

renewal.net Overview

Sport and Youth Offending



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Summary

Participation in structured sporting activities by young people can help increase community safety. Different schemes divert young people from crime and anti-social behaviour by:

- Targeting local 'hotspots' with attractive and positive activities for young people
- Providing 'protection factors' for young people so that they can better resist pressures to take part in harmful or anti-social behaviour
- Increasing young people's self-esteem and organisational and social skills
- Providing positive role models for the young people through the coaches and local organisers leading the activities
- Decreasing the perception and fear of crime and anti-social behaviour amongst the community
- Some schemes are targeted at those young people who are most at risk of offending or anti-social behaviour. Other schemes are more broadly based. Some schemes are preventative or diversionary. Others are rehabilitative or developmental.

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Sports activities can help to divert young people from crime and anti-social behaviour but even where these activities are available they are sometimes not as effective as they could be.

What's the Problem?

Offending by young people is a major concern because:

A lot of crime is committed by young people, particularly young males. However, only a minority of young people commit crime. (Around 3% of young offenders commit 22% of youth crime.)

Young people are the most likely to be victims of young offenders.

Much of the behaviour labelled as 'criminal' is not in fact unlawful, but it is anti-social and is experienced as upsetting or threatening by those who witness it or are on the receiving end.

Different people, including different generations, have different ideas about what is acceptable behaviour change.

Offending by young people often takes place in public and is very visible.

For many years, the Government, local authorities, charities and voluntary organisations have organised a range of diversionary activities for young people. These have helped to address youth offending by:

Stopping young people from getting bored – 'the devil makes mischief for idle hands to do'.

Involving young people in constructive activities in a structured environment.

Providing positive role models in the coaches and organisers.

Helping to combat peer group pressure where this may favour delinquent behaviour.

Increasing the self-esteem and organisational and social skills of young people and thereby giving them other, acceptable ways of relating to other people and the world.

Providing employment opportunities either directly through qualifications leading to sports coaching or indirectly by developing transferable skills.

Addressing offending behaviour for some individual young people at an early age to help them from entering a "life of crime".

But there are a number of issues which mean that sports diversionary projects are often not as effective as they might be:

- The widespread use of short term funding means that projects often do not last long enough to achieve any meaningful impact
- Last-minute funding can lead to projects which are disorganised and lacking in focus

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large scale diversionary projects (i.e. those aimed at youth generally rather than a small number of young people considered most at risk) can have vague rationales and overly ambitious objectives • Traditional programmes based in sports centres have only a limited impact • A lack of monitoring and evaluation means that the outcomes of projects often go unmeasured
<p><i>Traditional sports centres are not serving the needs of young people from poorer backgrounds, while the impact of diversionary sports projects has been limited by short term funding, vague rationales and unrealistic objectives in order to attract funding, and poor local facilities.</i></p>	<h2>What are the causes?</h2> <p>There are a number of reasons why projects aimed at reducing youth offending have not been as effective as they could be.</p> <p>For a variety of reasons traditional ‘local authority’ sports centres are not serving the needs of young people from poorer backgrounds or those at risk of offending. Sports centres are not geared towards this kind of work. Delivering structured activities for young people is relatively staff-intensive and requires staff with the training and personal qualities to work with young people perceived as being ‘difficult to deal with’. The need for sports centres to be business-like and generate income has favoured those activities and groups which generate the most income – e.g. adults over young people. The subsidy that most local authority centres rely on is too small to support these staff-intensive, low income generating activities. Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) has resulted in a split between sports facility management and sports development officers – this has made it difficult to get a full range of sports development activities in most sports centres.</p> <p>Sports development officers have often taken a ‘product-led’ sports development approach rather than a needs-based youth work approach. Finally, there are a number of other barriers to accessing many centres by young people from neighbourhood renewal areas – including price, distance, location, and perceptions that ‘the sports centre isn’t for the likes of us’.</p> <p>The failure of many sports centres has led to the rise of a number of outreach projects which work on or near the estates and neighbourhood renewal areas. Some of these are undertaken by sports professionals or clubs; some are delivered by youth organisations and by non-sporting voluntary and community organisations. These are more effective but can still be limited in their impact for a number of reasons.</p> <p>First, there is increasing evidence that the longer the intervention the greater the impact. But often ‘diversionary activities’ are funded and programmed for short periods – often during those times when there is perceived to be the greatest risk of youth offending, e.g. school holidays, summer evenings. This limits the impact, particularly when the funding is last minute leading to the project being badly organised.</p>

It means that the activity is not linked to any appropriate exit route so that the young person can continue to participate.

Second, some projects are designed to attract as large a number of participants as possible. While this extends participation and combats social exclusion, there are doubts about how much these schemes impact on youth offending. A more targeted approach, and one which puts the sports activities in the wider context of providing 'protection' factors protecting young people against involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour, appears to have more impact.

Third, some projects have vague rationales and unrealistic targets. Sport is widely seen as a key element in engaging young people (particularly young males). This can lead to the benefits of sport being over-sold: funding applications have targets which look good on paper (and attract the funding) but are unrealistic on the ground.

Fourth, there is a lack of even basic sports facilities in some areas. Many of the informal sports areas that remain are old, poorly maintained and with unsafe playing surfaces. Some 'kickabout' areas on estates have been 'developed' for other uses, e.g. car parking.

Fifth, some sports projects have been delivered in isolation rather than as part of a wider partnership, including key partners such as the Youth Offending Team, or Youth Service. Others are delivered by Sports Development Officers, Coaches and Leaders who do not have the appropriate skills or personal qualities for the task.

Until recently there was comparatively little hard evidence that sports projects had a significant impact on community safety. The sports sector has only recently started to monitor projects, and there remain practical difficulties on the ground with staff not having the time, skills or desire to collect monitoring data. It is also difficult to identify the precise difference that a sports project makes in an area where there are other youth offending initiatives taking place.

Recent research for the Youth Justice Board sets out the case for adopting a 'risk and protection factor' model in understanding youth crime. While sports projects can help to off-set some risks (e.g. by decreasing the opportunities for crime, combating alienation and impulsivity), their major influence is on providing 'protection' factors, i.e. factors that protect against involvement in youth crime including:

- The promotion of healthy standards
- Social bonding
- Adults who lead by example and have clearly stated expectations about young people's behaviour
- Opportunities for involvement

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social skills • Recognition and due praise <p>Sports projects which enhance these factors in young people will help to decrease levels of youth offending. This will usually mean that the sports projects will be delivered as part of a wider series of activities in partnership with renewal agencies and local groups. They will be 'packaged' within the context of other social and educational activities and within an overall ethos which emphasises positive values.</p>
<p><i>A range of sports activities are being tried, including passive provision, supervised sports activities during holidays, and long-term programmes targeted at those young people most at risk.</i></p>	<h3>What's been tried?</h3> <p>A number of approaches are being developed to use sport to help tackle and prevent youth offending. These can be seen as forming a 'Sports Intervention Spectrum'. At one end, the approach is preventative and is targeted at a stable, 'low risk', youth community. Here, the intervention is of low intensity – it may simply be the provision of an unsupervised kickabout area – and aimed at a large population. Often this passive provision is provided by the local authority.</p> <p>In the centre of the spectrum, the youth targeted are 'medium risk' – that is, there is some anti-social behaviour evident. Sports programmes are medium intensity and there is often some supervision, perhaps through supervised coaching sessions. Leagues, coaching and skill development are often used with the aim of instilling positive values. The level of supervision is often increased during those times when there is perceived to be most risk of anti-social behaviour – school holidays, weekends, evenings during the summer months. These schemes are usually provided by sports development teams, youth services or the police, often acting in partnership.</p> <p>Two examples of work in this area are SPLASH and Streetgames. Splash schemes include a range of activities including sports, arts, visits, fun activities, residential trips and social skills development. Evaluation of the 2001 Splash schemes indicated there was a noticeable reduction in offending in areas where the schemes were being implemented – with juvenile nuisance falling by almost 20%; drug offences by 25%; and motor crime by 11%.</p> <p>Pilots for Streetgames were held in south east London and in the North East in summer 2003. The south east London project involved structured football coaching in deprived estates, delivered by local organisations and emphasising a 'fair play' ethos. The project culminated in a tournament with teams from different estates competing against each other. Evaluation of the project found that participants' social and sportsmanship skills had increased, that the fear of crime had decreased and that the tournament had helped to break down barriers between young people living on different estates.</p>

At the other end of the Sports Intervention Spectrum, the young people targeted are those at 'high risk' – typically offenders or young people who have been referred by the authorities. There is active supervision, often 'one to one' sessions, and the intervention is likely to be long term. The role of sport is to provide a safe, supportive, structured environment, and to help the individual's self-development through raising confidence and building skills. The sports programmes will be part of a wider programme of personal, social and educational development. Here, the primary provider is often the Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), the Probation Service, the Police and – in the case of Positive Futures projects and some Active Communities projects – Sport England.

Managed within the Home Office Drugs Strategy Directorate (and with a wide range of partners), there are now 107 Positive Futures projects nationally. Positive Futures projects are targeted at the 50 most 'at risk' young people aged 10 to 19 in neighbourhoods identified as being amongst the 20% most deprived in the country. Around 50% of the young people participating in Positive Futures programmes have been referred by other agencies, e.g. YOTs. These are long term projects in which sport is used to establish relationships with these socially marginalised young people. Projects also include outreach work; training and mentoring; education programmes; and leadership training. Community safety is only one of the impacts of this social inclusion programme. It has helped 35,000 young people in the most deprived areas get involved in sport. It has motivated and raised aspirations, helped almost 14,000 find a job, take up volunteering, enter training or improve their education.

Evaluations of Positive Futures have found that 74% of partners believed that the local area had improved as a result of the project, and 65% that it had reduced participants' offending. There was evidence in most projects of a correlation between the development of the project and youth offending – with a decline in youth offending by between 14% and 77% for different projects. However, in many cases the Positive Futures programme was only one of a number of interventions, including Youth Inclusion Programmes, aimed at decreasing youth offending. Thus, while Positive Futures played a part in these reductions, these other initiatives are also crucial.

Two other points. First, the impact of Positive Futures, like Streetgames, is much wider than community safety. In particular, they encourage – along with programmes such as Positive Activities for Young People (PAYP) – young people back into education and training and, subsequently, employment. Second, Positive Futures, Streetgames and Splash are all organised through partnerships involving sports, community safety and local organisations. Their success emphasises that sport has a greater impact in terms of youth offending when it is part of a wider strategy and draws on the skills, experience and insights of renewal agencies and community groups.

Checklist

Planning

- First assess the needs of young people in your area: what are they interested in, how far do they want to be involved, what would most attract them? For many smaller projects, much of this 'needs assessment' can be based on local knowledge.
- Work out where you are in the 'Sports Intervention Spectrum'. This will help to define which target group you are aiming for, the level of supervision, coaching and mentoring required, who will be the most appropriate partners and where funding is most likely to come from.
- Research has shown that the empowerment and involvement of young people is important. While adults define the issues in terms of 'diversion' and 'rehabilitation', young people define the issues in terms of 'police harassment' and with the desire to gain adult respect and tolerance. Remember to take this on board when developing your sports programmes.
- Build in funding for monitoring and evaluation of the project right from the beginning. This means making sure that you get potential funders around the table as partners from the start of the project. Also ensure that partners can fund their staffing and other inputs – otherwise build funding for this in from the beginning.
- Funding needs to be agreed some time (at least three months) before the start of the project to give time to organise coaches, equipment, programmes, monitoring, address health & safety, insurance, child protection, etc.

Partnership Working

- Partnership working is more effective in terms of youth offending than going it alone. Sports organisations, sports professionals, local voluntary and community groups and renewal agencies – all bring skills and experiences which will make your project more successful.

Delivery

- It helps if coaches and organisers are local – not only do they have local knowledge and are in daily contact with others from the community, but this can help to give them credibility with the young people involved. Positive Futures and the Home Office are currently drawing together the competencies needed by workers operating in deprived areas.
- Evidence suggests that there is a huge demand from young

people, particularly males, for sports projects. The limiting factor is often the lack of qualified, street-wise coaches.

- The involvement of parents and local residents to help with the range of tasks involved in sports coaching sessions, leagues and tournaments can strengthen the project.
- Where possible build in 'exit routes' for participants. For the talented this may be through making links with sports clubs or the local authority's Sports Development Teams. But for most the exit route is often 'more of the same'. Ultimately this means persuading the local authority that it should fund the project from its mainstream budgets.
- As well as increasing participation, aim to increase the skills of participants – social, communication and team skills, getting on with peers and officials – these are all 'protection' factors helping young people resist pressures to take part in anti-social behaviour. These skills will also stand them in good stead in terms of employment.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- To persuade funders about the benefits in terms of youth offending, social inclusion, increasing skills means setting up monitoring and review processes and systems at the same time as you are setting up the project itself.

Want to know more

Contacts

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