

Youth Sport vs. Youth Crime

Evidence that youth engaged in organized sport are not likely to participate in criminal activities

By David Carmichael

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Few social issues get as much media attention as youth crime. Statistics Canada reported a 3% increase in crimes committed by 12- to 17-year-olds between 2005 and 2006. In the last 15 years, the rate of violent crimes among young people has increased by 30% (Youth crime, 2008). From gangland-style killings in Vancouver to the senseless beating of an elderly woman in Halifax, Canadian cities are struggling with a wave of youth crime that was unimaginable a couple of decades ago. According to Statistics Canada, most Canadians believe that youth crime is on the rise and 77% believe that the sentencing of young offenders is too lenient (Youth crime, 2005).

Many experts attribute the spike in youth crime to the increased number of street gangs - often the perpetrators of youth crime (Catalano and Hawkins, 1996). Research indicates that youth seek comfort from those who welcome them and reinforce their sense of belonging. Unfortunately, some youth have no choice but to turn to street gangs in order to satisfy their need for approval, belonging and self-worth (Clark, 1992).

Street gangs are not just issues in big cities. Over the last few decades, there has been an increase in the presence of street gangs in non-metropolitan and rural communities. For example, in 1960, there

were 54 cities in the United States with a gang population. In 1995, there were street gangs in approximately 800 cities and towns across the United States (Swetnam and Pope, 2001).

There is no consensus among experts on how to reduce youth crime. Criminal involvement usually starts before the age of 15, with first-time offences declining markedly once young people reach 20 years of age. Young people who become involved in criminal activities before the age of 14 tend to be the most persistent offenders, with long criminal records (Joseph, 1996).

Reducing Youth Crime

There is little evidence that punitive sanctions such as incarceration (e.g., time in a youth correction centre), shock incarceration (e.g., putting a child in jail overnight), community service hours (e.g., gathering garbage at the side of roads), or boot camps (e.g., physically demanding residential programs) have been effective at reducing juvenile crime (Hoge, 2002). In Ontario, 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). This seems to be supported by Canadians. 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).

Social Development through Organized Sport

Organized 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 \$10 million 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 Organized Sport

It is unrealistic to claim that organized youth sport alone can reduce the levels of youth crime in society. The causes of youth crime are complex and multidimensional. Organized 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 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

rates in Aboriginal communities (Mason and Wilson, 1988).

The organized sport programs that are successful at reducing youth crime appear to develop feelings of competence, connectedness and empowerment among youth (Gatz et al, 2002). Sport programs dominated by unequal access and the obsession to win-at-all-costs often foster social problems among at-risk youth (Hawkins, 1998). Northern Fly-In Sports Camps in Manitoba that focused on building teamwork, character and self-esteem among Aboriginal young offenders and potential young offenders resulted in an average 49% reduction in youth crime in the 8 communities that offered the program (Winther and Currie, 1987). A multi-sport program in Bristol, England that engaged youth at-risk of offending or reoffending resulted in a 43% reduction in juvenile crime between October 1997 and January 1998 when compared to crime statistics from 12 months earlier (Sport England, 1999).

The benefits of organized sport for at-risk youth are maximized if programs are skills-based, team-focused and learning-rich (Diana, 2000). Organized sport programs that engage at-risk youth by empowering them and providing opportunities for positive peer mentoring will foster reductions in youth crime (Sheehan et al, 2002). Young offenders in organized sport programs have demonstrated significant increases in ratings in perceived competence in sport skills and increased self-esteem (King et al, 1998).

Although there is limited empirical evidence of a direct causal relationship between youth sport and youth crime reduction, there are several rationales as to why youth sport reduces youth crime, including that organized sport (Nichols, 1997):

- Keeps young people busy and out of trouble
- Meets a need that youth have for excitement
- Makes young people feel empowered
- Meets a need that youth have for risk-taking
- Increases feeling of connectedness
- Develops problem-solving skills
- Fosters teamwork

- Develops athletic abilities
- Increases self-esteem
- Develops cognitive competencies
- Provides positive role-models and mentors
- Develops decision-making skills
- Makes youth feel special
- Provides employment opportunities

Organized sport can prevent youth crime by developing capable, mature and responsible youth (Howell, 1995). But few governments in the world have established policies and committed resources that support the provision of sport opportunities for youth at risk of getting involved in criminal activities - who are the individuals that would probably gravitate most toward organized sport if they could choose sport teams over street gangs (Mastrich, 2002).

Policies and Programs in the United Kingdom

Prior to the 1997 General Election in Britain, the Labour Party stated that “sport can be crucial to the social and personal development of young people. By participating in sporting activities they can learn to differentiate between good and bad behaviour”. The Labour Party declared that if they were elected they would “develop sporting opportunities for young people to help them foster a sense of their value to society and to help tackle problems of youth crime” (Crabbe, 2000).

After the Labour Party was elected in 1997, the British government started supporting sport programs for at-risk youth. The organizing committee for the London 2012 Olympic Games is currently promoting the importance of sport for at-risk youth. Many great athletes from the United Kingdom have spoken publicly about how sport probably helped keep them away from criminal activities. Sebastian Coe, a Gold medalist in the 1500 metres at the 1980 and 1984 Olympic Games, wants sport to be recognized as an effective mechanism for empowering and educating youth to tackle the problems they face and for building the social skills they need to succeed. London 2012 is promoting the fundamental and lasting role of sport in changing the lives of young people throughout the world (Holmes, 2007).

There have been several successful programs in England to engage at-risk youth in sport. Bristol City Council, for example, has been using sport as a central policy mechanism in its efforts to overcome exclusion and to regenerate some of the poorest areas of the city. Its efforts have resulted in lower youth crime rates (Sport England, 1999). In West Yorkshire, a sport counselling scheme aimed at reducing re-offending rates encourages young people on probation to make constructive use of their leisure time through sport. The researchers were able to conclude that the project was successful in helping to halt long-term recidivism among young offenders, including some with lengthy histories of serious crimes. Those who participated in 8- to 12-weeks of sports counselling and programming experienced significant improvements in their self-esteem and perceptions of their own fitness (Nichols and Taylor, 1996).

Need for Non-Traditional Partnerships

Community sport networks involving local sport groups and non-traditional stakeholders such as the police, social service agencies and local businesses seem to be the most effective at reducing youth crime (Jamieson and Wolter, 1998). The sport programs in England that have been successful at reducing youth crime involve a variety of non-traditional stakeholder groups including the local police, health authorities, municipal social service departments, housing agencies, residents associations, and local businesses (Sport England, 1999).

Although many of the non-traditional partnerships documented by Sport England have been established at a community level, there are opportunities to create a Canada wide movement for sport for at-risk youth in partnership with non-traditional provincial/territorial and national groups. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), for example, has identified supporting youth as one of its five strategic priorities along with fighting organized crime, battling terrorism, supporting Aboriginal communities, and safeguarding Canada's economic integrity. A key objective of the RCMP is crime prevention through social development (RCMP, 2007).

Investing in Sport for At-Risk Youth

There is an immediate need for Canadians to invest in sport for at-risk youth. While youth crime rates are rising, the number of Canadian youth participating in sport is rapidly declining. Between 1992 and 2005, for example, the sport participation rate among 11- to 14-year-old boys dropped from 74% to 62% while participation rates among 11- to 14-year-old girls dropped from 54% to 48% (Clark, 2008). This trend could be reversed if even a fraction of the government money spent on punitive approaches to dealing with youth crime (e.g., incarceration) was directed at engaging all youth in organized sport. An investment into sport for at-risk youth would significantly reduce incarceration costs, minimize personal harm to youth and adults, and maximize social development among young people (Diana, 2000).

Many coaches have compelling stories about youth who have chosen sport over juvenile crime. But anecdotal evidence is no longer enough. Federal, provincial/territorial and municipal governments need empirical evidence to establish policies and commit programming resources. Philanthropists and corporate executives need empirical evidence to be assured that major financial gifts to sport organizations will contribute as much to the health and well-being of Canadians as donations to hospitals, universities and health charities.

According to the True Sport Foundation, more than 90% of Canadians believe that sport can and should make a positive contribution to the social development of youth. But fewer than 20% believe that sport is living up to its potential (True Sport, 2002).

One way to demonstrate that sport in Canada is living up to its potential is for sport organizations to engage at-risk youth and to gather data, in partnership with local police, which demonstrates that youth who are engaged in organized sport are not participating in criminal activities. To do this, methodologies need to be established that measure both variables of engagement and crime reduction (Smith and Waddington, 2004). Participation barriers such as cost and transportation need to be removed so programs are

accessible by all youth regardless of gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, cultural background or ability, and sport programs need to focus on building character and self-esteem (Gatz et al, 2002).

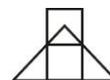
Organized sport programs for youth that develop social skills, mentoring opportunities with adult role models, cognitive skills, and increase feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem provide an antidote to antisocial behaviour (Saskatchewan, 2003). With Vancouver 2010 on the horizon, there could not be a better time for Canada to show the world that organized youth sport does, indeed, reduce youth crime.

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