



SPORTING EVIDENCE

Sport and crime prevention: the evidence of research

Dave Robins

The idea that engaging in sports and outdoor activities has a morally redemptive quality was very popular with Victorian social reformers. Bald claims are sometimes made today. But how effective are sports and outdoor pursuits in crime prevention?

Mistaken assumptions

The assumption that participation in sport or the provision of sports facilities affects levels of delinquency, is made in the absence of any supporting evidence. Coalter (1987), in his review of the literature on the subject commissioned by the Scottish Sports Council felt "unable to conclude that the correlation high level of sports participation/low level of delinquency holds good in the UK". Mason and Wilson (1988) alluded to the myriad of variables that have to be taken into account before the relation between sport and delinquency can be ascertained. My own (1990) study concluded that there is no sound theoretical basis for the use of sport and outdoor adventure activities to combat or prevent juvenile crime.

The view that participation in sport has little effect is shared by many of those who work professionally with offenders. Many are deeply sceptical of sport as prevention. But the power of the sports lobby is strong. Not for the first time, the findings of the researchers and the experiences of the practitioners are at odds with the decisions of the policy makers.

Sport as prevention

The use of sports, games and rigorous PE sessions are just as much the core feature of today's 'young offender institutions' as they were of the Borstals. The use of outdoor adventure in treatment programmes for youth at risk is also commonplace. Considerable amounts of public funds and private charitable donations are deployed in this direction. When asked to propose solutions for young offenders who for the most part are destined to spend their lives trying to survive in the jungles of

the cities, politicians of all political persuasions will evoke windswept rockfaces and speak of Challenges Overcome and Lessons Learnt.

Even Britain's leading expert on young offenders, Professor David Farrington of Cambridge University, has invoked the supporting, and discredited, safety valve theory expounded by the Victorians, by suggesting that 'If offending is linked to boredom, excitement seeking and impulsiveness then it might be reduced by some kinds of community or recreational programmes that provide

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socially approved opportunities for excitement and risk-taking' (Farrington 1989). For your average tearaway a socially approved 'buzz' is a contradiction in terms. This sort of thinking also implies that the best way to handle hyped up, manic and self destructive kids, is to give them more and better opportunities to 'act out'.

The belief in 'sport as prevention' also occurs in community development capital programmes aimed at improving sport and recreational facilities in deprived areas. This approach aims to reduce delinquency rates by encouraging a positive use of leisure time. There is of course nothing objectionable about greater investment in sport and recreational provision in these areas. But it cannot be stressed enough that there is no evidence of concomitant reductions in juvenile crime following such developments. On the contrary,



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gleaming sports centres have become the foci for young people's negative projections and the targets for violent attacks.

Failed dreams

In October 1990 the French high rise suburb of Vaulx en Velins was engulfed in a week of bloody clashes between police and local youths, during which new community facilities were set on fire and destroyed. Immediately before the disturbances a brand new sports centre, including a gymnasium and a swimming pool, had been opened in a euphoric mood of self-congratulation. A climbing wall inaugurated a few days earlier had been seen as the culmination of a successful programme based on the idea of providing constructive sports pursuits for people with time on their hands. At the height of the disturbances, several hundred riot police had to be deployed to protect the sports centre.

Some new treatment programmes attempt to blend the joys of sport and outdoor adventure with group confrontation therapy techniques. Sending 'bad boys' up mountains to find themselves, confronting childhood trauma with more trauma in group therapy: these are the alternatives to the customary verbal beating by the magistrate followed by the custodial sentence. I have found that advocates of such programmes are often propelled by a sort of aggressive optimism which acts as a defence against the hopelessness felt when confronting the destructive nihilism of criminalised youth. (Of course this is preferable to the attitude adopted by the present Home Secretary, Mr Michael Howard. He appears to be



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driven purely by a need to punish children.)

Policy makers and criminal justice professionals need to be reminded of

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the essential futility of sports and outdoor pursuits, the fact that they make no direct contribution to the wealth of the community, or to a fairer society. At the risk of sounding old fashioned, to privilege such programmes is to denigrate more cerebral activities. Intellectual qualities - a sceptical, questioning attitude towards authority and convention, broadening horizons, acquiring a more educated view of society - are not required. The old socialist belief in the educational, and intellectual, advance of working-class youth has been abandoned.

There is no evidence that participation in physical endeavour based programmes, whether punitive or 'liberal', prevents criminality. But another incontrovertible fact is that sports and games are massively popular. A staggering 3 million people play football on a regular basis. Every youth worker and prison officer knows that football is a priceless lowest common denominator of activity designed to hold the attention of young men who are otherwise uncooperative, and who have successfully resisted the lessons of the classroom. The sad consequence of the failure to find real educational solutions for young offenders is that the purely instrumental aspects of sport become the main rationale for provision.

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Sports counselling - the Hampshire Probation Scheme

Keith Waldman & Julia Waldman

Hampshire Probation's Sports Counselling Scheme has thrived for more than a decade, during a period in which sport and offending have become linked as perhaps never before. Sport has become identified as a cause of and a response to crime. National and international sporting bodies have sought to expose and tackle illegal drug-taking in sport; corruption in the football league has been taken in new directions; football hooliganism surfaced again and individual sports idols have run the gauntlet of media attention and the law. From Maradona to Tyson, Cantona and Ben Johnson, the image of the sporting hero has been tainted or, one might argue, re-styled on the 'working class lad makes good' persona.

The glamourisation of sport

It may be argued that a thread which links some of these facets is the commercialisation, even glamorisation of media-friendly sports. Sport has become a potent player in the consumer culture and, in an image conscious society, sport fashion has spread well beyond those who participate in sporting activities themselves. The financial stakes are high for those at the top echelons of sport. So too are the temptations for those who are part of and aspire to its rewards. Sport has shown itself to be, as with other parts of the social fabric of everyday life, woven into the dominant value system of contemporary society.

Politicians who both feed off and contribute to public feeling have recognised the use of sporting symbolism in the image-building process of cultural unity. Who can forget Nelson Mandela displaying the colours of a united South Africa in the 1995 Rugby World Cup? Conversely, however, such symbolism has been used to fan the flames of racial and social division.

Against this changing backdrop of sport in society the Hampshire Probation's Sports Counselling Scheme has used what may be regarded as rather

traditional sporting principles and activities to address the growing disaffection of a small but significant section of the community - a section who may feel disenfranchised from the rather mythological world that national sporting events can seduce us into believing exists. The sporting reality sustained by the Sports Counselling Scheme is sport as a relatively cheap, local, accessible and achievable activity; paring participation down to its basic requirements; playing badminton in jeans, swimming in a borrowed pair of shorts or pitch and putt in a pair of Doc Martens.

The Hampshire Scheme

Throughout the Scheme's life time there has been the necessity understandably to justify the change potential for those offenders who choose to take up the Scheme's eight session programme. Separate to internal evaluations, externally imposed pressures have at times been created by politicians and policy makers who have used the emotive significance of sport to speak

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for political interests in the arena of criminal justice and punishment. The climate towards the use of sport in the punishment and rehabilitation of offenders has historically blown hot and cold. The Scheme has survived periods when sport, particularly residential activity experiences, has faced a battering of criticism in terms of its value and purpose for, in particular, young offenders. Sport became associated with unjustifiable reward for the undeserving. The cardboard young offender became a useful scapegoat for the entrenched disaffection of a poor minority.



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There appears to be an expectation, not held for the middle-classes attending their local health and fitness centre or squash club, that sport with offenders should involve a transformational goal: as if in the face of poverty, unemployment, possibly homelessness, and the criminal justice system a fleeting sporting chance will alter someone's lifestyle and opportunities. As Robins (pg. 14, 1990) suggests:

"Quite remarkable claims are made about the alleged socialising properties of sport which are imbued with an almost mystical significance"

It is interesting to consider, therefore, the key elements in the sporting paradigm of the Sports Counselling Scheme which have enabled it to avoid the harsher attack on activity-based programmes for offenders. It has maintained a straightforward approach to sport participation in the face of an increasingly sophisticated and diversified sporting market. The Scheme also recognises the limits of a purist and puritanical approach towards sporting achievement for its client group, which remains predominantly unemployed young men. There has been an avoidance of the pitfall of an instrumentalist attitude towards sporting provision.

A befriending approach

Whilst the Scheme has limited power to resolve the sometimes insoluble dilemmas related to lack of external resources of its participants it does not seek to deny their existence. It recognises that diet, shelter, discrimination, getting a job or training, sorting benefits and health care need to be acknowledged and attended to alongside the Scheme's goals aimed at building and sustaining the self-worth and self-esteem of individuals. Any person in the community may feel inhibited about attending sports centres if their body weight, appearance or clothing draws attention to their marginality within society. The Scheme adopts a befriending approach which usually involves a member of staff or volunteer accompanying a person or a group to community-based activities and venues of their choice and taking part in the activity with them. No judgements are made about skill or fitness levels; taking part is valued for its own sake rather than aspiring to a particular level, unless individuals themselves wish to strive



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for personal targets.

By sharing the sporting experience with an individual, a worker can build a relationship and trust. The dynamic of power present in relationships with

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probation officers, magistrates, solicitors, police and other professionals is diminished in the contact with the Scheme's staff. Many of the Scheme's participants will be used to relating to professionals in formal settings and with formal agendas, the very situations at which they may feel most ill at ease. The Scheme staff member or volunteer will be alongside an individual and it is through the inter-personal relations between these two people that the key to the Scheme's model lies. The Scheme's representative is not expected to have the skills of Ryan Giggs to play five-a-side football or the eye of Stephen Hendry to play snooker; their qualities to motivate and challenge the individual lie with their ability to convey the value, purpose and enjoyment of the activity. The bottom line is that the sporting focus is only half of the sum. Without

the people to generate involvement and provide a glimpse of what is possible and achievable, which things *can* be changed, the Scheme would not the success it is.

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