solitary. In the past decade, there have been more than 40 documented sodomy hazing cases in male high school and collegiate sports (ESPN n.d.). These types of incidents are often minimized, handled poorly by institutions, and no state or federal agency tracks them. For generations, hazing has resulted in extreme psychological and physical harm, and even death (Houtz 2025).

While participation in sport generally offers physical and mental health benefits (Eather et al. 2023), athletic teams carry risks including hazing, which ranges from forced alcohol consumption to physical and sexual assault (Jeckell et al. 2018). Despite its harms,



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hazing persists as a normalized initiation ritual and a means of enforcing group loyalty. According to Hoover and Pollard (2000), approximately 1.5 million high school students are hazed each year, and 74% of college athletes will experience hazing at some point during their athletic careers. While statistics on general hazing are already limited and often outdated, research specifically focused on sexualized hazing is even more scarce. Statistics on sexual hazing are frequently mislabeled by school officials as “general hazing” to avoid the legal implications and public scrutiny associated with sexual violence, making accurate statistics elusive. Additionally, the entrenched code of silence surrounding hazing, combined with unclear and sometimes contradictory legal standards across jurisdictions, further obscures the scope of the problem and hinders systematic data collection (Stuart 2013; Jeckell et al. 2018; Henneke 2023).

In male sports, hazing rituals reinforce hegemonic masculinity—traits such as dominance, aggression, heterosexuality, and toughness (Drummond et al. 2022; Mikell 2014). These practices both affirm and police masculine hierarchies by feminizing victims and elevating aggressors, sustaining team power structures rooted in homophobia and sexism (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Sexual hazing thus normalizes sexual violence and reinforces dominant masculine ideals (Jeckell et al. 2018). This cultural normalization directly shapes legal outcomes. Despite 44 states having anti-hazing laws, prosecutions remain rare largely due to weak statutes, the secrecy of team environments, and high burdens of proof (C.Y. Lee Legal Group 2025; Henneke 2023). Many male victims remain silent, constrained by shame, fear of ostracism, and internalized gender norms discouraging acknowledgement of victimization (Patterson et al. 2026).

Despite growing awareness of sexualized hazing, legal and institutional responses remain fragmented and inconsistent. Title IX prohibits sex-based discrimination in federally funded educational programs and has been extended to cover sexual harassment and assault in school settings. However, Title IX cases are simply reactive, offering legal recourse after harm has already occurred, rather than preventing it (Stuart 2013; Nite and Nauright 2020). Unlike colleges and universities subject to federal reporting requirements under the Clery Act, high schools have no comparable national system for tracking hazing incidents, contributing to underreporting and institutional protection. Although 44 states criminalize hazing, most classify it as a misdemeanor; six states have no anti-hazing laws at all, seven exclude high schools from coverage, and only one explicitly addresses sexual penetration (Parks et al. 2015). Consent remains a central legal ambiguity, dividing courts on whether participation in hazing constitutes voluntary agreement, yet only sixteen states explicitly invalidate consent as a defense (Parks and Southerland 2013; Henneke 2023). Together, these legal gaps create structural conditions in which sexualized hazing is systematically under-prosecuted, institutionally minimized, and largely invisible to national oversight.

This research provides one of the first systematic cross-case analyses of sexualized hazing among male high school athletes, offering a replicable methodological framework and applied contributions for policy, prevention, and education within sporting organizations. This study utilizes a qualitative content analysis of 25 documented hazing cases from 2010–2025 to examine how law, institutions, and culture collectively minimize this form of gender-based violence. Findings reveal systematic patterns of legal leniency, institutional self-protection, and cultural normalization that collectively sustain the minimization of sexualized hazing in men’s sports. This research addresses the following questions:

1. How do legal actors (police, prosecutors, courts) interpret and respond to sexualized hazing incidents, and what consequences do perpetrators face?
2. How do schools, athletic departments, and coaches respond to allegations of sexualized hazing, and what patterns of minimization or deflection emerge?

3. How does the “hazing” label function to minimize sexual violence across legal and institutional contexts?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Hazing and Sexual Violence

The concept of “hazing” is not self-evident. It occupies an ambiguous space between popular culture, law, and sociology, and understanding it requires attention to all three registers. As a popular category, hazing refers broadly to any humiliating or dangerous initiation activity expected of a person joining a group, regardless of their willingness to participate ([Stop Hazing n.d.](#)). As a legal category, it is far more contested: hazing did not acquire widespread statutory recognition until the 1980s and 1990s, largely in response to high-profile deaths in fraternities and military contexts. By the early 2000s, most states had enacted some form of anti-hazing law, though these vary enormously in scope, severity, and coverage ([Parks et al. 2015](#)). As a sociological concept, hazing is best understood as a ritualized mechanism of group initiation that enforces hierarchy and produces belonging through degradation ([Bryshun and Young 1999](#)). These three registers—cultural, legal, and sociological—frequently conflict. An act treated as a minor cultural tradition may constitute a criminal offense under one state’s statute but not another’s, while sociologists may classify the same act as a form of sexual violence regardless of its legal status. The present study treats hazing as a sociological and legal hybrid, focusing on cases in which initiation practices involve sexualized acts, regardless of whether they were charged or prosecuted as hazing, assault, or sexual violence.

Sports initiations can take many forms and may produce positive effects on team sport performance and cohesion (strengthening personal bonds, clarifying roles, etc.). However, it can lead to abusive and violent situations like hazing ([INSPQ n.d.](#)). Hazing activities are meant to humiliate and degrade individuals and could include severe behaviors like rape, beatings, drinking to the point of rendering unconsciousness, engaging in group sex, or other sexually deviant or violent acts ([Yang 2020](#)). Sexual hazing occurs when the inappropriate encounter includes a sexualized verbal, nonverbal, or physical component ([Jeckell et al. 2018](#)). Sexual abuse represents a more severe form, characterized by the absence of consent and the exploitation of victims. Research on psychological effects of hazing is mixed. One study found that some college students reported perceived benefits of hazing (i.e., increased identification, accomplishment, group cohesion ([Allan et al. 2018](#))). However, a substantial body of research shows hazing victims face elevated risks of depression, anxiety, PTSD, eating disorders, and other mental health problems ([Marks et al. 2012](#); [Hillberg et al. 2011](#)). [Mullen et al. \(1996\)](#) further linked abuse to sexual difficulties, low self-esteem, and interpersonal struggles. In a sports context, abuse can lead to compulsive training, disordered eating, self-injury, heightened injury risk, and burnout ([Brackenridge 2002](#)).

The incidence of hazing in the general population has been difficult to assess as there is significant variance in definitions and reporting. Since 2018, there have been 946 reported hazing incidents. Researchers find this is just the tip of the iceberg with an estimate that 95% of students who experience hazing do not report it ([Houtz 2025](#)). As it pertains to sport, there is a profound “code of silence” surrounding abuse, which contributes to the dramatic underestimation of hazing incidents. A substantial body of literature documents the frequency with which recruits are coerced into high-risk, degrading, and abusive initiation practices, though hazing prevalence varies widely across sports and organizations ([Bryshun and Young 1999, 2007](#); [Holman and Johnson 2004](#)). While sport is often framed as a tool for physical and psychological development ([Eather et al. 2023](#)), research on the relationship between sport participation and sexual violence is mixed.

Studies report that 21% to 64.4% of student-athletes experience sexual violence, with perpetrators mostly being peer athletes (Van Niekerk and Rzygula 2010; Fasting et al. 2011, 2014; Rintaugu et al. 2014; Ahmed et al. 2018; Elendu and Umeakuka 2011). However, sexualized violence specifically related to hazing remains understudied. Some scholars argue that sport environments can facilitate sexual violence (Parent et al. 2022; Brackenridge 2002; Hartill 2016), whereas others suggest sport participation may provide a “protective” effect by fostering confidence, physical competence, and resilience (Fasting et al. 2008; Parent et al. 2016). However, membership in men’s athletic teams has been identified as a risk factor for sexual assault perpetration. Athletes embedded in male-dominated peer networks may be particularly vulnerable to adopting harmful norms, with some studies linking this risk to hypermasculinity, aggression, and rape-supportive attitudes (Murnen and Kohlman 2007; Boeringer 1999; Sawyer et al. 2002; Eime et al. 2013; Bonar et al. 2022). Yet this relationship is not uniform; scholars note that specific sport context, rather than athletic participation itself, shapes these behaviors (Murnen and Kohlman 2007; Tharp et al. 2013; Diamond et al. 2016). Still, evidence shows that college athletes report higher rates of sexual coercion than non-athletes (Young et al. 2017). Together, these mixed findings suggest that male collegiate and high school sport environments may pose elevated risks for both sexual perpetration and victimization, warranting further research.

2.2. Hegemonic Masculinity

This study is grounded theoretically in the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which provides the analytical lens through which cases, legal responses, and institutional behaviors are interpreted. Hegemonic masculinity refers to ‘the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women’ (Connell 1995, p. 77). Rather than describing a fixed personality type, the concept identifies the culturally idealized form of masculinity that legitimates gender hierarchy and subordinates both women and non-dominant masculinities; it is sustained relationally and institutionally rather than through individual attitudes alone (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In North America, dominant views of masculinity continue to reflect traditional ideals such as risk-taking, self-reliance, prioritizing work, aggression, emotional control, dominance, and control over women (Mahalik et al. 2003). Although many boys and men find these ideals unattainable or undesirable, societal pressures compel them to conform. Researchers have explored how men cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally engage with these gendered expectations, demonstrating that experiences of gender role conflict are linked to sexual aggression, coercion, dating violence, and sexist or rape-supportive attitudes (Pleck 1981; Eisler and Skidmore 1987; O’Neil 2008; Sappington 2021). Homophobia plays a key role in this process, with men going to great lengths to avoid being perceived as gay, particularly in cultures characterized by “homophobia” (Anderson 2009; Anderson et al. 2012). Consequently, homophobia functions as a mechanism to reinforce dominant heterosexual masculinity, especially in sport, where these dynamics are intensified (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Several theoretical frameworks are available for understanding these dynamics. Gender role conflict theory (O’Neil 2008) focuses on the psychological costs to individual men of failing to conform to masculine norms. Rape culture theory examines how broader cultural attitudes normalize and excuse sexual violence (Brownmiller 1975; Buchwald et al. 1993). The concept of “toxic masculinity,” while widely used in popular discourse, is a descriptive rather than analytic term, identifying harmful masculine behaviors but does not explain the structural mechanisms through which they are produced and reproduced. Hegemonic masculinity, by contrast, offers a structural account: it explains not only what harmful

masculine norms look like, but how they are institutionally sustained, how they organize hierarchies among men (not just between men and women), and why they persist even when individuals find them undesirable. This makes it the most appropriate framework for understanding sexualized hazing, which is fundamentally about the reproduction of masculine hierarchy within institutional settings and not merely about individual attitudes or behaviors.

Beyond sport, hegemonic masculinity provides a useful framework for understanding power dynamics in other social contexts. For example, it shapes bullying and resistance patterns among boys in classrooms and offers insight into the correlation between masculinities and various crimes, linking aggressive behavior to the pursuit of hegemonic status (Messerschmidt 1993). In broader sports culture, hegemonic masculinity helps explain the popularity of brutal contact sports as celebrated symbols of manhood, alongside the persistence of violence and homophobia within these environments (Messner 1990).

This dynamic is especially evident within sports teams, where younger or rookie athletes frequently occupy these subordinated positions (Yang 2020). Sport environments, particularly competitive male athletics, amplify hegemonic masculinity by intensifying expectations of toughness, dominance, and aggression, reinforcing traditional ideals of manhood within the team culture. This dynamic is exemplified in football, which Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) identify as central to school life and a key “medium for the construction of a particular kind of masculinity” that celebrates these traditional ideals. The cultural reverence for football legitimizes the dominance of this “tough and macho” masculinity, subordinating other masculinities and securing institutional consent to enforce conformity (Kessler et al. 1982). This institutionalization of hegemonic masculinity helps explain the prevalence of hazing practices in sport, which reflect and reproduce these entrenched norms. Because this system is so deeply woven into the culture of sport, institutions often respond by minimizing or reframing these incidents. If they were to acknowledge sexual violence at the core, it would challenge the very culture that sustains their programs. Because hazing functions as an institution-sustaining practice, responsibility for its persistence cannot rest solely with individual perpetrators. Institutions that benefit from the cohesion hazing produces are structurally implicated in enabling it.

2.3. Consent and Coercion

Given how hegemonic masculinity shapes and enforces strict norms of behavior in sport, social groups often rely on various mechanisms to ensure conformity within their ranks. Berger (1963) identified sources of social control as: (1) force- the use of violence or threats of violence, (2) ridicule and gossip- fear of being belittled for acting outside group expectations, (3) ostracism- the threat of actual removal from the group, (4) fraud and deception- actions to manipulate others into conformity, (5) belief systems to induce individuals to conform- like hegemonic masculinity, and (6) pressure from close social circles. In the context of sports, violence is often learned and strategically used to achieve goals and maintain status (Messner 1990). This culture of control is particularly evident in hazing, where many athletes perceive initiation rituals as the only path to acceptance within the team. These initiation rituals can build social bonds and empathy but primarily serve to maintain power hierarchies through sexualized humiliation (Stuart 2013). Men lower in the hierarchy often accept the authority of dominant figures, complying with or reinforcing norms to avoid punishment, gain acceptance, or advance their status. This dynamic perpetuates hegemonic masculinity by securing power through threats or actual violence. It also creates the illusion of consent, making participation in degrading activities appear voluntary and defensible, while ignoring the strong influence of peer pressure, coercion, and entrenched social hierarchies that undermine genuine consent.

Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony clarifies this process: the dominant class secures "active consent" through a combination of force and ideological persuasion. Victims of sexual hazing may consent because they internalize their subordination, viewing it as natural or inevitable, thereby legitimizing existing power relations. This explains why athletes comply with abusive initiation practices—their consent is shaped by broader systems of power, hierarchy, and masculine norms. The 2015 Chattanooga basketball hazing case illustrates this blend of force and consent. Despite brutal assaults, coaches, officials, and even players framed the incidents as "boys being boys" or "harmless hazing," signaling institutional consent to hegemonic masculine norms that valorize toughness and silence victims (CBS News 2016). This euphemistic framing coerces athletes into accepting abuse as a necessary rite, and the minimal legal consequences further normalize sexualized violence within sport culture. Stuart (2013) highlights the cognitive dissonance in labeling sexual violence as "hazing," since rookies are already team members, indicating hazing functions as team self-governance through humiliation, often sexualized. Hazing expert Susie Lipkin emphasizes that these acts are less about sexuality and more about power and humiliation, deliberately asserting control, maintaining the pecking order, and reinforcing masculine traits like strength, dominance, and toughness within sport culture (Fedrizzi 2023).

3. Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative content analysis of 25 sexualized hazing cases among high school male athletes from 2010–2025. Qualitative content analysis was selected because it enables a systematic evaluation of patterns across publicly available documents while remaining attentive to the framing and language used by legal and institutional actors, which is a central concern of this study. The study begins in 2010 because existing research on hazing cases is largely outdated and concentrated in earlier decades. Sexualized hazing was defined as including acts of nudity, sexualized physical contact, or sexual humiliation intended to enforce team hierarchy or conformity. Cases were identified through searches of Nexis Uni, news archives, lawsuits, and official reports from schools, athletic associations, and law enforcement agencies. Cases were selected on three criteria: (1) occurrence within the specified time frame, (2) a documented sexualized component, and (3) sufficient publicly available information to allow analysis. Official reports were analyzed to assess institutional policies and administrative responses. Full source documentation for each case, including news archives, court records, and official reports, is provided in the reference list. Table 1 summarizes the 25 cases included in the analysis.

Using NVivo 15 software, cases were systematically coded across four dimensions: (1) severity of the hazing act— including penetration (sodomy with foreign objects or digits), partial penetration (athletes were penetrated through shorts), and attempted sodomy or sexual assault (athletes were held down but no penetration occurred); (2) legal responses (arrests, charges, convictions, settlements); (3) institutional responses (suspensions, expulsions, policy changes, coach termination), and (4) the framing of hazing by legal and institutional actors (e.g., horseplay, "boys being boys"). For the framing dimension, statements were coded and attributed by the role of the speaker—law-enforcement officers, prosecutors and defense attorneys, and school or district officials—rather than being pooled. We distinguish framing advanced by these institutional and legal actors, which is the object of analysis, from journalists' own characterizations of events, which we treat as reportage; wherever possible, we rely on statements directly quoted from and attributed to named actors. Following coding, cases were analyzed for recurring patterns across all four dimensions to identify systemic trends in how sexualized hazing is normalized, addressed, or minimized. A detailed codebook was developed prior to analysis and applied consis-

tently across all 25 cases; it is reproduced in Appendix A. Each dimension was governed by explicit operational definitions and decision rules specified in advance. Severity, for example, was coded on confirmed physical acts rather than on the charge filed or the label used by actors, so that legally minimized cases were not thereby coded as less severe. Where public documentation did not confirm a more serious classification, cases were coded conservatively—assigned to a lower severity category or to “unclear”—and each coding decision was cross-checked against multiple independent public sources. Two cases (Clark and Grant) could not be coded for severity with confidence under these rules and were excluded from the severity counts. As this study involved a single coder, formal inter-rater reliability was not established; this limitation, and the steps taken to mitigate it, are discussed in the Limitations section. The 2015 Chattanooga, Tennessee case served as a central methodological benchmark, informing the coding framework’s development by illustrating how severe physical and sexual abuse, institutional minimization, and legal leniency can intersect in a single case (Barr 2016). This anchoring case enabled the study to capture how hypermasculine team hierarchies, cultural norms, and institutional dynamics intersect with legal processes that can minimize sexual harm amongst male athletes.

Table 1. The table provides a summary of all 25 cases included in the analysis.

<i>Case (State)</i>	<i>Sport/Year</i>	<i>Sev.</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Key Outcomes</i>
Bountiful (UT)	Wrestling, 2014	A	2	Plea, misd.; coach disciplined
Bronx (NY)	Track, 2013	PP	3	Plea, misd. /YO; team suspended
Browerville (MN)	Basketball, 2013	S	3	Felony conviction
Capital (WA)	Basketball, 2012	S	8	No charges; coach not renewed
Chelmsford (MA)	Football, 2014	S	3	Felony plea; victim forced to transfer
Clarion-Goldfield-Dows (IA)	Football, 2015	S	3	Charges dismissed; 3 expelled
Clark (IN)	Soccer, 2016	U	2	Unclear; 2 expelled
Conestoga (PA)	Football, 2015	S	3	Plea, summary offense; coach resigned; victim expelled
Cooper City (FL)	Baseball, 2016	S	8	No charges; coach left
De La Salle (MI)	Football, 2019	A	7	Charges dropped; students suspended
Dietrich (ID)	Football, 2015	S	3	Alford plea; 2 expelled; supt. resigned; civil
Edison (TX)	Football, 2014	A	4	Felony charge; 2 expelled; team removed
Elk Grove (CA)	Football, 2025	A	3	No charges; team suspended
Glacier (MT)	Wrestling, 2022	PP	3	No charges; coach retained 3 years
Grant (OR)	Basketball, 2012	U	4	No charges; coach resigned; restorative justice
Great Bend (KS)	Swimming, 2016	S	2	Misd. conviction; supt. resigned
Hobbs (NM)	Soccer, 2015–2018	S	0 ^(a)	No charges; coach retained; evidence destroyed
Juanita (WA)	Football, 2014	A	5	Plea, 3rd-degree assault; coaches reinstated
La Puente (CA)	Soccer, 2012	S	4	Juvenile/sealed; 5M settlement
La Vernia (TX)	Multi-sport, 2016–2017	S	13	Plea, unlawful restraint; coaches moved schools
Leechburg (PA)	Basketball, 2016	S	3	No charges; coach not renewed; later rehired
Lincoln (WI)	Basketball, 2024	A	5	Plea, misd.; not documented
Maine West (IL)	Soccer, 2012	S	6	Juvenile/sealed; civil; both coaches fired
Ooltewah (TN)	Basketball, 2015	S	3	Reduced charges; season cancelled; admin reassigned
Somerville (MA)	Soccer, 2013	S	3	Dropped (1); juv. detention (2); coach named Coach of Year

Note. S = sodomy; PP = partial penetration; A = attempted; U = unclear. N = number of perpetrators formally charged, arrested, or identified by name in official proceedings (total = 103) Misd. = misdemeanor; supt. = superintendent; juv. = juvenile; YO = youthful offender adjudication. ^a multiple perpetrators documented across cases spanning 2015–2018; no individuals publicly named.

4. Findings

Because the 25 cases were purposively selected from publicly documented incidents, the frequencies and percentages reported below describe patterns within this sample; they are not estimates of the prevalence of sexualized hazing or of the rate at which legal and institutional actors respond to it in any given way. They are presented to characterize the documented cases analyzed here rather than to generalize to the broader universe of sexualized hazing incidents, many of which are never reported, recorded, or litigated. Percentages are reported alongside raw counts throughout to keep the size of the underlying sample in view.

4.1. Severity of the Hazing Acts

Across the 25 cases analyzed, the most prevalent form of sexualized hazing involved anal penetration with digits or foreign objects, occurring in 60% of cases (15 of 25). Foreign objects used included pool cues (Ooltewah), a coat hanger (Dietrich), broomsticks (Chelmsford, Conestoga, Somerville), a javelin handle (La Puente), and multiple implements including a flashlight, shampoo bottle, and CO₂ tank threaded end (La Vernia) (CBS News 2016; Kazdin 2016; Melanson 2015; New York Post 2019; CBS Boston 2013; CBS Los Angeles 2013; Mettler 2017). An additional two cases (8%) involved partial penetration, sexualized acts involving penetration through clothing (Bronx, Glacier) (ABC30 n.d.; MTN News 2023). Six cases (24%) involved attempted sexual assault in which the victims were physically restrained and subjected to sexualized contact without confirmed penetration. Two cases (8%) could not be coded with confidence due to insufficient or inaccessible public documentation and are excluded from the severity counts.

Physical harm was severe in multiple cases. In four cases (16%) victims required emergency medical treatment or hospitalization. At least one victim (La Puente) was hospitalized for internal bleeding (Claypool Law Firm 2018). A victim in the Ooltewah case required emergency surgery to repair a ruptured colon and bladder after the tip of a pool cue broke off inside him (Washington Post 2016). The Dietrich victim also sustained internal injuries requiring medical intervention, and the Somerville victim sought emergency room care at the advice of a police detective following broomstick penetration (Kazdin 2016; Lopes v. City of Somerville 2018 (Lopez v. City of Somerville; 2018; U.S. Dist. LEXIS 186419 (D. Mass. Oct. 31, 2018))).

Repeated victimization and institutionalized patterns of hazing were documented in several cases. In La Vernia, one basketball player was assaulted more than 30 times over five months (KSAT 2018); in Hobbs, the pattern spanned at least three years (KRQE 2018); and at La Puente, a ritualized assault called the “pole tradition” had reportedly continued across multiple team cohorts (Claypool Law Firm 2018). In at least two cases (Hobbs; La Vernia), prior victims became perpetrators in subsequent seasons, suggesting the intergenerational transmission of hazing culture within programs (KFOX 2018).

4.2. Legal Responses

Legal accountability for perpetrators was minimal across the dataset. Of the 103 identified perpetrators—individuals formally charged, arrested, or identified by name in official disciplinary or legal proceedings—29 (28%) were never charged with any criminal offense. This included all eight identified perpetrators in Capital, Washington (Associated Press 2012), all eight in Cooper City, Florida (Seiden 2016), and full groups in Elk Grove (Pendleton Gift 2025), Glacier (Szpaller 2023), Grant (Bernstein 2012), and Leechburg (CBS Pittsburgh 2016). In Cooper City, the Altamonte Springs police recommended charges for all eight players and referred the case to the state attorney’s office; no charges were ultimately filed (Seiden 2016). In Capital, the primary victim’s family chose not to pursue charges,

and no institutional pressure existed to override that decision ([Associated Press 2012](#)). These composite figures warrant a caveat. Rates such as the proportion never charged, the proportion of charges reduced or dropped, and the incarceration rate aggregate perpetrators whose cases arose under different state statutes, in juvenile and adult forums, and under varying evidentiary and plea circumstances. They therefore summarize outcomes across heterogeneous legal contexts and should be read as descriptive of this sample rather than as precise measures of how any single legal system treats sexualized hazing (see [Section 5](#) on jurisdictional variation).

Of the 74 perpetrators who were formally charged, at least 32 (43%) had charges reduced or dropped based on publicly available records—a conservative floor, as sealed juvenile records for approximately 20 additional perpetrators preclude a precise overall figure. Among confirmed dismissals: all seven De La Salle defendants had dropped charges after completing an anti-bullying diversion program ([McLaughlin 2012](#)); all three Clarion-Goldfield-Dows defendants had charges dismissed ([Peng 2015](#)); and the lead Somerville defendant had charges quietly dropped approximately 20 months after filing ([O’Laughlin 2015](#)). Reductions were often substantial. Three Conestoga perpetrators pleaded guilty to summary harassment—a non-criminal summary offense—down from initial assault charges ([Benshoff 2017](#)). Six La Vernia perpetrators pleaded no contest to unlawful restraint. A seventh pleaded to misdemeanor hazing—all substantially below the original second-degree felony sexual assault charges ([Messer 2019a, 2019b](#)). The two 16-year-old Ooltewah perpetrators were adjudicated guilty of aggravated assault rather than their original aggravated rape charge ([T. Ellis 2016](#)). Across all perpetrators whose initial charges were felony-level, more than 80% had that felony charge reduced or dismissed.

Only four of the 103 identified perpetrators—3.9%—are confirmed to have served any period of incarceration: Seth Kellen (Browerville) received 30 days in jail following his felony guilty plea ([Ryan Garry LLC n.d.](#)); the 17-year-old Ooltewah perpetrator served a period of juvenile detention ([T. Ellis 2016](#)); and two juvenile perpetrators in Somerville each served approximately 13 months in juvenile detention ([Hohler 2017](#)). Across the remaining 99 perpetrators, outcomes ranged from probation and community service to no charges or sealed records.

Legal minimization was documented in the framing used by law enforcement and legal actors. In Ooltewah, a responding detective described the pool cue assault as “something stupid that kids do” and stated it “wasn’t sexual in nature”—statements the Chattanooga Police Chief publicly rebuked, declaring: “The allegations constitute rape. Not simply hazing, or bullying, or teasing, or horseplay. Rape” ([CBS News 2016](#)). In Dietrich, the Idaho Attorney General’s office characterized the coat hanger assault as “not a sex crime,” facilitating charge reduction from forcible sexual penetration to injury to a child ([Kazdin 2016; Boise Weekly 2016](#)). In Browerville, the defense attorney described digital penetration as “horseplay,” while the county attorney explicitly responded that “hazing is not a defense” ([Ryan Garry LLC n.d.](#)). In Edison, district administrators described a felony attempted assault as “horseplay that quickly got out of hand”—a framing the victim’s parent directly disputed ([Smith 2014](#)).

4.3. Institutional Responses

Institutional responses were inconsistent and, in most cases, insufficient relative to documented harm. Coaches were suspended or formally removed in 40% of cases (10 of 25); players were expelled from school in 24% of cases (6 of 25) and suspended from school in 24% of cases (6 of 25). Team removal from play or season cancellation occurred in 28% of cases (7 of 25). The gap between coach consequences (40%) and player expulsions (24%) reflects a broader pattern: institutions were more likely to take visible action at

the coaching level than to formally expel student perpetrators, whose families frequently contested discipline.

In several cases, institutional responses went beyond inaction to constitute active protection of perpetrators or reward of negligent adults. In Somerville, head coach George Scarpelli faced no disciplinary action following a broomstick rape at a school-sponsored soccer camp. That same fall, he led the team to the Eastern Massachusetts Division 1 championship, was named Boston Globe Coach of the Year, and received an honorary degree at school commencement—institutional rewards conferred within months of the assault (Lopes v. City of Somerville 2018). In Juanita, the athletic director acknowledged knowing about the broomstick assault but said “I didn’t think it was that serious” (Martinell 2015). In Hobbs, the head coach was present when a video of a sexual assault was shown to the team, ordered the video deleted, and told players the footage would put the program in jeopardy (KRQE 2018). In La Vernia, the athletic director’s response to initial reports of ongoing assault was a team locker-room talk, after which the abuse continued and escalated (Barajas 2017). In Dietrich, the school district seized evidence before contacting law enforcement, delaying the criminal investigation; district officials also denied knowledge of months of racial abuse that witnesses reported had occurred openly in front of coaches (Richert 2017).

Post-assault institutional failures affecting victims were documented across multiple cases. The Somerville victim was subjected to taunting with a broomstick by fans at away games throughout his high school career; the athletic director acknowledged four years of ongoing harassment but said there was “nothing to investigate” because she could not identify specific individuals in the crowd (Lopes v. City of Somerville 2018). The Chelmsford victim was harassed after reporting—including by some staff—and was ultimately forced to transfer schools (Thomas v. Town of Chelmsford 2017). One perpetrator was later honored with a school sportsmanship award following his felony guilty plea. The Glacier victim’s family was denied a requested school transfer after reporting, and the victim’s father was barred from school property (Sagner 2025). Conestoga High School expelled the victim—not the perpetrators—based on an unrelated incident, then sued the victim for \$10,000 in tuition, a lawsuit the school lost (Bennett 2017).

4.4. Framing and Minimization of Harm

Across legal, institutional, and community contexts, a consistent pattern emerged in which hazing was framed in language minimizing its sexual nature and severity. These framing statements originate with different types of actors—law-enforcement officers, attorneys, and school and district officials—who occupy distinct institutional positions and speak with different purposes; we therefore attribute each to its source rather than treating them as a single undifferentiated discourse. The term “horseplay” appeared in legal or institutional statements across multiple cases, including Browerville, Edison, and Great Bend (Ryan Garry LLC n.d.; Smith 2014; KSN News 2016). In Conestoga, the school district characterized a years-long culture of broomstick assault as “back slapping, horseplay and obscene behaviors” (ESPN 2017; New York Post 2019). In La Vernia, defense attorneys successfully argued for “unlawful restraint” charges in place of sexual assault—a reframing the district attorney had explicitly resisted, stating publicly: “This is not hazing. This is rape” (Daily Beast 2017). In Juanita, defense counsel characterized the assault as a “football hazing case” and argued it was “portrayed as something it’s not,” while the school district’s public statement to parents described it as “an exception to the Juanita school way” (KOMO News 2015).

The misdemeanor treatment rate provides a quantitative measure of systemic minimization: 35% of identified perpetrators (36 of 103) had felony-level acts resulting in misdemeanor-or-below outcomes, including cases where no charges were filed, charges

were reduced to misdemeanor, or cases were diverted without conviction. In Great Bend, two perpetrators were convicted of Class B misdemeanor battery for acts the county sheriff described as supporting criminal sodomy charges ([KSN News 2016](#)). In Bountiful, a perpetrator received a no-contest to misdemeanor sexual battery with case dismissal after one year and a fine ([Lockhart 2015](#)).

Active obstruction of accountability was documented in multiple cases. Institutional actors destroyed or suppressed evidence in Hobbs (coach-ordered video deletion), Dietrich (school seized evidence before contacting police), and Juanita (school district refused to provide police with witness interview documents, requiring a search warrant) ([KRQE 2018](#); [Kazdin 2016](#); [KOMO News 2015](#)). In De La Salle, 15 parents of accused players blocked police interviews, severely hampering the investigation ([Detroit News 2019](#)). In La Vernia, the school district violated a mandatory 48-hour Texas child abuse reporting law ([Daily Beast 2017](#)). In three cases—La Puente (4.5 million), Dietrich (10 million), and Conestoga—civil suits were resolved through sealed settlements, limiting public accountability through civil proceedings as well ([Claypool Law Firm 2018](#); [Kazdin 2016](#), [ESPN 2017](#)).

5. Discussion

Taken together, the findings reveal three interconnected patterns through which sexualized hazing is systematically minimized: legal fragmentation, institutional self-protection, and cultural normalization rooted in hegemonic masculinity. These patterns do not operate independently; they reinforce one another, creating a system in which severe sexual violence is routinely reframed, redirected, and ultimately resolved without meaningful accountability.

One interpretive caveat frames the analysis that follows. This study documents what occurred across cases—how acts were charged, adjudicated, disciplined, and described—but it draws on publicly available records rather than direct access to the reasoning of prosecutors, judges, administrators, or law enforcement officers. It can therefore establish that minimization occurred and can characterize the language actors used, but it cannot directly observe the motivations behind any particular charging, plea, or disciplinary decision. Where we relate these outcomes to cultural frameworks such as hegemonic masculinity, we do so as interpretive inferences that are consistent with the documented patterns and framing language, not as demonstrated causal mechanisms. Establishing motivation directly would require interviews with legal and institutional decision-makers, which we identify below as a priority for future research.

With respect to Research Question 1, the data reveal significant variation in how legal actors charged, prosecuted, and adjudicated identical acts across jurisdictions. The same conduct—sodomy with a foreign object, forcible penetration—was charged as a felony in some states and a misdemeanor in others, and in 28% of cases, no charges were filed against identified perpetrators despite documented evidence of harm. Of the 74 perpetrators who were formally charged, at least 43% had charges reduced or dropped, as sealed juvenile records for approximately 20 additional perpetrators preclude a precise overall figure. This two-stage accountability failure reflects not random variation but a structural pattern in which the “hazing” label consistently functions as a legal mitigant. The systematic downward trajectory of charges from aggravated rape to aggravated assault, from sexual assault to unlawful restraint, from felony to misdemeanor is consistent with legal actors drawing on cultural frameworks that treat sexualized hazing as categorically less serious than equivalent acts.

Legal minimization was explicit in the framing used by law enforcement actors across cases. A responding detective in Ooltewah described a pool cue penetration assault as “something stupid that kids do” and stated it “wasn’t sexual in nature”; the Chattanooga

Police Chief publicly rebuked these characterizations, declaring that “the allegations constitute rape” (CBS News 2016). The Idaho Attorney General’s office characterized a coat hanger assault as “not a sex crime,” directly facilitating charge reduction from forcible sexual penetration to injury to a child (Kazdin 2016; Boise Weekly 2016). These framing choices were not merely rhetorical—they had material consequences for charging decisions, plea outcomes, and the degree of accountability perpetrators ultimately faced. The relationship between hazing and assault charges also reveals prosecutorial inconsistency: across cases, the choice of charge category appears, in these cases, to track prosecutorial discretion and evidentiary posture at least as closely as the severity of the acts themselves, reflecting the absence of a coherent national framework for treating sexualized hazing as a distinct and serious category of harm.

The consequences perpetrators faced further illustrate this pattern of legal fragmentation. The most common outcome for perpetrators was probation, community service, fines, and withheld judgment—outcomes that carried no lasting record and no sex offender registration. Only 3.9% of identified perpetrators served any period of incarceration. In Bountiful, a perpetrator received a no-contest plea to misdemeanor sexual battery, dismissed after one year with a \$100 fine. In Great Bend, two perpetrators were convicted of misdemeanor battery for acts the county sheriff described as supporting criminal sodomy charges. The 35% misdemeanor treatment rate—perpetrators whose felony-level acts resulted in misdemeanor-or-below outcomes—provides a quantitative measure of how systematically the “hazing” label shapes legal consequences. Taken alongside the 28% who were never charged, these findings suggest that the label, rather than the acts it describes, may play a substantial role in shaping outcomes within this sample. In many of these cases the pattern does not appear attributable to evidentiary weakness alone; injuries were documented, perpetrators were identified, and evidence was substantial. The minimization occurred at the level of prosecutorial discretion, judicial decision-making, and plea negotiation—all sites where cultural norms may shape results alongside legal standards (Henneke 2023).

The magnitude of this legal minimization becomes clearest when charged outcomes are compared against the statutory exposure the underlying acts would ordinarily carry. In Ooltewah, the act adjudicated against the older perpetrator—penetration causing a ruptured colon and bladder—falls within Tennessee’s aggravated rape statute, a Class A felony carrying a 25-to-40-year sentence for an adult offender, of which 85% must be served (Tenn. Code Ann. secs. 39-13-502, 40-35-112). The two younger perpetrators were instead adjudicated for aggravated assault in juvenile proceedings and served periods of juvenile detention measured in months. In La Vernia, the seven perpetrators whose dispositions are known pleaded to unlawful restraint or misdemeanor hazing; the sexual-assault charges originally filed under Texas Penal Code sec. 22.011 are second-degree felonies punishable by two to twenty years’ imprisonment and lifetime sex-offender registration (Tex. Penal Code secs. 22.011, 12.33). None received a custodial sentence. In Dietrich, an act charged as forcible penetration by use of a foreign object—an offense punishable by up to life imprisonment under Idaho law at the time (Idaho Code sec. 18-6608)—was reduced via an Alford plea to felony injury to a child, resulting in probation, community service, and a withheld judgment with no incarceration. Even allowing for the juvenile status of many perpetrators and for genuine differences in evidentiary posture, the distance between the sentencing exposure attached to sexual violence charges and the outcomes actually imposed is substantial, and it consistently runs in the direction of leniency.

With respect to Research Question 2, institutional responses were inconsistent and, in most cases, insufficiently related to documented harm. Coaches were suspended or formally removed in 40% of cases, while players faced expulsion in 24% and suspension

from school in 24%. The relative frequency of adult discipline compared with student expulsion reflects an institutional logic that frames hazing as a failure of adult supervision rather than a crime committed by athletes, which is a framing that contains reputational damage while deflecting from the possibility that hazing is a product of team culture itself. In several cases, institutional responses went beyond inaction to constitute active obstruction: evidence was destroyed on coach orders in Hobbs, seized by the school before law enforcement contact in Dietrich, and withheld from police pending a search warrant in Juanita. In Somerville, the head coach faced no disciplinary action following the assault, was named Boston Globe Coach of the Year that same fall and received an honorary degree at school commencement—not passive failure, but active institutional reward for a negligent adult within months of a documented rape.

Civil litigation has served as an alternative accountability mechanism in some cases but with significant limitations. The cases of La Puente (\$4.5 million), Dietrich (\$10 million), and Conestoga resulted in civil settlements, all of which were sealed, limiting public accountability through civil proceedings as well. Barriers to civil recovery are substantial: proving school negligence is difficult when institutions deny prior knowledge of hazing; documenting psychological harm requires expert testimony that defendants routinely dispute; and victims' public profiles may be scrutinized for evidence inconsistent with claimed emotional injury—a dynamic that further deters reporting (C. K. Ellis 2018; Liang 2024).

Coach conduct was central to this pattern of institutional minimization. Across cases, a spectrum of coach complicity emerged ranging from active cover-up to passive tolerance to explicit minimization. Coaches in Hobbs ordered video evidence deleted and warned players the footage would put the team in jeopardy; the La Vernia athletic director responded to initial reports of ongoing assault with a locker-room talk, after which the abuse continued and escalated; the Juanita athletic director acknowledged knowing about the assault but said he “didn’t think it serious enough to involve police”. The minimizing language used by coaches and administrators—“horseplay” and “boys being boys”—reflects the hegemonic masculine norms examined in the literature: these are not merely rhetorical choices but expressions of an institutional culture that treats toughness, silence, and endurance as masculine virtues and frames disclosure as a threat to team cohesion (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Drummond et al. 2022). When coaches minimize or ignore sexualized hazing, they may be doing more than failing in a duty of care; such responses are also consistent with the reproduction of the hierarchical masculine norms that make hazing possible. Institutions that benefit from the cohesion and identity that hazing produces are structurally implicated in enabling its continuation.

With respect to Research Question 3, the data reveal how the “hazing” label operates not merely as a descriptive category but as a mechanism through which sexual violence is rendered less legible, less prosecutable, and less consequential. In legal contexts, the label enables prosecutorial discretion that systematically converts felony-level acts into misdemeanor outcomes. In institutional contexts, it allows administrators to frame perpetrators as students engaged in “team tradition” rather than criminal actors. The framing language documented across cases—“horseplay”, “boys being boys”, “an exception to the school way”—reflects a shared cultural logic rooted in hegemonic masculinity that treats sexualized hazing as categorically different from equivalent acts of sexual violence committed outside the sports context (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Henneke 2023). This label-driven minimization is self-reinforcing: the label enables impunity, impunity normalizes the conduct, and normalization perpetuates the label as a viable legal and institutional defense.

5.1. Jurisdictional Variation and Legal Opportunity Structures

Because the cases in this sample arise in different states, the legal outcomes they produced are not strictly comparable, and the cross-case patterns reported above must be read with that qualification in view. The relevant statutory environments vary along several dimensions that directly condition what charges are available to a prosecutor. States differ in whether an anti-hazing statute exists at all, whether it reaches high schools as opposed to only postsecondary institutions, and whether hazing is graded as a misdemeanor or a felony; by one accounting, forty-four states criminalize hazing but most classify it only as a misdemeanor, six have no anti-hazing law, seven exclude high schools, and only one explicitly addresses sexual penetration (Parks et al. 2015). They differ further in whether consent is statutorily foreclosed as a defense—only sixteen states invalidate it (Parks and Southerland 2013; Henneke 2023)—and in how juvenile jurisdiction, transfer to adult court, and sex-offender registration apply to adolescent defendants. As a result, identical conduct may expose a perpetrator to a felony sexual-offense charge in one state and, in another, to no charge that squarely fits the act. When outcomes are compared across cases, then, part of what is being observed is variation in the legal tools available to charging authorities, not only variation in how those authorities chose to use them. This qualification does not dissolve the paper’s argument; rather, it locates part of that argument at the level of statutory design. The absence of a uniform framework for classifying and grading sexualized hazing is itself one of the structural conditions that permits the “hazing” label to operate as a mitigating device, and it is a condition that a systematic, state-by-state comparative analysis—identified below as a priority for future research—is well positioned to map.

Table 2 summarizes the anti-hazing statutory context for the twenty states represented in the sample, drawing on ESPN Outside the Lines’ state-by-state compilation for the existence and baseline grade of hazing statutes (ESPN n.d.) and on StopHazing’s (2022) summary of consent provisions. The variation is substantial: two sample states (Montana; New Mexico) had no anti-hazing statute at all; among those that did, baseline grades and consent defenses diverged sharply. This cross-state heterogeneity is precisely why the aggregate legal outcomes reported above must be read as descriptive of this sample rather than as a single national rate of treatment.

Table 2. Anti-Hazing Statutory Context for States Represented in the Sample.

State	Cases (<i>n</i>)	Anti-Hazing Statute	Baseline Grade	Consent Barred
California	2	Yes	Unspecified	No
Florida	1	Yes	Unspecified	Yes
Idaho	1	Yes	Misdemeanor	No
Illinois	1	Yes	Unspecified	No
Indiana	1	Yes	Unspecified	Yes
Iowa	1	Yes	Misdemeanor	Yes
Kansas	1	Yes	Misdemeanor	No
Massachusetts	2	Yes	Misdemeanor	Yes
Michigan	1	Yes	Unspecified	Yes
Minnesota	1	Yes	Unspecified	No

Table 2. *Cont.*

State	Cases (<i>n</i>)	Anti-Hazing Statute	Baseline Grade	Consent Barred
Montana	1	No	N/A	N/A
New Mexico	1	No	N/A	N/A
New York	1	Yes	Misdemeanor	No
Oregon	1	Yes	Unspecified	Yes
Pennsylvania	2	Yes	Misdemeanor	Yes
Tennessee	1	Yes	Unspecified	No
Texas	2	Yes	Misdemeanor	Yes
Utah	1	Yes	Misdemeanor	Yes
Washington	2	Yes	Misdemeanor	Yes
Wisconsin	1	Yes	Unspecified	Yes

Note. *n* = number of cases in the analytic sample arising in that state (total = 25). “Anti-hazing statute” and “Baseline grade” follow ESPN Outside the Lines’ state-by-state compilation (ESPN n.d.); “Unspecified” means the ESPN table recorded that the statute did not clearly designate a single grade. “N/A” in the Baseline grade and Consent barred columns indicates that the state had no anti-hazing statute. “Consent barred” indicates whether the state’s anti-hazing statute, as summarized by StopHazing (2022), expressly invalidates or renders irrelevant victim consent as a defense. Statutory frameworks change over time; this table is offered as an illustrative snapshot of legal opportunity structures across the sample jurisdictions, not as a comprehensive or current codebook of state law. Baseline grades may escalate for serious bodily injury or death in some jurisdictions. None of the sample states was the single state that, at the time of Parks et al. (2015) and the ESPN compilation, explicitly named sexual penetration in its hazing statute (Nebraska). Pennsylvania’s Timothy J. Piazza Anti-Hazing Law (2018) (Timothy J. Piazza Antihazing Law, Act of Oct. 19, 2018, P.L. 535, No. 80; 2018) subsequently expanded secondary-school coverage; several cases in this sample predate that expansion. Notably, two of the no-charge case clusters in the sample—Glacier (Montana) and Hobbs (New Mexico)—arose in states that ESPN recorded as having no anti-hazing statute, illustrating how the absence of a dedicated charging tool can itself structure outcomes independent of prosecutorial culture.

5.2. Alternative and Complementary Explanations

Hegemonic masculinity is not the only framework capable of explaining the patterns documented here, and it would be a mistake to treat it as though it were. Several conventional legal and institutional mechanisms plausibly account for much of the leniency observed. Charge reductions and non-custodial dispositions are routine features of the American criminal process irrespective of offense type: the large majority of cases resolve through plea bargaining, and juvenile proceedings in particular are structured around rehabilitation, diversion, and confidentiality rather than incarceration. Many perpetrators in this sample were minors, and the withheld judgments, diversion programs, and sealed adjudications observed are ordinary juvenile-justice outcomes rather than anomalies requiring cultural explanation. Prosecutorial discretion, evidentiary limitations in cases turning on adolescent testimony, and variation in state statutes further shape charging and sentencing in ways that have nothing specifically to do with sport or masculinity. On the institutional side, school and district responses are plausibly driven by liability exposure, insurance and risk-management considerations, reputational protection, and bureaucratic incentives to contain controversy—motives that would operate regardless of the gendered content of the underlying incident.

These explanations are not rivals to be dismissed but mechanisms through which outcomes are actually produced, and the present data cannot adjudicate their relative weight. What a hegemonic-masculinity lens contributes is not a denial of these mechanisms but an account of their directionality. Discretion, plea bargaining, and risk management are general processes that could in principle cut in either direction; the pattern in these cases is that they resolve with striking consistency toward reframing penetrative sexual assault as non-sexual “horseplay,” “boys being boys,” or “hazing,” and toward protecting the adults

and programs implicated. The recurrent, documented framing language, including instances in which law-enforcement leadership explicitly repudiated the sexual-minimization framing advanced by other actors, suggests that cultural understandings of masculinity and sport may inform how discretion is exercised, not that they displace the legal machinery through which it operates. On this reading, hegemonic masculinity is best understood as one interpretive lens that complements, rather than competes with, structural-legal and organizational explanations; disentangling their relative contributions is a task for the interview-based research proposed below.

Collectively, these findings suggest that the minimization of sexualized hazing is not an incidental feature of an otherwise functional system, but a structural outcome produced by the convergence of fragmented law, institutional self-interest, and hegemonic masculine culture. Reform efforts that address only one dimension of this system, like tightening statutes without reforming institutional reporting obligations, or mandating coach training without addressing prosecutorial norms, are unlikely to produce meaningful changes. The findings underscore the need for coordinated intervention across legal, institutional, and cultural domains.

6. Limitations

Multiple limitations exist both empirically and methodologically in completing this study. From a methodological standpoint, both availability and reporting bias persist. Not all sexualized hazing cases are publicly reported, and the cases that are reported tend to be the most extreme or the most legally contentious. This likely biases the sample towards extreme incidents, limiting the study's generalizability to the broader landscape of hazing behaviors. Because inclusion required sufficient public documentation, the sampling frame conditions on visibility, and visibility is not randomly distributed. Cases are far more likely to enter the public record when they involve severe injury, litigation, criminal charges, or community conflict; incidents resolved quietly are systematically less likely to appear. This has two implications that limit inference in opposite directions. First, cases in which institutions responded promptly and appropriately, without litigation or media attention, are likely underrepresented, meaning the sample may overstate the prevalence of institutional failure relative to the full universe of incidents. Second, incidents that were successfully suppressed—through non-disclosure, non-reporting, or informal resolution—are also absent, meaning the sample may simultaneously understate the extent of concealment. The cases analyzed here should therefore be understood as the visible, contested, and documented segment of a larger and largely hidden phenomenon, not as a representative cross-section of it. Accordingly, the study can characterize how sexualized hazing was handled in these documented cases and identify recurring patterns among them, but it cannot establish what a 'typical' legal or institutional response to sexualized hazing looks like, and its frequencies should not be read as base rates. Additionally, the study relies on secondary data, requiring the interpretation of events that are already filtered through journalists' framing, legal language, and institutional statements. Because framing evidence is drawn largely from media reports, the possibility that news outlets themselves shape how incidents are described cannot be excluded; we mitigate but do not eliminate this concern by privileging statements directly quoted from, and attributed to, named legal and institutional actors. These sources may downplay, sanitize, or mislabel acts, directly affecting coding and categorization. The lack of standardized legal terminology across jurisdictions further complicates analysis. Terms such as "sexual assault," "hazing," or "forcible penetration" vary not only by state but also by prosecutor, police department, and media outlet. This inconsistency can lead to classification challenges and may obscure meaningful comparisons. A detailed codebook was developed prior to analysis to ensure

consistent application of codes across all 25 cases; as this study involved a single coder, inter-rater reliability was not established. The purposive sample of 25 cases is small, and percentages reported throughout should be interpreted as descriptive patterns within this dataset rather than population-level estimates.

Empirically, differences in state laws and prosecutorial discretion significantly affect case outcomes. The same behavior might constitute a felony in one state but only a misdemeanor in another, making cross-case comparisons empirically messy. Institutional responses also vary widely in transparency; some schools release full investigation reports, while others disclose almost nothing. This produces uneven data depth across cases and creates substantial gaps in the evidentiary records. Furthermore, cases often involve multiple perpetrators, making it difficult to determine how many individuals were disciplined, charged, or convicted, particularly when plea deals are sealed or juvenile records are protected. The involvement of minors adds an additional layer of opacity because juvenile proceedings are often closed to the public, limiting access to reliable documentation.

7. Conclusions

This study provides one of the first systematic cross-case analyses of sexualized hazing in high school male sports, examining how law, institutions, and culture collectively minimize a form of gender-based violence that is severe, recurring, and chronically under-addressed. Across 25 cases involving 103 identified perpetrators, the findings reveal that the “hazing” label functions not merely as a descriptive category but as a mechanism through which sexual violence is rendered less legible, less prosecutable, and less consequential. Across these cases, legal fragmentation, institutional self-protection, and hegemonic masculine norms appear to operate together, coinciding with outcomes in which 28% of perpetrators were never charged, at least 43% of those formally charged had charges reduced or dropped, and only 3.9% served any period of incarceration for acts that, in other contexts, would routinely result in prison sentences.

These patterns are not the product of individual failures. They reflect structural conditions: the absence of a coherent national framework for classifying and prosecuting sexualized hazing; institutional incentive structures that reward reputation protection over victim accountability; and a cultural logic rooted in hegemonic masculinity that treats silence, endurance, and loyalty to team hierarchy as masculine virtues. A note on the status of these recommendations is warranted. The present study documents patterns of minimization and inconsistent accountability across cases; it does not evaluate whether specific interventions would reduce sexualized hazing or improve institutional and legal responses. The proposals that follow are therefore best understood in two tiers. The first tier follows relatively directly from the findings: because the “hazing” label was repeatedly associated with charge reduction and institutional deflection, measures that reduce the classificatory ambiguity the label exploits—clearer statutory definitions, explicit coverage of sexual penetration, and consistent grading—address a mechanism the data documents. The second tier comprises broader, literature-motivated proposals—mandatory external reporting, uniform disciplinary standards, funding-linked sanctions, and cultural and educational programming—whose merits are reasoned and normative rather than empirically demonstrated here. We present them as recommendations warranting evaluation, not as interventions this study has shown to be effective. Meaningful reform must address all three dimensions simultaneously. At the legal level, this requires closing statutory gaps that exclude high school athletes from coverage, standardizing the classification of sexualized hazing as sexual assault when penetration is involved, and curtailing the charge reductions that systematically convert felony-level acts into misdemeanor outcomes. At the institutional level, mandatory external reporting requirements, uniform disciplinary

standards regardless of athletic status, and meaningful sanctions for institutions that obstruct accountability—including loss of program funding and civil liability—are essential. At the cultural level, prevention requires sustained investment in education targeting coaches, administrators, and young male athletes on healthy team culture, consent, and non-hierarchical models of masculine identity. Rules alone are unlikely to change behavior rooted in deeply held cultural norms; structural reform and cultural change must proceed together.

Future research should expand the sample size and pursue comparative state-level analysis to examine how variation in hazing statutes shapes legal outcomes. Primary data collection—including interviews with legal actors, administrators, and survivors—would further deepen understanding of the institutional dynamics identified here.

The cases documented in this study are not aberrations. They represent a pattern sustained by law, institutions, and culture in equal measure. Dismantling that pattern requires naming it clearly: what is called hazing is, in the most severe cases, rape, and the systems that minimize it bear responsibility for the harm that follows.

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Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the reported results are drawn from publicly available resources including Nexis Uni, news archives, publicly filed lawsuits, and official reports from schools, athletic associations, and law enforcement agencies. The NVivo coding dataset is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Appendix A Coding Framework and Decision Rules

Each case was coded across four dimensions using the definitions and decision rules below. Codes were applied to the documented facts of each incident as established by public records, independent of the charge ultimately filed or the terminology used by legal or institutional actors.

Dimension 1—Severity of the hazing act. Coded into four mutually exclusive categories based on the most serious confirmed act: Sodomy (penetration, however slight, of the anal opening with fingers or a foreign object, confirmed in public documentation); Partial penetration (penetrative contact through clothing); Attempted (the victim was physically restrained and subjected to sexualized contact, but no penetration was confirmed); Unclear (documentation insufficient to distinguish among the above; excluded from severity counts).

Decision rules for severity. (1) Coding followed the most serious confirmed act; where a case involved multiple incidents of differing severity, the case was coded at the level of its most serious documented act. (2) The charge filed did not govern the code; because legal minimization is the object of study, coding severity from charges would have been circular. (3) Where sources used ambiguous language or penetration was disputed, the case was coded conservatively and flagged.

Worked examples (severity). Reclassified: Bountiful was initially coded Sodomy but re-coded Attempted after all three available sources described contact over clothing and the charges filed were misdemeanor sexual battery. Excluded: Clark and Grant were coded Unclear and excluded from severity counts; no public source confirmed penetration, and in Grant the county declined to file charges. Coded with caveat: Leechburg was coded Sodomy despite community dispute over whether penetration occurred, on the basis of the police department's on-record classification of the incident as an assault involving an object. Aggregated to most-serious act: Cooper City involved one confirmed penetrative assault and one incident repelled by the victim; the case was coded Sodomy on the confirmed act.

Dimension 2—Legal responses. Coded for whether identified perpetrators were charged; the most serious charge filed; the disposition (conviction, plea, adjudication, diversion, dismissal, no charge); whether charges were reduced relative to those initially filed; and any custodial sentence. Reductions were coded only where the public record documented both an initial and a subsequent, lesser charge. Sealed juvenile outcomes were coded as “unknown,” not imputed.

Dimension 3—Institutional responses. Coded for coach suspension or removal; player suspension, expulsion, or removal from the team; season cancellation; policy changes; and documented obstruction. Each was coded present only where documented in a public source.

Dimension 4—Framing by legal and institutional actors. Coded for on-record statements characterizing the incident, attributed to the role of the speaker (law-enforcement officer; prosecutor or defense attorney; school or district official). Journalists' own characterizations were treated as reportage and not coded as institutional framing. Statements were recorded as direct quotations wherever available.

General decision rules. Codes were assigned only to facts confirmed in at least one authoritative public source and, wherever possible, corroborated across independent sources. Ambiguous or single-sourced claims were coded conservatively or flagged as unclear.

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