

The Influence of Sport and Recreation upon Crime Reduction: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Crime prevention is not the primary objective of sport and physical activity, but it might be an extremely positive byproduct. This paper examines a variety of sporting activities that appear to have had a beneficial effect in helping young people steer away from trouble. This study takes archival materials into account to consider the recreation and sport effects on crime reduction. It has implications for communities worldwide.

Keywords: Crime, Recreation, Sport

Introduction

For much of this century, citizens have placed the primary responsibility for crime prevention in the hands of the formal system of criminal justice. However, in recent years, the limitations of this approach have been recognized. Criminal justice professionals, politicians, and members of the community have realized that the patrol and investigative resources of the police are limited in preventing many types of crime and that the courts and prisons also have only a small impact on crime rates. Because of this there has been a greater emphasis on crime prevention programs that involve close cooperation between those working in the criminal justice system, other professionals, business people, and community residents.

The direct costs of crime to the justice system are nearly \$10 billion a year. To this we can add the financial costs of medical care, property loss, community decay, private security, and the human costs of the pain and suffering and psychological damage resulting from victimization. Because of high crime rates, the cost to Aboriginal communities is disproportionately high. There is ample evidence that a significant amount of this loss could be avoided if we made more of an effort to develop crime prevention programs targeted at the most serious crime problems.

When women living below the poverty line are part of a program planning process, they have a greater sense of empowerment and increase their participation in recreation and sport

activities .The provision of recreational activities (including sport programs) for children, as part of a package to help sole-support parents on social assistance, can contribute to moving more families off social assistance.

Both boys and girls are more attracted to sport and physical activity if their parents encouraged them to participate. In families where parents are involved in sport as both athletes and volunteers, their children have high levels of sport participation.

Which Types of Sport Work Best?

Not all sports are relevant for many vulnerable and at-risk young people, and there is a clear need to adopt a needs-based rather than product-led approach (Coalter et al, 2000).

There is some evidence of the need for small-group or individual activities, which are non-competitive, emphasise personally-constructed goals and have a minimum of formal rules and regulations.

Sugden and Yiannakis (1982) suggest that certain adolescents reject organised, competitive mainstream sport because it contains elements similar to those which they have already failed to resolve - adherence to formal rules and regulations, achievement of externally-defined goals and competitive and testing situations.

Serok (1975) suggests that delinquents prefer games with fewer and less specified rules and with fewer requirements for conformity. Robins (1990) refers to a number of diversionary sport projects whose main features were open access and a lack of rigid organisation.

The recognition of these issues underpins programmes that use sport to rehabilitate offenders and reduce recidivism. Such programmes often use outdoor adventure activities, or 'demanding physical activity programmes', aimed at developing personal and social skills, and improving self-confidence and self-efficacy. It is hoped that these will transfer to the wider social context and reduce offending behaviour (Coalter, 1988; Taylor et al, 1999; West and Crompton, 2001).

Although evidence for the success of such programmes is variable (Taylor et al, 1999), it has been argued that, when compared to the costs of prosecution and detention, such programmes are 'good value for money' (Tsuchiya, 1996). In 1994, Coopers and Lybrand estimated that "the benefit to society of preventing a single youth crime would be a cost saving equivalent to at least £2,300, just under half of which would be directly recoverable from the public purse".

Maximizing the positive aspects of sport

Many of the core values inherent in sport are compatible with the principles necessary for development and peace, such as fair play, co-operation, sharing and respect. The life skills learned through sport help empower individuals and enhance psychosocial well-being, such as increased resiliency, self-esteem and connections with others. These features of sport are beneficial to people of all ages, but they are especially vital to the healthy development of young

people.

Sport, however, is a reflection of society. It should be acknowledged that sport, like many aspects of society, simultaneously encompasses some of the worst human traits, including violence, corruption, discrimination, hooliganism, excessive nationalism, cheating and drug abuse. However, these negative aspects of sport by no means outweigh its potential positive benefits. The United Nations has the ability to help governments and communities harness the positive aspects of sport and channel them in a coordinated way towards the pursuit of the MDGs.

Sport and sustainable human development

Central to the United Nations notion of development is sustainable human development, which recognizes that development is more than economic growth. Development is a process of enlarging people's choices and increasing the opportunities available to all members of society. Based on the principles of inclusion, equity and sustainability, emphasis is on the importance of increasing opportunities for the current generation as well as generations to come. The basic human capabilities that are necessary for this are to "lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living and to be able to participate in the life of the community".⁵ Sport can directly help build these capabilities.

Participation in sport has significant physical benefits, contributing to people's ability to lead long and healthy lives, improving well-being, extending life expectancy and reducing the likelihood of several major non-communicable diseases, particularly heart disease, diabetes and certain cancers. Sport also provides psychosocial benefits, such as fostering social integration and teaching coping mechanisms, as well as psychological benefits, such as reducing depression and improving concentration.

Sport further builds human capabilities by increasing knowledge and contributing to education. Incorporating physical education into the school curriculum and providing opportunities for recreation improves a child's ability to learn, with evidence indicating that it also increases attendance and overall achievement. Sport also educates people about the body, raising awareness and respect for their bodies and those of others, critical for healthy living and the prevention of diseases, like HIV/AIDS. Similarly, participation in outdoor sports raises awareness and respect for the environment, teaching people about the importance of a clean and healthy environment.

Sport is also a key component of social life, directly engaging communities. It brings people together in a fun and participatory way. It helps create social relationships, build connections and improve communication between individuals and groups. Sport also mobilizes volunteers and promotes active community involvement, helping to build social capital and strengthen the social fabric.

Risk Factors

Many of the risk factors correlated with high rate offending are those associated with deprivation and disadvantage. Among these were poor child-rearing and supervision; antisocial parents and siblings; low family income; and school failure (Farrington, 1987). Thus children who come from homes where discipline is inconsistent and erratic; where parents do not care for them; where

parents themselves may have problems with drugs and crime; where parents are poor and unemployed; who do not achieve at school; and who do not make a successful transition to the labour market make up the group of individuals who are most likely to be potential offenders. The United States Surgeon General (2001) has recently reported that these risk factors are most important during childhood, while during adolescence peer-related risk factors become more important. These factors include weak ties to conventional peers, ties to antisocial or delinquent peers, and belonging to a gang. Protective factors include being tolerant of deviance and being committed to school (Surgeon General, 2001).

To be successful, social development programs must change some of all of these factors that put youth at risk of behavioural problems. However, while programs must address these risk factors program planners must always remember that not all children who are at risk will become serious offenders. Thus it is important that programs do not make the situation worse by singling some children out and consequently stigmatizing them. Further, Greenwood and his colleagues (1998) have shown that interventions targeted at high-risk youth are more cost-effective than programs aimed at all youth.

The role of local government in youth criminality prevention

Local governments have a crucial role to play in preventing crime and victimisation among young people, and providing them with choices that reduce the likelihood that they will choose criminal activities. Cities are traditionally responsible for functions like health, housing and urban planning, and have close contact with education, social welfare, and other services.

Access to education, supportive and consistent parenting and meaningful community and social involvement will increase a young person's resilience to crime. One of the primary challenges facing local governments and the criminal justice system is to provide adequate alternatives - beyond law enforcement and prison-based options - for young people who are likely to commit crime. Local government can play a vital role in creating an environment that increases a young person's resilience to choosing the criminal option.

Both the social and environmental situation, and the local context in which crimes are committed need to be considered when planning crime reduction strategies. For local governments a reduction in crime should form part of assessing whether overall community development has been successful. Targeting young people and building their specific needs into programmes is a key route to achieving this.

Local government can play an increasingly significant role in boosting the quality of life of all citizens by investing time, effort and resources in improving life chances of young people.

Results of crime prevention programmes, particularly youth-based programmes are often long-term and not immediately evident to the public. It is therefore vital that local governments are able to justify the value of such programmes and ensure wide support from the community.

There is also a need for increased community awareness of the effectiveness of prevention rather than punishment and the role that local government can play in prevention.

Discussion

Questions about sport and physical activity as strategies in crime prevention need rigorous scrutiny. This paper has focused on sport and physical activity as a means of crime prevention. The case studies demonstrate opportunities for individual young people to engage in behaviours that are valued by society. They also suggest that it is possible to reduce the supply of motivated offenders by diverting young people from offending behaviour to engage in sport and other physical activities, and show how the environment and infrastructure in communities can help make the pro-social choice easier than the anti-social choice. On another level, sport and physical activity can be used as strategies within a broader context involving, for example, development of values, social support and positive role models (Mason and Wilson 1988, p. 8; Chaiken 1998). In both the remote and the urban areas, sport and physical activity were important, but not sufficient, components of a broader strategy.

There are strong theoretical arguments for the potentially positive contribution that sport can make to reduce the propensity by young people to commit crime.

Large-scale diversionary projects tend to have vague rationales, overly-ambitious objectives and a relatively unsophisticated understanding of the variety and complexity of the causes of criminality.

Diversionary programmes need to be based on more precise understandings and definitions of the causes of criminality, the nature of sports' processes which are relevant to addressing such factors, and an understanding of the intermediate outcomes (changes in attitudes) required to achieve the desired final outcomes (changes in behaviour).

Available evidence suggests that outreach approaches, credible leadership, 'bottom-up' approaches and non-traditional, local provision appear to have the best chance of success with the most marginal at-risk groups. A needs-based, youth work approach may be more appropriate than a product-led sports development approach.

Crucially, sport is at its most effective when combined with programmes that address issues of personal and social development. "It appears that... playing sport will not lead to a permanent reduction in crime by itself. Successful programmes require a variety of other support mechanisms to be in place." (Cabinet Office, 2002)

Suggestions

Sport and physical activity can combine with other interventions to reduce crime in particular groups and communities.

- It appears that sport and physical activity can reduce crime by providing accessible, appropriate activities in a supportive social context. In other words, sport and physical activity must be connected positively within the social fabric of groups and communities.
- Sport and physical activity-based interventions must be conducted in collaboration with a range of other strategies and sectors.
- Elite sporting bodies can be involved in programs directly aimed at particular crimes or communities.
- It is essential to consider how the design, location, and funding of sporting and recreational infrastructure contributes to social cohesion, and avoids taking sport and physical activity out of its social context.
- The cases do not suggest “one size fits all” strategies; instead, they represent the value of community development approaches to tailor programs to particular needs. Nevertheless, this should not prevent us from suggesting common strategies and processes, and collecting examples of good practice.
- Recreation and sport programs established for the explicit purpose of crime prevention should be subject to rigorous evaluation.

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