

SPORT: A TOOL FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?

An impact report of Inner city sports programmes in New York.

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Introduction

In recent history there have been many attempts to measure the notion that sport can positively influence young people whilst reducing youth crime and anti social behaviour. The results have been inconclusive Nicholls and Crow (2004) Many have considered the complexity of measuring the impact of crime reduction of different types of young people, which use the medium of sports activity' The general theme which runs throughout various texts within the field is that there is very little evidence for their effectiveness Smith and Waddington (2003). Using qualitative methods it is the intention of this study to create an impact report on sports schemes in the New York area which aim (directly or indirectly) is to reduce youth nuisance and positively influence 'at risk' young people.

Background information

In Britain today there is a growing concern about the rise in youth crime, youth nuisance anti-social behaviour and substance abuse. Consequently there has been an upturn in the amount of government led initiatives whose aim is to tackle the above problems (Mizen, P. 2003). The importance of sport as a social tool has been recognised by the government and local authorities. Houllihan and White (2002). During this time of Austerity the issue of budgets and overspending is a frequent theme of discussion when it comes to debating the worth of such programmes.

Reducing Youth Crime in the USA

There is little evidence that punitive sanctions such as incarceration (e.g., time in a youth prison), shock incarceration (e.g., putting a child in prison overnight) or community service have been effective at reducing juvenile crime (Hoge, 2002). In Ontario USA where a "zero tolerance" policy was implemented more than a decade ago, there has not been a reduction

in youth crime even though the rate of charging youth with criminal offences more than tripled between 1989 and 1993. It is estimated that 70% of the total money spent on youth crime in Ontario is spent on incarceration (Owen, 1993), which is estimated to cost \$100,000 a year for each young offender (St.Thomas, 2008). The Honourable Hal Wootten, Queen's Counsel, former Royal Commissioner into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in Australia, urged delegates at a 1994 conference on preventing youth crime to "have the courage to stand up against those who believe that further dehumanization is the cure for those who have lost their way in society" (Osmand, 1994). According to many criminology experts, the most effective approach to reducing youth crime is to steer young people away from negative social activities before they become involved in criminal activities (Hartmann and Depro, 2006). Rehabilitation was seen by 64% of the public as the most effective way of dealing with young offenders, not incarceration (Hartnegal and Baron, 1994). There needs to be a balanced approach to dealing with young offenders. Some may need to be incarcerated, but many more need to be engaged in community programs that build character, increase self-esteem and develop life skills (Millie et al, 2005). Social development programs that provide youth with positive peer interactions, opportunities to develop problem-solving skills and a supportive adult help reduce the risk factors associated with youth crime (Andrews et al, 1990).

Organised sport is being used throughout the world to curb political extremism and to facilitate peace. In 2007, for example, the United Nations established a "Global Sport Fund" with a \$10million donation from the country of Qatar to engage youth from different parts of the world, particularly those in conflict regions, in sport. Sheikh Saud bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, Secretary- General of the Qatar Olympic Committee, stated that "the Sport Fund targets young people at the age when the temptation to experiment with illegal drugs is high. The main purpose is to promote sports activity among young people and to prevent drug use and crime worldwide" (UNODC, 2007). With more than 1.2 billion 15- to 24-year-olds in the world, the United Nations realized that youth sport represents one of the most dynamic mechanisms in society for transforming dangerous and violent conflict situations because organized sport can engage youth of all races, genders and classes (United Nations, 2005). Daniel Tarschys, former Secretary General of the Council of Europe, stated in 1995

that “the hidden face of sport is also the tens of thousands of enthusiasts who find, in their football, rowing, athletics or rock climbing clubs, a place for meetings and exchange, but, above all, the training ground for community life. In this microcosm, people learn to take responsibility, to follow rules, to accept one another, to look for consensus, to take on democracy. Seen from this angle, sport is par excellence, the ideal school for democracy”.

Reducing Crime through Organised Sport

It is unrealistic to claim that organised youth sport alone can reduce the levels of youth crime in society. The causes of youth crime are complex and multidimensional. Organised sport programs can, however, contribute to reducing youth crime by giving young people a positive identity, feelings of empowerment and by helping youth acquire leadership, teamwork and self-governance skills under adult supervision (Jamieson and Ross, 2007). Several studies have demonstrated that youth sport does prevent youth crime (Utting, 1996). In Kansas City, Missouri, evening and midnight basketball programs have reduced the crime rate among African American youth (Hawkins, 1998). According to the Kansas City Police, there was a one-third to two-thirds reduction in juvenile crime in areas where there was a midnight basketball program for 10- to 21-year-olds (Kennedy and O'Brien, 1996). In Alexandria, Virginia, there was a reduction in crime among young women who participated in a running program sponsored by the Road Runners Club of America (Vibar-Bawzon, J.,1997). In Australia, rehabilitation programs that engaged Aboriginal young offenders in organized sport contributed significantly to reducing crime

Methodology

Using qualitative methods it is the intention of this study to create an impact report on sports schemes in New York area whose aim is to reduce youth nuisance and positively influence ‘at risk’ individuals. A series of focus groups and individual interviews will be held with a group of young individuals who have partaken in the various schemes which are on offer from the local agencies and organisations. The focus groups will consist of no more than eight individuals and will be unstructured with the interviewer acting as a ‘facilitator’ to stimulate relevant

discussion. The rationale behind using a focus group to obtain information is backed up by Gratton and Jones (2004) who state that “focus groups can be particularly useful to collect data from groups that may otherwise be unwilling to provide it”. These series of meetings will hopefully offer meaningful and personal insight into the subject matter and should allow for a subjective opinion to be formed on whether or not such schemes are of benefit. According to Gratton and Jones (2004) “Reliability can be enhanced through a standardised interview environment, and recording with the interviewee’s permission.” No attempt will be made to balance the group with regards to gender in order to gain environmental validity.

In addition to these meetings interviews will be held with various coaches and youth workers who are staffing the inner city sports programmes in the New York area. These interviews will be held in order to gain a balanced perspective of the issue at hand. The interviews will be conducted in a semi-structured fashion which will allow the researcher to adopt a flexible approach to the data collection process. It will enable the participants to talk freely about their own, personal experiences and allow for unexpected data to emerge. I will be able to obtain a broad collection of information which will in turn answer the initial research question

New York Sports projects

The Midnight basketball league in Down Town Manhattan is a prime example of a successful, sports based youth inclusion programme. The aim of the project is to have “a direct impact on all local issues, especially reducing crime and disorder, including anti-social behaviour by operating at spike times of youth nuisance, but also providing help and advice on all issues that a young person may have”. The scheme also caters for “mainstream” young people consequently integrating all aspects of the local community to guarantee “future sustainable, cohesive communities”. A member of the volunteer team was quoted as saying “By embracing the local facilities, the midnight basketball league aim to unite the youth of the area and give them a sense of local ownership”. After meeting with the young people who attended the league and discussing a series of issues with the young people the information gathered recognized four issues directly affecting the young people:

Money/ lack of things to do: No money = no opportunities.

Gangs: The peer pressure and violent nature associated with them

Drugs: The numerous problems caused by drug dealers/ drug dealing.

The Police: The breakdown in relations between the young people and the police.

According to young people, these four problematic areas issues are everyday worries and issues in their day to day lives and are fundamental to the way that the young people relate to and define not only their community but also themselves. These four areas are in essence building blocks and the structural elements of the community in which the young people operate. None of the above areas can be discussed in solitude- a lack of money, the easily accessible lure of drugs and the of crime play pivotal roles in shaping their mentality and consequential behaviour.

During my research I realised that there is an overwhelming drug problem facing the youth in the local area. On closer inspection of the work carried out by the Midnight Basketball League it came to my attention that many of the projects in operation, like in England use sport not only to provide distractions from the problems facing the youth but to also to educate and distribute information and advice about issues such as substance abuse.

This kind of Partnership work enables the staff to integrate the young individuals in array of courses and programmes that they themselves may not be able to offer such as non-sporting educational activities like 'DJing' and Theatre studies.

Integration with the above programmes also initiates the contact which is needed to progress the young individual into more standard education and eventually the working environment. Numerous projects make use of sporting events to circulate information and guidance regarding various issues relevant to the young people such as substance and alcohol misuse. For a lot of the young people such projects can offer a stage where they feel comfortable to discuss their concerns or ask for information. According to the Young People who partook in the focus groups the sessions were very informative and delivered in a fun and creative fashion. A learning tool which was particularly popular was a fun session which saw the

Young People take a free throw whilst wearing “Liquor lenses” visual distortion the specially made goggles allowed the Young people to experience the effects of alcohol whilst attempting to complete an otherwise simple task.

The term ‘something to do’ or phrases of the same effect were stated vastly during the focus groups: *“I think is a good thing what they are doing (referring to the streetlife football team) because it’s something to do innit. Cos usually on the Saturdays we are normally just doing nothing, but now we have something to do on Saturdays and Sundays- It’s something to look forward to innit”.*

As previously stated a big concern for the Young People is the allure of crime and gang culture, the mere chance of an outlet, a release and a productive way in which to spend their time and focus their efforts have been welcomed by the group. The following conversation with some young people highlight the kind of impact that taking part in the programme can generate:

Ryan: *yeah I’d say this teams the best thing they’ve have done for us.*

Aaron: *Yeah for real for real- you fell part of something ya get me?*

Ryan: *yeah I know what you mean it makes u wanna chill the night before aswell, u don’t want to be out getting wrecked (intoxicated) if you’ve got a game in the morning innit’*

Aaron: *yeah I know what you mean mate, the youth round here need stuff where they can go and do things they are interested in.*

Mike: *So, what about MBL then? Do you reckon the scheme’s a good idea?*

Dean: *No, they’re shit! Only joking innit, nah definitely yeah it’s give us something to do you know what I mean.*

Josh: *Yeah serious, without this yeah, seriously, without this team, I’d probably be up to no good innit- committing crimes and that.*

An educational element has also been integrated into the setup of MBL with various coaching courses and qualifications being made available to the individuals who are looking to become

involved in a more supervisory capacity helping with regards to organisation and refereeing etc. The young people have been encouraged to take advantage of such opportunities as the qualifications and experience alone would offer invaluable experience when seeking employment in the sports and leisure sector. A huge emphasis of most of the programmes was volunteers. During times of recession it is paramount that people and communities recognise that they themselves (with perhaps small amounts of guidance and structure from central government) can make a difference. One project such as this is the "Kids First programme in Brooklyn.

This project enables 250 underprivileged youth to participate in after-school organised sports free of charge, by covering basic costs of uniforms, equipment, participation fees, and transportation. The children they work with are children facing poverty, absent parents, poor grades, and families affected by gangs, drugs, and crime. According to Colin Withersby Head of youth engagement "We see sports as a way to touch children's lives, model life and character skills, and as an opportunity for children to experience success. Over 80% of our youth are from low-income, single-parent homes whose families can't afford to pay participation costs" The project allows children to play for free. They provide a wide range of after-school league sports to 250 youth ages 8-18. The project's purpose is to teach life skills through sports. Once again sport is the tool not the solution. Research shows extracurricular participation increases academic commitment and success. Just 53% of Brooklyn's Public School students graduate high school. By providing 250 youth an opportunity to develop and earn success through sports, Kids First are giving them one more tool to realize academic and personal success. One young person was quoted as saying "I learned that by achieving at a level that allows you to have options, you gain control over your life...It's about gaining and maintaining confidence that you can achieve your goals."

Youth at Risk (YAR) is a not-for-profit, volunteer driven organisation committed to transforming the chaotic lives of young people through persistent and compassionate mentoring. Since 1985, Youth at Risk (YAR) has committed to transforming the lives of disadvantaged youth who exhibit behaviours such as truancy, violence, gang membership, physical and verbal violence, and at-risk sexual activity.

According to Francisco Duarte an experienced volunteer “Our mission is to decrease the troublesome behaviour of youth and to enhance the effectiveness of the people who live and work with them. Youth At Risk currently provides both prevention and intervention services and we do this using a diverse and individualistic approach, our methods support the development of critical educational and social outcomes for youth, including: decreased involvement in gangs, violence, and teen sexual activity, development of goal-directed behaviour, increased GPA (grade point average) and school attendance, increased self-worth and self-esteem, increased sense of family, peer and community support and a shift in attitude and behaviour, from being a victim to taking responsible actions. Francisco and other staff I spoke to was a huge advocate of the use of sport to engage the young people on his caseload and stated that they have close links with local sports provisions, especially midtown boxing club “Fight camp” the gym welcomes a lot of local youths through the door and have helped with the programme “Warriors way” run by the agency Warriors Way empowers boys who are most at risk of dropping out of school, and becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. The program develops boys in middle and high school, living in single parent households with absent dads. With the coaching of adult male mentors, youth learn to stay in school, handle aggression through verbal communication and contribute service to communities.

Discussion

Sport, in confinement is not a miracle cure which is capable of transforming society and cultures, the problems which are prevalent in inner city areas worldwide basically come down to poverty and class divides. Children and young people are born into destitute, overly populated areas with little to none positive role models, a media which tells them that the only way out is crime and are raised in single parent households which are a melting pots of frustration, pain and sheer ignorance. Sport is a cloth, a mop which can be used to wipe some of the spillage from the broken pipes of society, a tool to engage young people, a tool to teach discipline, hard work, communication skills, team work, strength resilience, loyalty and expose children to loss and failure in an educational environment whilst also exposing them to

countless “well done’s” and praise which they otherwise may not experience. The American coach is held in the highest esteem, in a room of professionals he is respected in the same fashion as a Teacher or a Lawyer. A coach is much more than simply a coach, he is a mentor, a role-model, a confidant and in some cases the only positive role-model the children connect with.

On completion of my research it became evident to me that many American youth organisations and their corresponding activities are appealing to the youth as an alternative to the often boredom induced anti-social and nuisance behaviour. “The debate about the relationship between sports participation and crime divides broadly into theories of ‘prevention’ (or diversion) and theories about the rehabilitation of offenders” (Coalter *et al*, 2000) It is clear to see that the many initiatives which the organisation have to offer are attracting, educating and engaging the young individuals living in the New York area and simultaneously helping them to realise their true potential, they are creating opportunities that address and tackle the numerous issues and problems associated with the often problematic and challenging young individuals who they engage with. The MBL approach would include an attempt to alter a young person’s opportunity structure through the use of skills training, educational and vocational programs. From the results gathered it is clear to see that sport is having a positive effect on the young people involved. However; it could be argued that such schemes are merely offering a distraction. By attracting some of the local youths off the streets and into a sports facility it is sure to have at the very least, a positive effect on crime rates. In this perspective it could be argued that sport is no more than a means of surveillance and that sports participation is not bringing about a permanent change in cultural behaviour but is instead merely offering a temporary distraction for the youth. “Schemes such as this (Basketball) are of great importance to local communities and have high success rates when trying to reach and positively influence at risk and socially marginalised young individuals, such programmes often offer individuals opportunities and careers that would otherwise be unavailable”. There is a broad range of activities which are on offer to the children who may otherwise be unable to experience such activities. Football, Arts, Trips, Basketball, DJing, Outdoor pursuits, Multi-sport, Music, Computers, Swimming, Climbing and Dance comprise the list of activities accessible at the time of writing this. Access to such activities can only be

positive. As a result of my Research and the series of focus groups held with the Young People I have realised that 'not having anywhere to go' or 'anything to do' is not only problem which is facing these young individuals; the problems are numerous and multi-faceted- a lack of money, the easily accessible lure of drugs and the of crime play pivotal roles in shaping there mentality and consequential behaviour. The problems which the youth of today are facing are diverse and cannot be solved via such programmes alone. 'It would be naïve to think, and unrealistic to claim, that sport alone can reduce the levels of youth crime in society... Research evidence to support the effectiveness of sport in reducing criminality among young people is limited by a high-quality systematic evaluation... [However] there is growing experiential evidence that sport can play an influential role. Indirectly sport can have an impact by providing challenge and adventure, and by giving meaning and a sense of purpose to young people's lives where previously there was a vacuum' Bull et al (2003). Henry (2001) argues that such provisions are 'justifiable' because that by occupying the 'at risk' individuals, crime rates will fall.

Although initiatives such as MBL and are achieving applaud able levels of success it will take a change in society itself to cure the problems facing areas such as New York and although there is very encouraging evidence of successful practice, further research is needed to better understand successful delivery and the complexity associated with the long-term relationships between projects and individual participants. The projects which have been investigated during this report are having an impact in terms of decreasing offending amongst those 'at risk' individuals participating in the programmes. However, for the purpose of this research this impact cannot be overestimated, for some young people it obviously makes a positive impact, but for others the effects may be much less apparent or even completely void.

There were few limitations with regards to the study. One key concern was sustainability, are these positive effects likely to last in the long term? The study only allowed for 6 weeks of analysis and relied on the data and information provided by each of the agencies I spoke to. Another concern which arose during the study is one shared by Collins *et al* (1999) where the Research Report: 'Sport and Social Exclusion' suggests that a ".... major problem with all such studies is that the lower levels of delinquency may be because of the young people who

come onto the schemes are self-selecting and more likely to offend less” Although the data gathered demonstrated and reinforced the New impact report there are no assurances that such ‘positive experiences’ can be positively transferred. It is thought that by associating with and learning the values of morals, teamwork, respect for others, acceptance of authority (referees and coaches), teamwork and sharing etc. in the sporting arena that the individual will be able to positively transfer the above qualities and reap the benefits in everyday life, it would only be by staying in contact with the individuals who participated in this study that would allow such conclusions to be drawn.

With regards to project sustainability a “major problem is that such schemes rarely run beyond three months and some are a matter of days. A sail training week or a mountain expedition may be a life-changing experience in mental terms, but if the youth returns to the same physical and social complex or deprivation, the values and conditioning of many years soon re-assert themselves. The constant cry is for longer schemes and prolonged follow-up support, but this happens in only a handful of cases” Collins *et al* (1999). This dilemma with sustainability often causes problems with regards to funding. Due to the inability to provide evidence of project sustainability certain schemes fail when trying to receive political (and financial) support from local and central government. According to houllihan (2003) “...poverty is the core of exclusion”.

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