



THE CASE FOR SPORT

Can sport reduce crime amongst young people?

Dacre Dunlop

The most common images of crime, certainly those we are most subjected to by the media, are those of juvenile crime - stealing cars, vandalism, violence and drug abuse.

We are seeing an increase in criminal damage, drug-related offences and violent crime. Equally, we are also seeing a large proportion of crime being committed by juveniles aged between 10 and 17 years. Finally, crime in rural areas, where there are fewer opportunities for diversion, has also shown an increase over the past few years.

Juveniles cite boredom as the most common reason for committing a criminal offence. The case for sport is that it can help to reduce crime by relieving boredom and providing a purposeful and constructive outlet for youthful energy and enthusiasm.

A sense of achievement

Sport should be for all and it is important that our communities and in particular young people, have access to enjoyable and enriching sporting opportunities. The benefits of sport are that it enhances community spirit, equality of opportunity, personal development and social integration. In addition, it provides fun, enjoyment and a sense of achievement.

However, in making the case for sport, to raise its profile and importance at all political levels, it is essential that sport is seen not just for its own sake, but for the considerable economic and health benefits it brings.

In terms of the economy, a study in the Northern Region in 1992 showed that expenditure on sport was £638m, employment in sport was 26,000 jobs, capital investment in sport was £26m, each household spent £288 per year and volunteer involvement was equivalent to 900 full-time jobs.

In terms of health, surveys show that the majority of people are not active enough - they are not fit. There are significant long-term health benefits from regular physical activity and the most likely source of activity is through sport.

Just as we argue that sport can be preventative medicine, can sport also have a preventative effect on crime?

Reducing crime?

A further and important case for sport, albeit perhaps not exposed to the same detailed research as economy and health, is its potential in reducing crime. Whilst

sport can have a role to play in controlling crime, ranging from rehabilitation of offenders, integrating offenders and non-offenders, it is community sports programmes which could divert young people from crime and influence community regeneration. Good community sports developmental programmes which are well researched and marketed will almost certainly divert young people from crime, dispel aggression and violent tendencies, influence community regeneration, reduce vandalism and, as a result, expenditure on the results of vandalism.

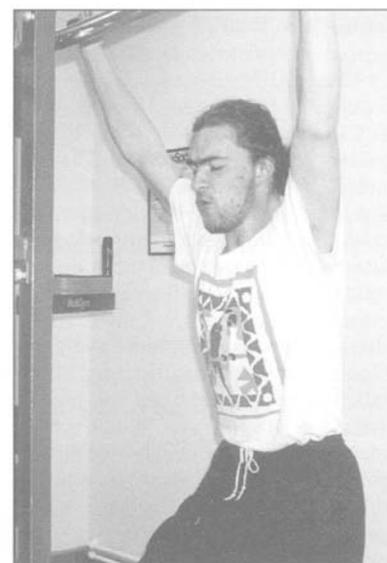
In addition, social changes in our society have resulted in the fact that young people are now often separated from family influences. A youth culture now prevails which puts importance and pressure on peer groups and others such as sports coaches and leaders to set examples. Therefore, the importance in providing enriching, challenging and enjoyable sporting opportunities and investment in people to provide these opportunities has never been greater.

For as many children as possible the Sports Council intends that the National Junior Sports Programme should be the pathway from the school playground to the international sporting arena.

There is also a growing importance of the need for fair play and good standards in sport as an example to young people to carry forward into adult life. Whilst the sport and crime relationship is difficult to assess, particularly in relation to cause and effect and the impact in reducing deviant behaviour, it is clear that sport has an important role to play. Sport is by no means the complete answer to our crime problems, but getting young offenders and those at risk involved in sport and active recreation may help them divert them from criminal activity.

Raising the debate

The Government Policy Statement, 'Sport - Raising the Game', produced in July 1995, includes a quote from the Prime Minister stating "the quality of life in Britain should not revolve simply around material success. Some people say that sport is a peripheral and minor concern. I profoundly disagree. It enriches the lives of the thousands of millions of people of all ages around the world who know and enjoy it. Sport is a central part of Britain's National Heritage. It is a binding force between generations and across borders."



Hampshire Probation Service

In terms of young people, the Prime Minister states: "I have been concerned about the growing evidence of a decline of sport in many of our schools. My ambition is to put sport back at the heart of weekly life in every school and to re-establish sport as one of the great pillars of education alongside the academic, the vocational and the moral."

In response to that concern, the Sports Council has recently launched the National Junior Sports Programme to provide new and better quality sporting opportunities for 4-18 year olds. The Sports Council, supported by the Government, has an ambition to have fitter children, children who feel good about themselves, who are physically and socially more adept and who have the opportunity to develop teamwork skills and healthy, physically active habits to last a lifetime, and have some fun at the same time. For as many children as possible the Sports Council intends that the National Junior Sports Programme should be the pathway from the school playground to the international sporting arena. With this mission statement, I feel this programme must have an effect on reducing crime amongst our younger generation in providing a purposeful and constructive outlet for youthful energy and enthusiasm, an answer to the boredom factor and a deviation from crime.

References:

Priorities for Progress - A Strategy for Sport in the Northern Region 1994-99
Beyond the Barriers - A Strategy for Sport in the East Midlands Region 1994-98

(Government Policy Statement) *Sport: Raising the Game, July 1995*

Dacre Dunlop is Regional Director of the Sports Council (Northern Region)