



ONLINE ABUSE PROTECTION IN US COLLEGE SPORTS

NCAA ANNUAL REPORT 2025/26

ONLINE ABUSE PROTECTION IN US COLLEGE SPORTS NCAA ANNUAL REPORT 2025/26

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2023, the NCAA has partnered with Signify Group and its AI-powered Threat Matrix service to identify, investigate and provide ongoing support in relation to online abuse and threats received by student-athletes, coaches, and officials.

Over the course of the partnership, the Threat Matrix service has provided the NCAA with an increasingly comprehensive view of the online abuse landscape surrounding its championships, helping to build a detailed picture of the issues experienced by student-athletes, coaches, and officials over time.

THE 2025/26 SEASON

Across the 2025/26 season, the Threat Matrix service expanded its coverage from seven to nine sports. New monitoring included the Men's and Women's Frozen Four, Women's Lacrosse, and Men's and Women's Soccer, giving the NCAA a broader view of the online issues and challenges experienced by student-athletes competing across its championships.

The service monitored social media accounts of competing players, coaches, officials, and teams across X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. It also provided support and remediation where issues arose, including the assessment and investigation of abuse and threats received through other digital channels, such as email.

The Threat Matrix service covers 56 languages (and their variations) with abusive posts identified based on text, with layered word, image, emoji and phrase categorization and detection.

REPORT OVERVIEW

This report provides an overview of the 2025/26 monitoring program, examining the scale and nature of abuse identified across the season and the action taken in response. It also draws on intelligence gathered throughout the partnership to examine how the online abuse landscape has changed over time, what progress has been made and where challenges remain.

THE ROLE OF THE THREAT MATRIX SERVICE

The initiative was established to deliver:

- **Monitoring** – identifying abusive, discriminatory and threatening content across public social media accounts and mentions.
- **Assessment + investigation** – categorizing and assessing identified abuse and threats according to severity, source, tactics, and potential risk.
- **Immediate notification** – alerting the NCAA to identified threats, inappropriate approaches and other content requiring immediate attention.
- **Real-world action** – facilitating platform sanctions, NCAA action or law enforcement intervention where content meets relevant thresholds.
- **Welfare-led support** – providing direct message monitoring and support to individuals experiencing high volumes of abuse, where appropriate.
- **Individual wellbeing** – the central goal of this service is to protect players, coaches, and officials from abuse, allowing them to focus on the event and giving them the assurance that abusers are being held to account.

The aim is not simply to quantify the abuse identified, but to use three years of intelligence to understand the wider threat landscape, assess the impact of intervention and identify the priorities for driving meaningful change in the years ahead.

DRAW THE LINE



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SCOPE + PROCESS

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SCOPE + COVERAGE

All participants and selected stages of competitions in the following championships were covered this year:



DI Men's + Women's Tennis Championships
(Individual + Team Finals)



DI Men's and Women's Soccer Championships
(National Semi-Finals + Final)



DI Women's Volleyball Championships
(National Semi-Finals + Final)



FCS Football Championships
(Championship Game)



DI Men's and Women's March Madness
(Selection Sunday + First Round onwards)



DI Men's and Women's Frozen Four
(National Semi-Finals + Final)



DI Men's and Women's Lacrosse Championships
(National Semi-Finals + Final)



DI Women's Softball Championships
(Regionals onwards)



DI Men's Baseball Championships
(Regionals onwards)

ACCOUNTS MONITORED

6,628

Student-Athletes
(19% increase from 2024/25)

1,309

Team Coaches
(109% increase from 2024/25)

500

Team Accounts
(7% increase from 2024/25)

198

Event Officials
(29% decrease from 2024/25)

31

NCAA Official Channels
(19% increase from 2024/25)

A BESPOKE PROCESS



Build a proactive net around participants: scanning for abuse and threats targeting accounts across social media platforms and the dark web.



Proactively identify accounts used by abusers at scale – using a combination of AI tech and the nuance of security and intelligence experts.



Unmask abusers using specialist Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) forensic tools and real-world intelligence to **de-anonymize and identify abusers to an evidential standard.**



Report abusive accounts to social media platforms, pressuring the **removal of abusive accounts.** Removing the expectation on participants to report abuse.



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THE 2025/26 ABUSE LANDSCAPE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This year saw **7,666 abusive, threatening, and discriminatory posts and comments** detected across 16 National Championships. Signify reported all detected content to the social media platforms for post removal or account sanction.

The levels of abuse detected during the 2025/26 season were the largest of the project so far. However, the increased scope saw the addition of new sports to the coverage, **increasing the number of monitored social media accounts by almost 25%**.

With the largest viewing figures to date, more eyes led to **significant increases in abuse volumes detected across the Men's and Women's March Madness tournaments**. The combined uptick in vitriol was 114% compared to 2024/25.

In **Women's Softball, heightened volumes of abuse were also observed**, with a 139% increase compared with the previous year. This highlights the growing risk towards female student-athletes as women's sport audiences continue to expand.

Men's Baseball saw a decrease in abuse volumes for the second year in a row. However, it remained the second most targeted event after March Madness.

Abuse categorization analysis revealed **Sexual commentary to be the largest category of abuse, after General Abuse**. This has been a recurring theme within the abuse profile detected over the past three years. While men have been the subject of this content, **the sexualization of female student-athletes is a growing concern** with the addition of AI imagery editing.

Signify conducted 127 investigations into accounts that warranted further action. From those, the identities of 18 users were verified, and case packs were shared with the NCAA that included tailored recommendations for further action. Four of those cases were recommended for law enforcement referral.

TOP 5 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. EDUCATION

Athletes, coaches, officials and selection committee members should be informed of the protections currently in place, as well as educated on how they can further protect themselves online. As part of this, they should be advised as to how they can report concerning messages that they receive.

2. ONGOING MONITORING OF EVENTS

Incorporating this year's analysis with the previous two years of data highlights March Madness, the Baseball College World Series, and the Softball College World Series as the high-risk events which would be recommended for coverage next year.

3. WELFARE-LED DM SUPPORT

The welfare-led approach to DM support should be continued. This process could be enhanced by utilizing the data recorded across the last three years to assess if there are any at-risk individuals. These stakeholders should be approached prior to a tournament for onboarding, or education.

4. SPORTS BETTING & ONLINE ABUSE

This service continues to strongly justify further research into the connection between sports betting and online abuse. As the US betting industry expands, close attention to this link remains essential.

5. CONNECTING TO EVENT SECURITY

With several accounts of concern investigated in this study, it is inevitable that some will be linked to specific colleges or indicate attendance at an event. Establishing a fast-track process for sharing intelligence would be a valuable outcome.

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KEY FIGURES: ALL CHAMPIONSHIPS

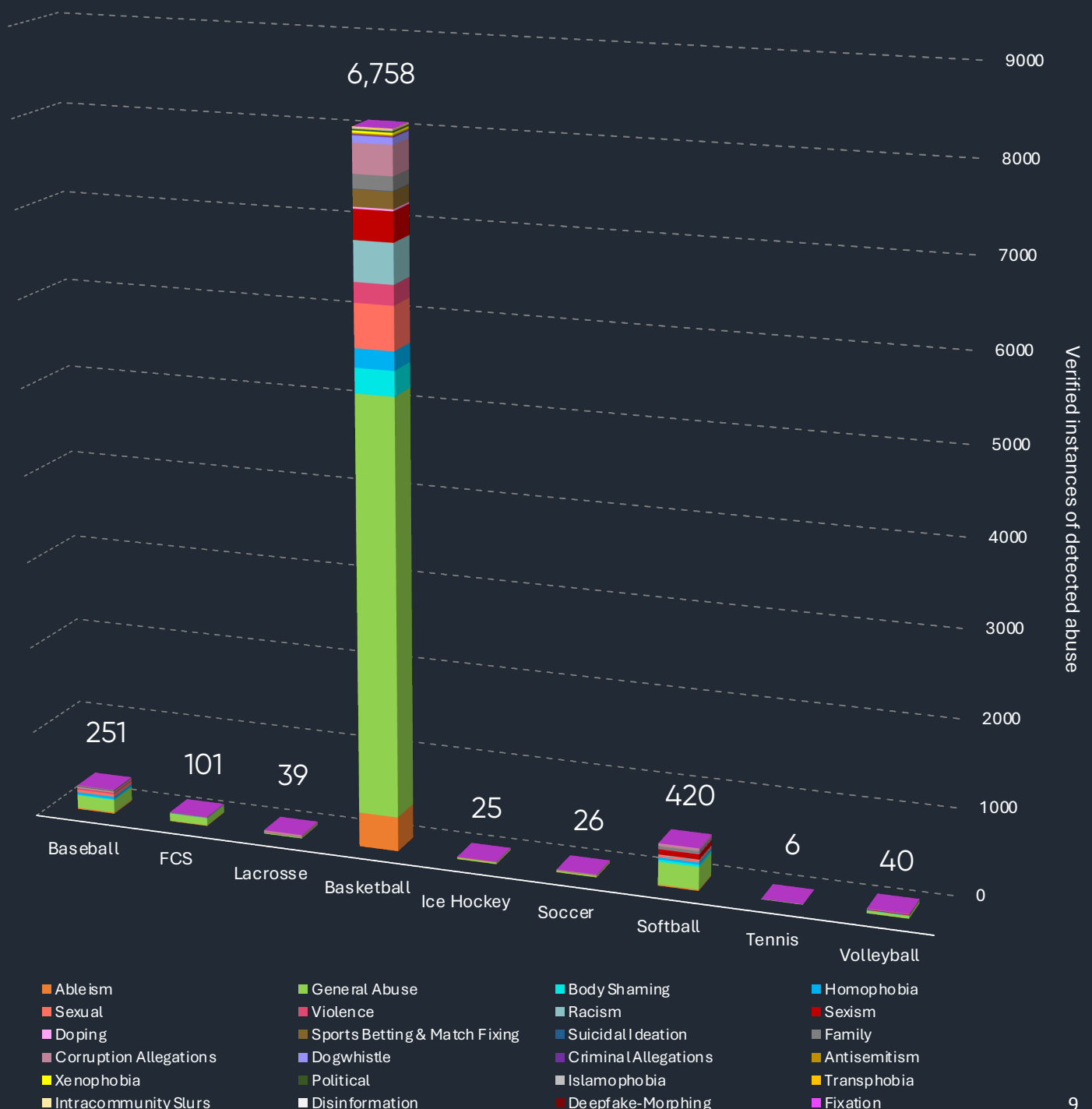
		TOTAL MESSAGES (Mentioning target accounts)	TOTAL FLAGGED BY AI (Reviewed by analysts)	TOTAL VERIFIED ABUSIVE (Reported to platform)
	TENNIS	4,600	66	6
	SOCCER	7,831	197	26
	VOLLEYBALL	15,905	655	40
	FOOTBALL	18,402	652	101
	BASKETBALL	775,274	51,675	6,758
	ICE HOCKEY	13,112	691	25
	LACROSSE	7,252	418	39
	SOFTBALL	69,382	3,127	420
	BASEBALL	65,699	4,243	251
TOTALS		977,457 Mentioning target accounts	61,724 Reviewed by analysts	7,666 Reported to platform

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ALL CHAMPIONSHIPS - BREAKDOWN

This chart provides a breakdown of the instances of abuse, by category, detected across each monitored sport during the 2025/26 year.

It should be noted that one post can contain multiple categories of abuse which may mean that some columns appear larger than the exact number of detected abusive posts (highlighted above each column).



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ABUSE CATEGORIZATION

Abuse categorization analysis was conducted to assess the abuse profile across all monitored events during the 2025/26 year.

Overall, General Abuse accounted for 59% of all detected content (see right). If General Abuse is removed from the analysis, it provides a deeper dive into the key issues faced by student-athletes online (below right).

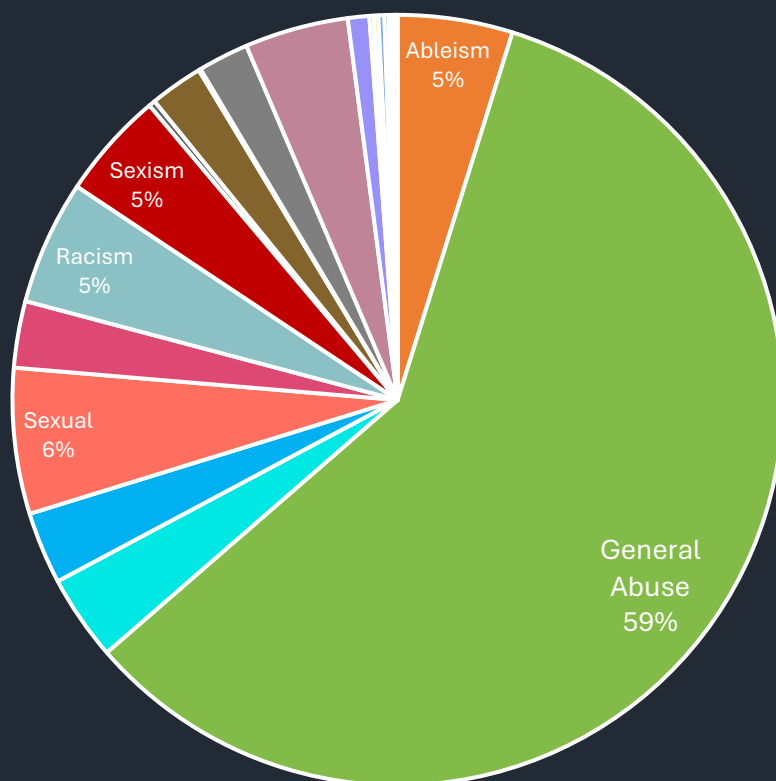
Whilst General Abuse is often the largest category of abuse, due to containing all general swear words that do not explicitly discriminate against protected classes, the volume of General Abuse appeared larger than previous years. It should be noted that, that this is largely due to improvements to the Threat Matrix classifications which allows both the language and intent of the abuse to be considered during the categorisation process. Previously, language alone dictated which category content was classified.

Sexual commentary formed the largest category within the abuse profile, after General Abuse. While this content was detected within Men's sports such as Basketball and Baseball, the content was more invasive when targeted at female athletes, particularly in Basketball, Softball and Volleyball.

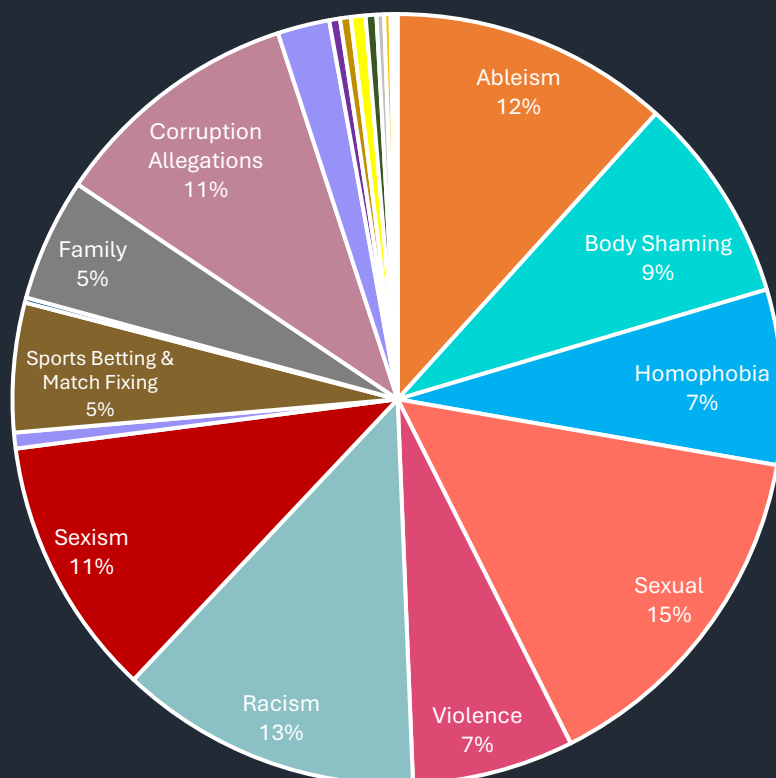
Racism has been an ongoing theme amongst abuse detected across the three-year period. The heaviest volume of this content was detected during March Madness.

Ableist language was also prominent within the content detected this year. There was an observed increase in the use of slurs relating to disability, even if they were not used to discriminate against disabled individuals.

Sports Betting & Match Fixing content contains posts where language specifically mentions gambling or match fixing. It may be that other content was shared by angry gamblers and further analysis presented on [page 19](#) delves into this further.



Abuse categorization for all events
(2025/26).



Abuse categorization for all events,
excluding General Abuse (2025/26).

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PLATFORM BREAKDOWN

Platform breakdown analysis was conducted across all abuse detected throughout the 2025/26 monitored events.

The findings highlighted that X (78%) was the social media platform where the highest volumes of abuse was detected. Instagram saw 22% of the detected abuse, while the percentages detected on Facebook and TikTok were fractional. Analysis on how these figures compare to previous years can be found on [page 21](#).

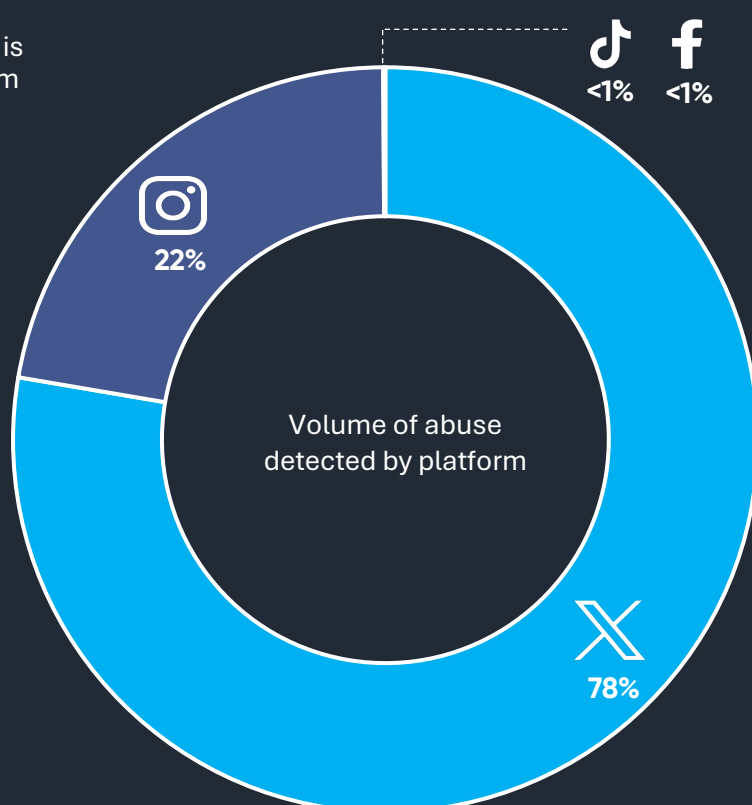
These figures can be explained by X being the platform for discussion around live sports events. Fans use X to keep updated on key events during a game or tournament, which also triggers live reactions to results which can sometimes contain abuse.

All detected abuse was reported to the relevant social media platforms for action to be taken in the form of post takedown or account removal.

Some of the abuse detected by Threat Matrix did not meet platform thresholds for action due to its low gravity. Signify still records this content because, while the content could be minor abuse, a large volume of low-gravity comments can still have a mental health impact on an individual. Therefore, it is important that this is shared with the NCAA to inform welfare support, and to assess the issues that are being faced by student-athletes or coaches.

In 2026, X also introduced a policy where content that is not viewed as egregiously abusive is removed from the algorithm (meaning the number of people that see it is significantly reduced) rather than removing the post altogether. This forms part of its “freedom of speech” policy, while reducing the reach that abusive content has.

This makes it more difficult to assess the action taken by social media platforms in response to reports made by Signify. However, Signify’s relationship with the platforms has formed a level of confidence in the issues that are being reported which increases the action percentage.



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GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION

Signify conducted analysis on the accounts sending abusive content to understand the global regions that abuse was sent from.

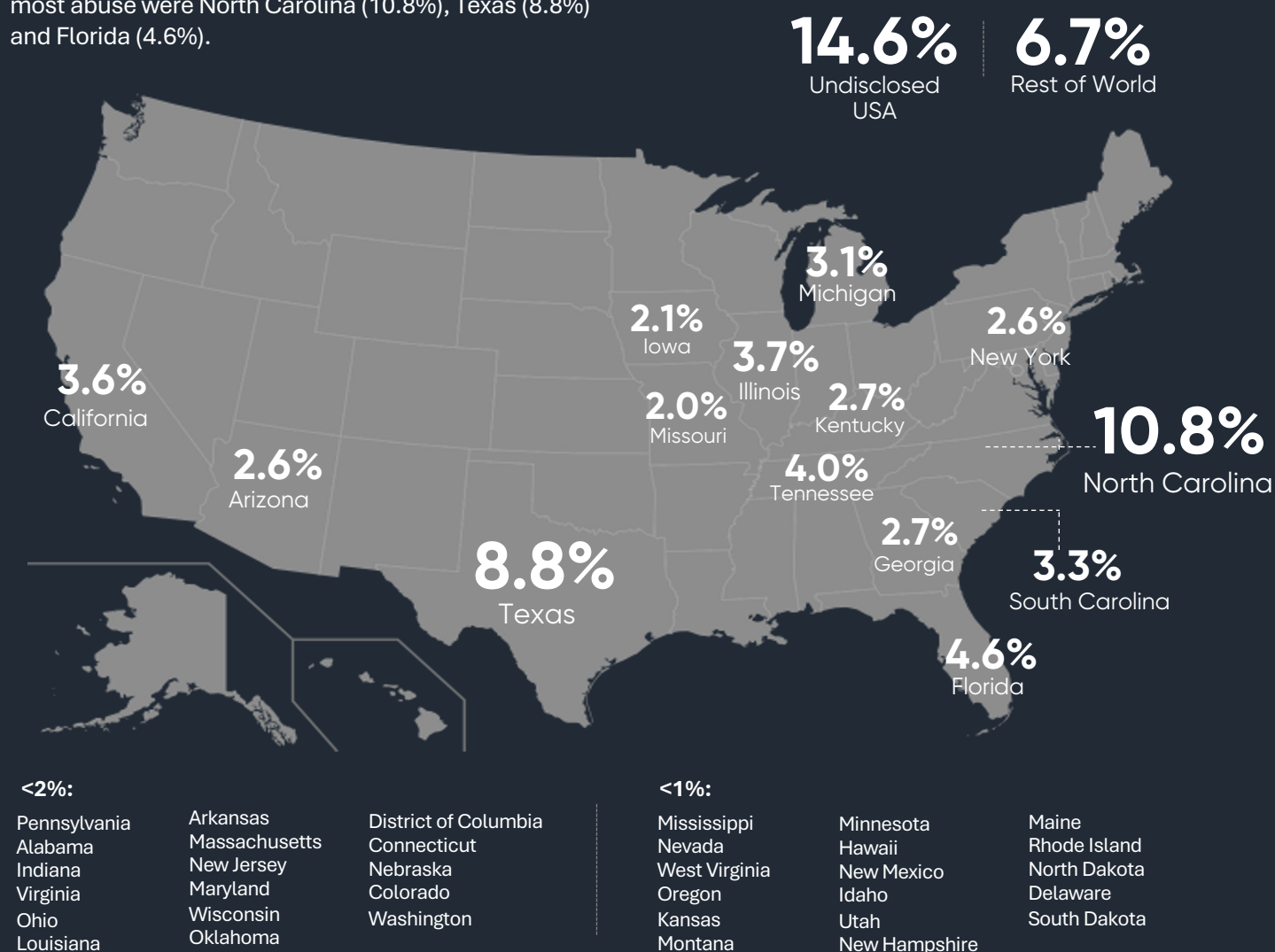
This was determined by self-declared locations from accounts that directed abuse towards the NCAA and its athletes, coaches, teams and officials across the 2025/26 season (where this information could be identified). In this case, the locations of 1,405 abuse senders could be identified.

Overall, abuse was identified to have been sent from 32 different countries, with 93.3% of the total originating from the USA.

Within the USA, the top three locations that sent the most abuse were North Carolina (10.8%), Texas (8.8%) and Florida (4.6%).

The high volume of abuse originating from North Carolina was likely influenced by several prominent March Madness storylines involving teams from the state. NC State head coach Will Wade announced his departure during the tournament, while Duke entered as the No. 1 overall seed before being eliminated in dramatic fashion in the Final Four.

Duke's intense in-state rivalry with UNC may also have contributed to abusive interactions throughout multiple championships in 2025/26.





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REAL-WORLD ACTION

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REAL-WORLD ACTION

As well as providing insight into abuse and threats targeted at NCAA stakeholders, Threat Matrix is designed to facilitate real-world action.

Identifying abusive or threatening content is an important first step, but understanding who is responsible, assessing the level of risk and supporting appropriate intervention are critical to ensuring that monitoring has a tangible impact beyond the online environment.

Throughout the 2025/26 season, Signify's Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) investigations team worked to find the identity of users who shared serious egregious abuse. Where the identity of a user could be verified, detailed case packs were shared with the NCAA, combining intelligence gathered through investigation with tailored recommendations based on the nature of the activity. These recommendations included action by the relevant social media platforms, action by the NCAA, or referral to law enforcement authorities where appropriate.

Where identification of the individual behind an account was not possible, this did not prevent action from being pursued. Relevant cases were escalated to the platforms with supporting evidence to seek removal of abusive content and/or sanctions against accounts.

This approach ensures that the Threat Matrix service supports the NCAA not only in understanding the scale and nature of online abuse, but in taking proportionate and targeted action against it.

INVESTIGATIONS

Across all monitored events in the 2025/26 season, 127 unique accounts shared content that met investigation thresholds:

- 115 – March Madness
- 5 – Softball
- 3 – Baseball
- 3 – Independent cases
- 1 – Tennis

ACCOUNT IDENTIFICATION

Of the accounts investigated, Threat Matrix was able to identify information relating to 18 accounts, providing the NCAA with additional intelligence to support appropriate action. All 18 individuals were believed to be in the USA.

- 16 – March Madness
- 1 – Softball
- 1 – Independent case

These accounts shared a variety of Violent, Racist, Transphobic, or Sexist abuse, with 4 cases identified to be related to Sport Betting.

For 3 of the cases, the identified individuals were associated with specific colleges. This was considered in recommendations for further action.

There were also 4 cases that met thresholds encouraging recommendation of referral to law enforcement.

127

Completed investigations into
unique accounts

18

Actionable cases with
positive IDs

4

Recommended for referral
to law enforcement



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THREE YEARS OF INSIGHT

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE INITIATIVE

Since the initial pilot in the 2023/24 season, the Threat Matrix service provided to the NCAA has continued to evolve. What began as monitoring across 7 championships has developed into a 16-championship program in 2025/26, with a corresponding increase in the number of accounts monitored. This expansion has enabled the NCAA to build a far more comprehensive understanding of the online environment surrounding its championships, extending visibility and protection to a greater number of student-athletes and other stakeholders.

By extending monitoring to more sports, events and accounts, it has been possible to capture a wider range of experiences across the student-athlete population, providing a stronger evidence base for understanding where abuse is occurring and where intervention may be required. This has also increased opportunities to investigate and take action where serious or persistent abuse is identified.

The capability of the service has developed alongside this expansion. Improvements to detection and categorization, together with increased language coverage, have strengthened the ability to identify and assess a greater variety of abusive content. Coverage has increased to 56 languages this season and will exceed 100 languages for the 2026/27 season, further strengthening the service's ability to identify abuse across a diverse and increasingly global online environment.

The growth of the program is therefore important not simply because more sports, accounts and languages are now covered, but because it provides the NCAA with a deeper and more representative evidence base from which to understand and respond to online abuse. It also means that changes in the volume of abuse detected over the three years cannot be considered in isolation: some increases will reflect expanded coverage and improved detection capability, rather than a direct increase in the prevalence of abuse. The analysis that follows takes this context into account, using the data to distinguish between the impact of program growth and genuine changes in the online abuse landscape.

50%

Increase in number of sports covered since 2023/24

115%

Increase in number of accounts monitored since 2023/24

44%

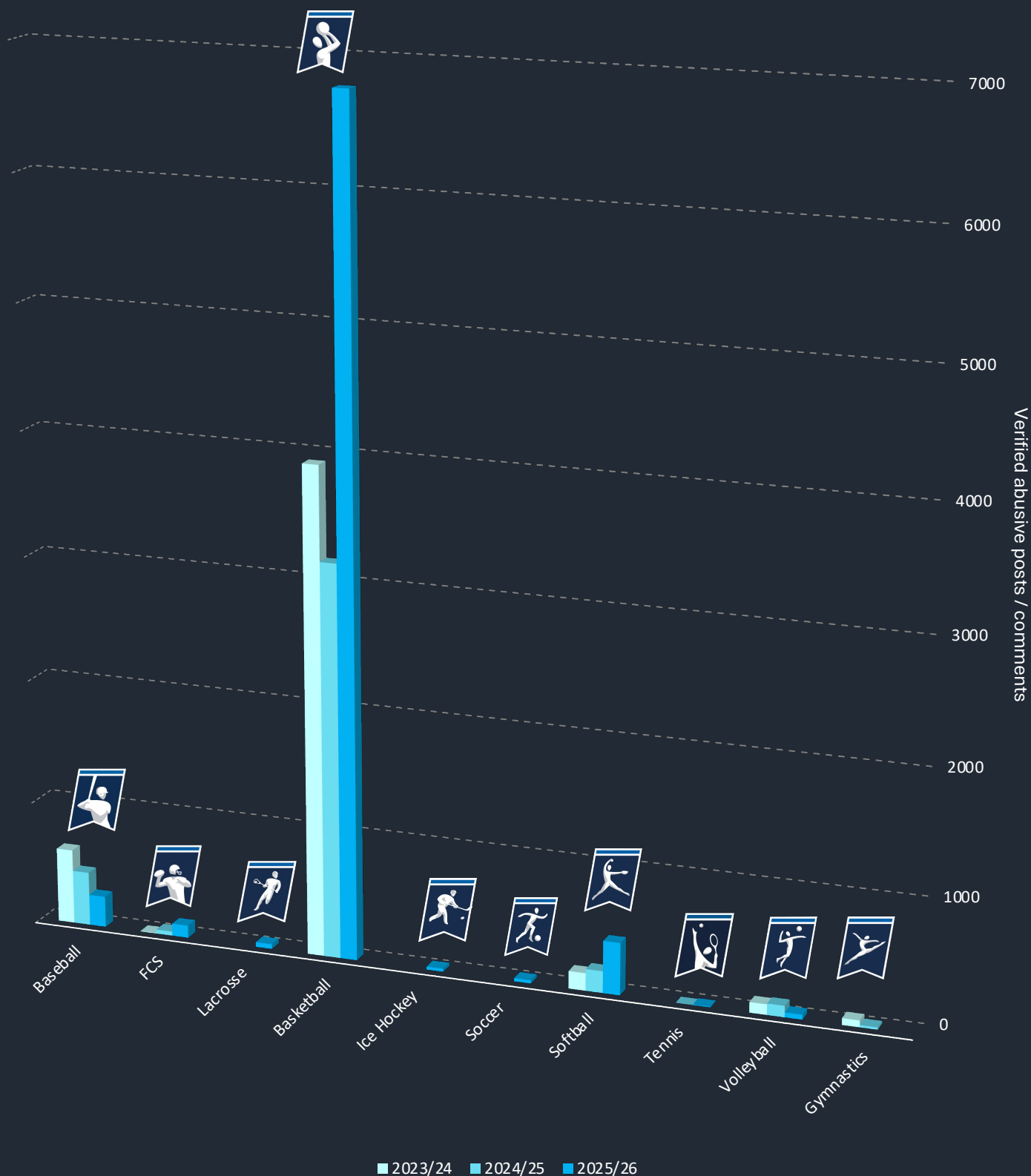
Increase in languages monitored since 2023/24

2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
 7 CHAMPIONSHIPS	 9 CHAMPIONSHIPS	 16 CHAMPIONSHIPS
 4,027 ACCOUNTS	 6,781 ACCOUNTS	 8,666 ACCOUNTS
 39 LANGUAGES	 48 LANGUAGES	 56 LANGUAGES
 5,022 ABUSIVE POSTS	 3,916 ABUSIVE POSTS	 7,666 ABUSIVE POSTS

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YEAR-ON-YEAR COMPARISON

The chart presented on this page compares the volume of verified concerning content from the different monitored sports across the three-year period.



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ABUSE CATEGORIZATION COMPARISON

This page presents the abuse profiles detected across all monitored NCAA events, broken down by year. The purpose of this is to highlight how targeting tactics have stayed the same or differed across the three-year period.

The first observation within this analysis is how General Abuse has become an increased proportion of the detected abuse. However, it should be noted that changes were made to the Threat Matrix system across this period to allow recategorization of detected content where extra consideration for the intent of the comment could be made, rather than just the language alone. An example of this could be where a sexual term could be used within a general insult, which, while previously detected under the “Sexual” category, would have been recategorized to “General Abuse” in 2025/26.

That being said, it is usual for General Abuse to form the largest category as this is a catch-all for general swear words and insults. Often, this type of abuse is performance-related.

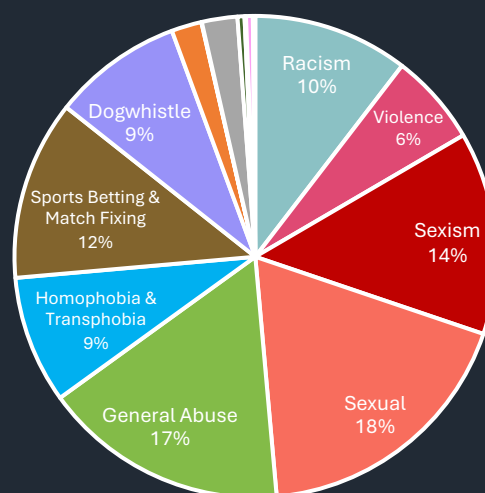
This analysis has highlighted that across all three years, Sexual commentary has been within the top two categories of abuse, alongside General Abuse. This raises a key issue that is faced by student-athletes competing in NCAA events. While this has proven to be an issue picked up in Men’s sports such as Basketball and Baseball, it poses an even higher risk to female athletes, particularly to those competing in Basketball, Softball and Volleyball. Signify has seen a growing trend in online Sexual commentary that has crossed into real-world fixation and stalking cases, or had a detrimental impact on female athletes due to the use of their images which have been altered into more sexual copies using AI.

Notably, Sexism, which is also an issue faced more prominently by female athletes, has also remained among the most targeted categories.

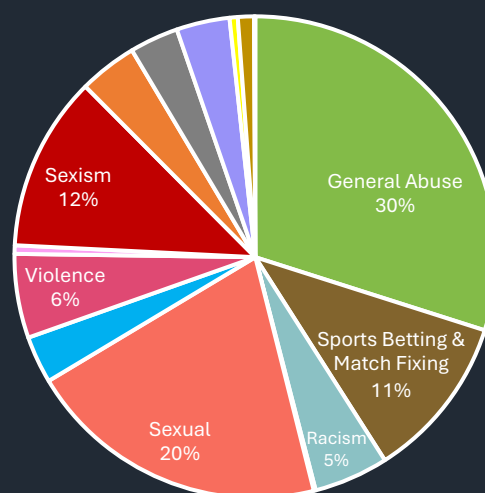
Sports Betting & Sports Betting & Match Fixing content appears to have dropped off over the three-year period. This will be partly due to a re-classification exercise in 2025/26 where instances of Sports Betting & Match Fixing have been classified separately from Corruption Allegations (previously they came under the same category). It is also worth mentioning that abuse recorded under the Sports Betting & Match Fixing category is only content that explicitly references betting or match fixing within the abuse. There will be other abuse detected, shared by angry gamblers, that will have fallen under other categories, such as Violence.

Racism has also been a recurring theme within the abuse profile over the years, with the heaviest proportion of this content detected during March Madness.

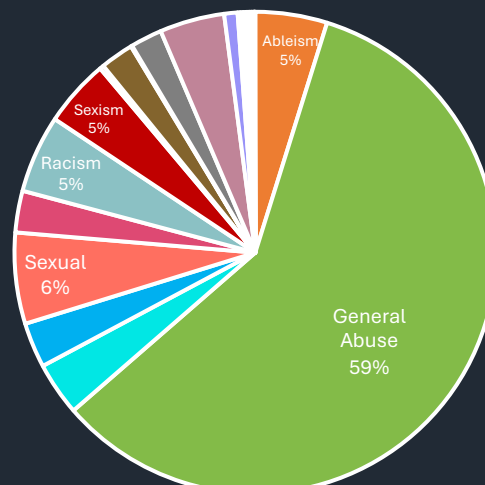
2023/24:



2024/25:



2025/26:



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SPORTS BETTING ANALYSIS

Sports betting represents an increasingly important source of risk for student-athletes as the USA betting market continues to expand. The growth of legal sports betting has brought wagering further into the mainstream of sports consumption, increasing the potential for student-athletes to become targets when individuals have a financial interest in the outcome of a game.

The data presented on the previous page shows the volume of content categorised as Sports Betting & Match Fixing across the three-year period. This category captures content where betting or match fixing is explicitly referenced within the abuse. However, the figures also need to be considered in the context of changes to the categorisation framework. In 2025/26, Corruption Allegations was introduced as a separate category to provide greater specificity. Content relating to corruption that had previously been recorded under Sports Betting & Match Fixing was therefore reclassified, contributing to the apparent decline in this category.

The category figures also do not capture abuse where an individual appears to be motivated by gambling but does not explicitly reference betting within their message. To explore this further, a separate analysis was conducted across all abuse identified during the three-year period. Each instance was reviewed to identify, where possible, content attributable to individuals with a betting interest, based on the language used, other content they had shared, and the accounts they followed or engaged with. **This analysis identified 3.2% of all detected abuse as attributable to angry gamblers in 2023/24, 2.2% in 2024/25 and 7.9% in 2025/26.**

Importantly, this analysis **excluded the corruption-related content that had previously been captured within the Sports Betting & Match Fixing category**, allowing the proportion attributable specifically to angry gamblers to be assessed separately. The increase to 7.9% in 2025/26 is particularly notable. It suggests that betting-related hostility extends beyond abuse that explicitly references gambling, with bettors also responsible for wider forms of hostility, including violence, threats and personal abuse directed towards athletes.

The NCAA has itself highlighted the issue, with recent research finding that 46% of DI Men's Basketball student-athletes reported receiving negative or threatening messages from someone who had bet on their game (NCAA GOALS Study, 2025). The NCAA has subsequently called for the removal of individual player prop bets, citing concerns around harassment, student-athlete wellbeing and competition integrity.

For Threat Matrix, this reinforces the importance of understanding not only what is said within an abusive message, but also the behaviour and context surrounding it. Identifying the potential motivation behind abuse can provide a more complete picture of the risks facing student-athletes as sports betting becomes increasingly embedded in college sport.

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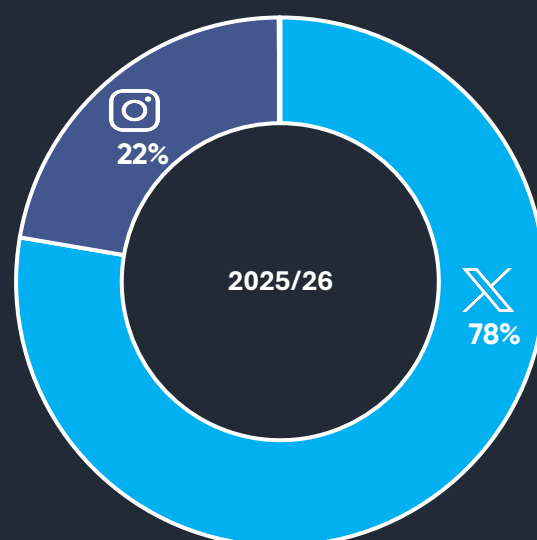
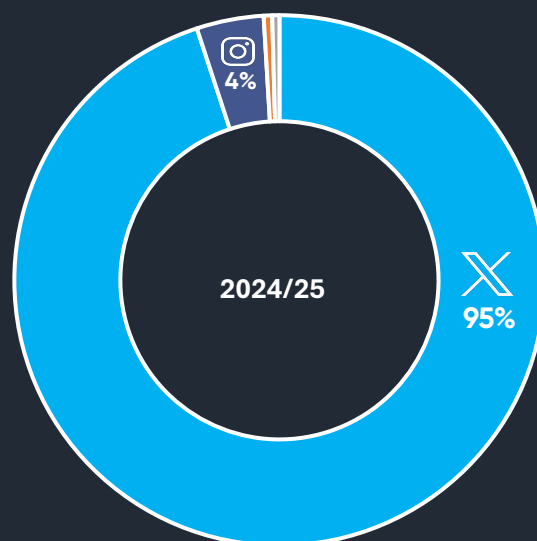
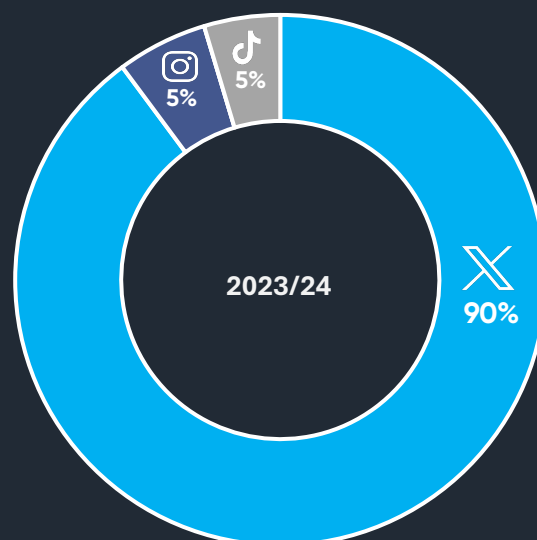
PLATFORM ANALYSIS

The platform breakdown of identified abuse has changed noticeably across the three-year monitoring period. X has remained the dominant source of detected abuse, reflecting its continued importance for live sport, real-time discussion and immediate reactions to events. However, the proportion of abuse identified on Instagram has increased significantly in 2025/26, accounting for 22% of all detected abuse compared with just 4% in the previous year.

This shift is partly a result of improvements to Threat Matrix's ability to identify abusive content on Instagram. As the service has become more effective at detecting activity on the platform, a greater proportion of the abuse taking place there is now visible within the dataset. This is particularly relevant given that most accounts monitored as part of the initiative also have an Instagram presence.

It also reflects the changing way in which student-athletes and their audiences use social media. While X remains an important platform for live sport, Instagram has become increasingly central to how athletes build their profiles, share content and engage with audiences.

This is particularly relevant to women's sport, where increased visibility can bring greater exposure to appearance-based and sexualised abuse. The image-led nature of Instagram can create additional opportunities for this type of commentary, particularly as female athletes become more prominent online. The shift in identified abuse towards Instagram therefore provides an important indication of how the nature of online risk are changing.



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THE CHANGING ABUSE LANDSCAPE

THE OVERALL PICTURE

The three-year dataset shows significant variation in the volume of abuse identified across NCAA championships, with overall activity influenced by both an expansion of coverage and the level of attention surrounding particular events and athletes.

In 2023/24, 5,020 abusive messages were identified, with the Women's March Madness event accounting for a substantial proportion of the detected content. The following year saw volumes fall to 3,916 messages, despite an expanded monitoring scope. In 2025/26, detected abuse increased substantially to 7,666 messages, driven largely by Men's March Madness.

These fluctuations demonstrate that changes in the volume of online abuse need to be understood in the context of what is happening within each championship and the wider online environment. While overall volumes may rise or fall from year to year, the data continues to highlight clear patterns in where risk is concentrated, the factors that can increase exposure to abuse, and the sports and athletes that require particular attention.

The three-year picture also reinforces the importance of interpreting abuse volumes alongside the changing scale of NCAA sport and the Threat Matrix programme itself. As coverage has expanded and more activity has become visible, the dataset provides increasingly detailed understanding of where and when online abuse occurs, and the circumstances in which risk is heightened.

The growth of NCAA sport brings significant benefits in terms of visibility and engagement. The challenge is ensuring that the infrastructure protecting student-athletes evolves alongside that growth.

BASKETBALL – VISIBILITY CREATES EXPOSURE

March Madness provides the clearest example of the relationship between visibility and online risk. Across the three-year period, the sport has been associated with some of the highest volumes of detected abuse, while also experiencing significant changes in audience attention and monitoring coverage.

The 2023/24 Women's March Madness tournament demonstrated the scale of this effect. The unprecedented attention surrounding Caitlin Clark, Angel Reese, and the wider growth of Women's Basketball created an online environment in which student-athletes were exposed to exceptionally high levels of scrutiny and engagement. In 2025/26, the focus shifted towards the Men's March Madness tournament, which again generated substantial volumes of abusive content alongside record-breaking audience figures.

This does not suggest that increased visibility is inherently negative. However, greater visibility also means that more student-athletes are exposed to a much larger and more active online audience. Understanding and managing the risks that accompany this growth is therefore an important part of protecting the athletes who are driving it.

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THE CHANGING ABUSE LANDSCAPE

BASEBALL AND SOFTBALL

Baseball and Softball present contrasting trends across the three-year period. Baseball has experienced a sustained decline in detected abuse across the three years - yet remains the sport with the second-highest volume of detected abuse after Basketball. The content identified has continued to include sexualized language and homophobic slurs used as insults. While this language is not necessarily used with discriminatory intent, its continued presence demonstrates a theme of harmful content to which student-athletes can be exposed.

Softball presents a different picture. Detected abuse has increased consistently across the three-year period, against a backdrop of continued growth and visibility of women's sport. The content identified has regularly included sexualized commentary on athletes' bodies, alongside homophobic slurs used with discriminatory intent – contrasting with Baseball, where similar language was more commonly used as an insult rather than to discriminate.

These forms of abuse reflect wider challenges faced by women in an increasingly visible sporting environment, where athletes can face scrutiny that extends beyond their sporting performance to their gender, sexuality, and appearance.

The growing visibility of women's sport also creates an increasingly complex online environment in which emerging technologies, including AI-generated imagery, can introduce new forms of sexualized abuse and harassment. As female athletes attract larger audiences and greater online engagement, understanding these risks becomes increasingly important to ensuring that heightened visibility does not come at the cost of their wellbeing and safety.

The contrasting trends across Baseball and Softball reinforce an important point: a decline in overall volume does not mean that the underlying risk has disappeared, just as an increase in volume does not tell the whole story. The nature, severity and context of the abuse identified are equally important in understanding the risks facing student-athletes.

WHY PROTECTION MATTERS

Across three years, Threat Matrix has helped the NCAA build a deeper understanding of online abuse across its championships, while enabling earlier identification, investigation and action where risks emerge.

The growth of NCAA championships and the increasing visibility of its athletes should be celebrated. But with greater visibility comes greater exposure, making it increasingly important that student-athletes are not left to navigate the consequences alone.

The purpose of monitoring is the ability to identify harmful behavior, understand its context, investigate and take action, and support victims. By providing this layer of protection, student-athletes can focus on competing and representing their institutions without having to manage the burden of online abuse themselves.

Three years of monitoring demonstrate that understanding the problem is the first step towards changing it – and that sustained protection is essential as the online environment surrounding NCAA sport continues to evolve.



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LOOKING AHEAD: EMERGING RISKS IN COLLEGE SPORT

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EMERGING RISKS IN COLLEGE SPORT

A CHANGING ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

The online environment surrounding college sport will continue to evolve alongside the growing visibility and reach of its championships. As audiences expand and athletes become increasingly prominent online, the nature of abuse is also likely to change, with new tactics, platforms and forms of harmful content emerging over time.

The growth of AI-generated content, increasingly sophisticated attempts to evade detection and the movement of abuse across platforms are examples of how the threat landscape is becoming more complex. This makes continued intelligence important not only for identifying known forms of abuse, but for recognising new and emerging behaviours as they develop.

The platforms where student-athletes engage are also changing. While X remains an important platform for live sport and real-time conversation, an increasing number of athletes are choosing not to maintain a presence there. Instagram continues to play an important role in how athletes build their profiles and interact with audiences, while Facebook is becoming less prominent among younger audiences. As these behaviours shift, maintaining coverage across the platforms where student-athletes are most visible will be important to ensuring emerging risks are not missed.

GREATER VISIBILITY, GREATER EXPOSURE

The three-year data identifies Basketball, Baseball and Softball as areas where continued monitoring will remain important, although for different reasons.

Basketball has demonstrated how quickly risk can increase when visibility is heightened. Major championship moments and high-profile athletes can generate significant online traction, creating greater exposure to abuse. As March Madness continues to grow, including its expansion from 68 to 76 teams, maintaining visibility of this risk will be important to ensuring increased engagement does not come at the expense of athlete protection.

Baseball presents a different picture. While detected abuse has declined over the three-year period, it continues to generate the second-highest volume of identified abuse across the program. Sexualized commentary and homophobic slurs remain persistent themes in negative online conversations surrounding the sport, suggesting that a reduction in volume does not necessarily mean a reduction in the underlying risk.

Softball represents an increasingly important area of focus. Detected abuse has risen consistently across the three years, alongside the continued growth and visibility of women's sport. The nature of the abuse is particularly concerning, including discriminatory homophobic abuse and sexualized commentary relating to athletes' bodies. As the profile of women's sport continues to grow, so too does the importance of understanding and responding to these risks.

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EMERGING RISKS IN COLLEGE SPORT

PROTECTING FEMALE ATHLETES

The protection of female athletes will remain an important priority as women's sport continues to grow. Across the monitoring program, female athletes have experienced significant levels of discriminatory and sexualized abuse, with the nature of this abuse often extending beyond sporting performance to their gender, sexuality and appearance.

Importantly, the risk is not limited to the online world. Threat Matrix coverage of female athletes more broadly has seen a rise in cases of fixation which become real-world risks. These cases demonstrate why understanding the wider context around online interactions is critical; what may initially appear to be an isolated or low-level interaction can, in some circumstances, form part of a broader pattern of behavior requiring intervention.

As the profile of female athletes continues to grow, protecting them from these risks will be increasingly important to ensuring that greater visibility remains a positive development for the athletes and the sports themselves.

SPORTS BETTING – A GROWING RISK

The continued growth of sports betting in the USA presents another evolving risk for student-athletes. As betting becomes increasingly embedded in the consumption of college sport, athletes can become directly targeted by individuals whose financial interests are tied to their performance. This is particularly evident around player-specific prop bets, where an individual athlete becomes the focus of a wager.

Recent NCAA research (GOALS study, 2025) highlights the scale of the issue. In 2025, 46% of DI Men's Basketball student-athletes reported experiencing social media abuse from someone who had bet on their game.

For Threat Matrix, this represents an important area of emerging risk because betting-related abuse can escalate quickly from frustration or criticism into targeted harassment, particularly following a missed opportunity, poor performance or lost wager.

Monitoring provides an opportunity to identify this behavior as it occurs, understand when betting-related abuse is becoming concentrated around particular athletes or events, and support intervention where behavior crosses into more serious or persistent forms of abuse.

STAYING AHEAD OF THE THREAT

Threat Matrix will continue to develop alongside this changing landscape. In 2026/27, language coverage will expand beyond 100 languages, increasing the range of content that can be identified across NCAA championships. Improvements to image-based detection will also strengthen the ability to identify harmful content that cannot be captured through text alone, while continued development of the service will support the identification of new and evolving forms of abuse.

These further developments are important because the threat landscape does not remain static. Continued monitoring allows emerging patterns to be identified as they happen, while improvements to detection ensure the initiative continues to maximize protection levels for student-athletes and other NCAA stakeholders as the way people communicate online changes.



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MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT

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MENTAL HEALTH TOLL ON INDIVIDUALS

The risks and mental health challenges associated with being a victim of online abuse or threats are real and have a direct and immediate effect on student-athletes, coaches, officials, and their families.

This can impact them on both a personal and professional level and ultimately affect their wellbeing and ability to perform at their best.

By putting the Threat Matrix service in place, the NCAA can demonstrate to student-athletes that they are being protected, and that proactive action is being taken on their behalf to hold abusers to account.

Participants in sport regularly demand that action be taken against those who send them abuse and threats.

Threat Matrix is providing this proactive support to student-athletes, coaches, officials, and family members, giving them the assurance that perpetrators are being flagged, investigated, and reported to the appropriate authorities.

REAL-WORLD SYMPTOMS OF ONLINE ABUSE

The abhorrent abuse that Signify monitors across social media and all online platforms exposes student-athletes, coaches, officials, and even their families to serious risks.

Being a victim of online abuse and continuous hatred online can lead to a range of real-world consequences and symptoms, including (but not limited to) instances of anxiety, depression, loss of confidence, panic attacks and, in extreme cases, can be a contributory factor in suicidal ideation or actions.

Intervention, recognition and outreach can provide a victim with a real sense of support and protection – at the very least, recognition of the issues.



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GLOSSARY

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GLOSSARY – CLASSIFICATIONS

- **Ableism:** Discrimination that devalues and marginalizes individuals with disabilities.
- **Anti-GRT:** GRT refers to Gypsy, Roma, Traveller and abuse flagged as such uses language that discriminates against the community.
- **Antisemitism:** An abusive message discriminatory against the Jewish community.
- **Blackmailing:** A form of coercion where a person threatens to reveal damaging, embarrassing, or sensitive information about someone unless demands — typically financial payment or specific actions — are met.
- **Body Shaming:** Mocking, criticizing, or discriminating against someone because of their body size, shape, or appearance.
- **Corruption Allegations:** Claims that individuals in positions of power or authority — such as governing body officials, committee members, or administrators — have been bribed or otherwise improperly influenced to manipulate decisions surrounding major events or tournaments.
- **Criminal Allegations:** Messages that contain false criminal accusations — such as rape, domestic violence, or fraud — in order to intimidate or damage reputation and credibility.
- **Deepfake-Morphing:** Manipulation of images or videos using AI to falsely depict a person in ways that can harm, mislead, or exploit them.
- **Disinformation:** Presenting false information as facts.
- **Dogwhistle:** Messages that contain coded language or subtle references designed to signal prejudice, extremism, or harmful beliefs to a specific audience, while appearing harmless to others — implying hidden discriminatory intent behind seemingly normal words.
- **Doping:** Content containing abusive accusations of drug use to enhance performance. These messages frequently intertwine with transphobic tropes, due to the players' alleged use of hormones (testosterone).
- **Doxxing:** Publishing, disclosing, requesting, or circulating private information.
- **Family:** Abusive messages targeting or mentioning a player's family or partners.
- **Fixation:** Obsessive and persistent focus on a particular individual, where a person is repeatedly messaging, tracking a person's online activity, or shows an inability to disengage despite requests to stop, which can often escalate over time.
- **General Abuse:** Messages that are abusive in nature but do not contain any specific discriminatory language.
- **Homophobia:** Prejudice, discrimination, or hate towards individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, or questioning. It also encompasses harmful stereotypes related to sexuality which are applied to individuals irrespective of their sexual orientation.
- **Intracommunity Slurs:** Derogatory insults used within a single community and directed inwardly. The terms often originate from the community itself.
- **Islamophobia:** An abusive message that contains hatred, fear, or prejudice against Muslims.
- **Phishing:** A message designed to impersonate a legitimate and trusted source and deceiving an individual into revealing sensitive personal information — such as passwords, financial details, or login credentials.
- **Political:** An abusive message targeting an individual based on their political beliefs or making presumptions on their beliefs as a basis for attacking them. Messages often falsely link an individual to a political issue or event to justify abusing them.
- **Racism:** A discriminatory, derogatory, or hateful message against an individual based on their race or ethnicity, which is typically marginalized.

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GLOSSARY – CLASSIFICATIONS

- **Sectarianism:** An abusive message against an individual who is linked to a religious and political group, typically arising from an ongoing conflict between the specific group and another.
- **Sexism:** Messages that contain discrimination, prejudice, and harmful stereotypes based on sex or gender, typically against women.
- **Sexual:** An abusive message that subjects the targeted individual or group of individuals to graphic sexual language or sexual acts without their consent.
- **Sports Betting & Match Fixing:** An abusive or threatening message directed at athletes, officials, or others arising from gambling-related grievances, including harassment from individuals who have lost money on a result, pressure or threats from those involved in illegal betting, or accusations that a player or official has deliberately influenced the outcome of a match for financial gain.
- **Suicidal Ideation:** Instances where an individual expresses (or wishes on others) thoughts or feelings about ending their own life. This includes statements where a person communicates a wish to die, a sense of hopelessness, or an intention to harm themselves.
- **Terrorism:** A message that contains words that are suggestive of, or related to, terrorist activity.
- **Threat:** The use of digital communication to intimidate or instill fear in a victim through menacing messages, posts, or images. Such messages are a deliberate tactic used to silence, control, or coerce the victim by exploiting the speed and reach of technology.
- **Transphobia:** Messages that are hateful, fearful, or discriminatory against non-binary, gender non-conforming, and transgender individuals. In sports, transphobic and sexist tropes often intertwine, falsely equating biological sex with gender to make derogatory comments regarding physical strength.
- **Violence:** Messages containing online threats (including death threats) that demonstrate an intent or desire to cause harm to an individual or group of individuals.
- **Xenophobia:** Fear or hatred based on an individual's country of origin.



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