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Crime Prevention Through Sport and Physical Activity

Margaret Cameron and Colin MacDougall

Crime prevention is not the primary objective of sport and physical activity, but it might be an extremely positive byproduct. This paper examines a variety of sporting activities that appear to have had a beneficial effect in helping young people steer away from trouble. It examines wilderness programs, programs in which youth participate and learn skills, and programs in which the sense of belonging reduces vandalism and develops other pro-social behaviours.

Of particular interest are sports carnivals in Aboriginal communities. When the carnivals (organised and run by Aborigines for Aborigines) are held, they act as catalysts for social and traditional cohesion. Harmful behaviours such as petrol sniffing, heavy drinking, and violence are prohibited for the duration of the carnival, and the prohibitions hold in the short term.

At another level, elite sporting clubs can reach out into their communities. The example in this paper is the (British) Liverpool Football Club, which has had successes in quit smoking programs, coaching, truancy reduction, and even reducing the number of hoax calls to the local fire brigade.

This is the first exploratory paper for a project in conjunction with the Australian Sports Commission. The Australian Institute of Criminology would welcome comments on this paper, and would like to learn about any activities that may have an implicit or an explicit crime prevention outcome.

Adam Graycar
Director

Can sport and physical activity be used as strategies for crime prevention? The evidence is encouraging; it suggests that with careful planning, sport and physical activity have crime prevention potential. Young people can personally benefit from these programs. This paper outlines some processes by which this may occur, and makes the following conclusions.

- Sport and physical activity can combine with other interventions to reduce crime in particular groups and communities.
- It appears that sport and physical activity can reduce crime by providing accessible, appropriate activities in a supportive social context. In other words, sport and physical activity must be connected positively within the social fabric of groups and communities.
- Sport and physical activity-based interventions must be conducted in collaboration with a range of other strategies and sectors.
- Elite sporting bodies can be involved in programs directly aimed at particular crimes or communities.
- It is essential to consider how the design, location, and funding of sporting and recreational infrastructure contributes to social cohesion, and avoids taking sport and physical activity out of its social context.
- The cases do not suggest "one size fits all" strategies; instead, they represent the value of community development approaches to tailor programs to particular needs. Nevertheless, this should not prevent us from suggesting common strategies and processes, and collecting examples of good practice.
- Recreation and sport programs established for the explicit purpose of crime prevention should be subject to rigorous evaluation.

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Meaning of Sport and Physical Activity

Sport and physical activity play a significant role in contemporary society. Indeed, sport and physical activity have great meaning for many people. Groups of people come together around team activities such as netball, football, and rugby. Some activities are more individualised, such as surfing, skateboard riding, and ballet. Participants may experience rewards from strenuous activity, but there can be other rewards as well.

Sport and physical activity have the potential to improve the quality of life. In the 19th century, Thomas Arnold made sport a central part of the education curriculum for boys in England, in the hope that moral education could be imparted, and as a form of “character building”. At the time, women were also pushing for the same educational and athletic opportunities as men. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, a movement developed professional training for women in gymnastics, considering its remedial, educational, and aesthetic value (Fletcher 1984). The idea that sport is moral education has been discredited. Nevertheless, it is worth exploring the idea that sport and physical activity is important if young people are to fully participate in society.

In the year when Australia hosts the Olympic Games, there is enough evidence of the financial rewards flowing to elite athletes. For many ordinary people, sport and physical activity is plain fun, or a fantasy that allows one to escape from day-to-day reality of family conflict, homelessness, or the temptations to use alcohol, drugs, or inhale petrol. By donning a uniform, young people can be equal, regardless of their diverse backgrounds. Sport and physical activity can give people a sense of belonging, loyalty and support, which may mean that suicide, truancy, and illicit drug use is no longer viewed as an option. The

experiences young people get from involvement in sport could include physical activity, fitness, and skill development. It is also an enjoyment of play and a form of social integration.

Sport and physical activity can have long-term benefits in the social development of young people. It may also have immediate outcomes—police and communities may witness an immediate benefit that coincides with the duration of the sporting or physical activity. Indeed, reported levels of assault, malicious damage, receiving or selling stolen goods, shoplifting goods, break and enter, or motor vehicle theft may drop. The benefits of sport and physical activity may vary from one social setting to another. There is strong evidence to support the contention that sporting carnivals organised and operated by Aboriginal people produce remarkable behavioural changes and enable Aboriginal people to take control for the duration of the carnival (Tatz 1995).

Crime Prevention Strategies

Crime is usually characterised by three ingredients: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and an absence of a capable guardian (Cohen and Felson 1979). Policy development should aim to attain three main objectives:

- to reduce the supply of motivated offenders;
- to make crime more difficult to commit; and
- to create structures that increase the supervision of possible offenders.

One or all of these objectives can be part of a crime prevention strategy.

The following four broad approaches to crime prevention are relevant in conceptualising sport and physical activity in crime prevention terms. To explain these approaches, we will give contemporary examples. Some have been introduced with the explicit intention of limiting crime. Other recreational and sporting activities have potential

to make crime prevention an unintended outcome. The approaches are:

- developmental crime prevention;
- situational crime prevention;
- community crime prevention; and
- law enforcement (Tonry and Farrington 1995, pp. 4–10).

While programs have been introduced with an explicit or an implicit crime prevention outcome, it should be noted that very little is known about their effectiveness (Robbins 1990). It is important to develop evidence of the effectiveness and sustainability of programs. The projects cannot always be evaluated, but, where possible, we should build scientific evaluation into the program design (Sherman et al. 1997a, pp. 2.18–2.19). Wherever possible, the discussion will include comments on the findings of any evaluation that may have been conducted.

Developmental Crime Prevention

Wilderness Therapy Programs for At-Risk Young People

Operation Flinders is run in South Australia for young men and women who have either breached the law, or who are at risk of breaching the law. This wilderness therapy program is an area where physical activity is used as a means of crime prevention. Wilderness programs often aim to develop character through experience. The virtues include accomplishment, trust, and cooperation (Holyfield and Fine 1997).

A number of wilderness programs have been evaluated internationally. Results suggest that the length of the program may be an important determinant of their success.

The Hope Center Wilderness Camp in the United States runs a program for young offenders aged between 12 and 17 years. The offences range from truancy to murder. The program runs from 8 to 18 months, with an average stay of 14 months. The

camp consists of four independent living areas, each with 12 participants. It aims to provide quality care and treatment in a non-punitive environment with emphasis on health, safety, education, and therapy. Once the participants leave the program, a worker supports the family for 6 months. Eighty-five per cent of participants do not re-offend in the 6 months after the program (Clagett 1989, pp. 92, 85). No comparison group was used in this evaluation.

Another program from the United States, known as Spectrum, entails learning about wilderness survival and undertaking a 2-week expedition. It has been evaluated using an experimental and a control group. Participants in the experimental group were aged between 15 and 17, and underwent a 26-day program. The comparison group entered an institution or undertook parole. The evaluation found that there was a reduction in arrests in the experimental group over the following year (20% of the program group had re-offended compared with 42% of the control group). However, after 2 years the positive impacts of the program were no longer apparent (Castellano and Soderstrom 1992, p. 43). It is unclear from the evaluation what supports there were for participants after the program ended.

The length of programs can vary considerably, as these two examples indicate. In a meta-evaluation of wilderness therapy programs, Sandra Wilson and Mark Lipsey suggested that the programs which led to the greatest reduction in delinquency resulted from relatively short-term programs, those of less than 6 weeks. These programs involve difficult physical activity, such as strenuous solo and group expeditions. Therapy delivered in addition to the challenge resulted in further reductions of delinquency (Wilson and Lipsey 2000, pp. 8–11). Teasing out issues such as duration of

courses, the nature of support available subsequently, and the nature of the challenges has implications for the best way to spend resources in wilderness therapy programs. It may simply be the case that someone showing that they care can result in crime reduction.

There is evidence that Aboriginal use of such wilderness and “cultural trail” camps has had positive outcomes in the short term. Nowra and Wallaga Lake communities in New South Wales have developed programs of value, but sustaining the programs is the key to any real effectiveness. Tatz (1994) showed that consistency of sports programs was clearly correlated to reduced delinquency. During sports seasons, especially Australian football, Aboriginal delinquency dropped markedly in rural and remote communities, such as Port Lincoln in South Australia. At season’s end, the antisocial behaviour resumed. He contends that reducing such rates of criminality is more sensible than not reducing them.

Integrating Homeless Youth Through Sport

Another program with a therapeutic approach concerns homeless young people in inner city Adelaide (Miller 2000). Often, these young people have poor physical, mental, and emotional health due to living “rough” without secure housing, as well as through their exposure to, and involvement in, crime, drugs, alcohol, and sexual abuse. Their support networks are often transient and inconsistent in nature.

The Adelaide-based service for homeless youth aims to offer support and develop trust through sport and physical activity. For some young people, this support comes in the form of team sport such as netball or basketball. Participation in sport and physical activity provides a sense of belonging, it brings young people together, and is a place to learn about access to services for their needs.

The program has not been evaluated for crime prevention outcomes.

Situational Crime Prevention

Participate and Learn Skills (PALS)

One evaluated program in Canada is known as PALS. It was implemented in a housing complex where 417 children between the ages of 5 and 15 years lived. It offered skill-development programs, including guitar, ballet, judo, and swimming to young people living in a housing complex. The experimental housing complex was compared with a control housing complex where young people were involved in a “lower-key, recreation-and-activity program” (Jones and Offord 1989, p. 739).

The program was effective as a crime prevention strategy. During the course of the PALS program, children committed fewer serious offences and security violations at the housing complex. The program was also cost-effective; it costs much less than what would have been spent on policing and cleaning up graffiti. Programs such as this operate to divert young people from deviant activity by involving them in physical activity.

New Swimming Pool Programs

Programs that appear to be effective have been implemented at a swimming centre in Canning, Western Australia, to overcome the problem of vandalism and theft. In one program, young offenders ordered to undertake community service worked on maintenance at the pool. Those who did a good job could secure up to 2 weeks paid work. A scuba diving program was also organised for 130 children. Those aged 6 to 11 took part in a lifesaving course in the shallow pool, while those aged 12 to 16 learnt to use goggles, snorkel, and the breathing apparatus. An advanced, internationally accredited course was subsequently offered (Smith 1993, p. 11).

According to the manager, as a result of the programs, the vandalism and theft dropped by 85 per cent between 1990–91 and 1992–93. One of the young people participating in community service said that vandalism and theft had dropped because he had asked his friends and others to stop doing it inside the pool complex. The manager considered that because of the programs, young people used and maintained the pool “as if it were their own” (Smith 1993, p. 11)

Community Crime Prevention

Professional Sporting Clubs and Community Development

Professional sporting clubs involve themselves in communities, with the intention of producing an explicit or an implicit crime prevention outcome. Perhaps one of the best known internationally is the Liverpool Football Club. The Liverpool Football Club is one of the biggest, richest, and most successful teams in world soccer. The club has confronted violence and other problems. Particularly in Europe, soccer has been associated with hooliganism and organised violence, often with racist motives and outcomes.

As part of its response, the Liverpool Football Club established a community development and public relations program. In the late 1980s, the Professional Footballers Association started a pilot scheme at 6 football clubs, with the aim of improving the connections between football clubs and local communities. In 1993 the program expanded and, with government funding, staff were placed in football clubs as part of a Football and the Community Program.

Examples of community-based activities with relevance to crime prevention are numerous. They included football camps involving high-profile players who promoted quit-smoking and anti-drug themes. A program

addressed truancy, whereby children with a history of truancy who attended school for increasing periods of time received a Liverpool Football Club sticker and certificate. Those with improved attendance were invited to the club for a presentation. Another program with the Merseyside Fire Brigade aimed to reduce the 7,000 hoax calls received by the brigade each year. To send the message to schoolchildren, the club produced a video starring senior players (Hall 1995).

In Australia, professional football, cricket, and rugby clubs participate in community development. For example, the Australian Football League (AFL) is investing \$3 million over 3 years into junior development in Queensland. A Cape York development officer hopes that the AFL Kick-Start program will address many social problems, including petrol sniffing. Part of the program involves AFL footballers who grew up in the general area, visit-ing, coaching, and talking to young boys and girls about healthy lifestyles and participation in sport (Burke 2000).

Individual clubs have also participated in crime prevention programs. For example, as positive role models, members of Carlton and Kangaroos (formerly North Melbourne) Football Clubs visit the Parkville Youth Residential Centre (Inform 1999). Hawthorn players also work with young Aboriginal students, in the hope that they will not drop out of school (Dubecki 2000, p. A4).

Programs based on mentoring or role modelling often operate without policy development (Drummond 1999). However, the Raiders, a rugby league team in Canberra, seems to have developed an effective program (Gearin 1999, pp. 16–17). A program being delivered in the United States and New Zealand, known as “Going for Goal”, is a promising approach to teach young people life skills that can be transferred from one context to another, for example from

sport to the classroom (Tatz 1999, p. 138).

Law Enforcement

Restoring Control to Aboriginal Communities

One crime problem that has been addressed, in part by communities organising sport and physical activity, is petrol sniffing. Petrol sniffing is a problem for communities on the Anangu-Pitjantjatjara Lands, amongst others. It has major effects on physical health, including permanent brain damage, and leads to a variety of social problems (Roper 1998).

Despite efforts to prevent petrol sniffing on the Anangu-Pitjantjatjara Lands in the past, the practice continues today. The interventions to prevent petrol sniffing will not succeed without addressing the problems, including the need for stimulation (Nurcombe et al. 1970). There are few outlets for youth recreation and development throughout the Anangu-Pitjantjatjara Lands.

In areas of petrol sniffing and heavy drinking, sports carnivals organised by local communities have succeeded in producing short-term prohibition of alcohol, cannabis, and petrol sniffing. There was also a drastic reduction in juvenile offending and adult offenders against property. Generally, there were positive behavioural changes during a number of festivals, including the annual Pitjantjatjara games in South Australia, the Yuendumu games and the Barunga sports festivals in the Northern Territory, and the Aboriginal basketball carnivals in Geraldton, Western Australia.

The common factor in the success of these events, albeit in the short-term, is that the events are wholly and solely within the Aboriginal domain. They act as fulcrums for social and traditional cohesion as ways of “recharging the batteries”, and reporting traditional rituals. But they are also community justice mechanisms. These events

require research to demonstrate their success and replicability (Tatz 1995, pp. 297–339).

Sporting carnivals appear to be characterised by short-term crime prevention outcomes. Some other sporting activities may have more sustainable success. For example, Palawa Recreation Program, run in Tasmania, aims to increase the level of young Aboriginal people's involvement in sport, and to assist Aboriginal communities to run their own sport and recreation programs. The program gives Aboriginal people the skills and knowledge required to design, coordinate, and deliver sporting activities in a culturally appropriate way (Australian Sports Commission undated, pp. 3–4).

Sport and physical activity programs may result in immediate crime prevention, and those that involve members of the community on a continuing basis may be sustainable. Evaluation of crime prevention outcomes is necessary in this area.

The Role of Sports Educators and Facilitators

These cases demonstrate that sport and physical activity may play an important part in young people's lives as a means of crime prevention. Recreational activities can reduce vandalism and other property offences in local areas. Communities can organise sport and physical activity programs to address specific local problems, such as alcohol and illicit drug use amongst young people. Therapeutic programs, such as wilderness programs for at-risk young people, may assist them to develop new interests in physical activity, and to stop offending. Non-government organisations that provide sport and recreation opportunities for homeless youth in Adelaide assist them to reintegrate into the community. The success of such programs may depend to some extent on how sports administrators and facilitators undertake their role.

The role of sports administrators and facilitators is

critical to the success of programs. Benefits in the form of character-building do not necessarily flow from the sport as many advocates once thought. For example, football or rugby can be seen as combat sports, and involvement may not discourage young people from getting into a fight. The value in sport is in the sense of belonging and the relationships that develop. Further, the introduction of sport and physical activity alone cannot achieve a crime prevention outcome. Unless young people want to get involved and are motivated and willing to engage, the outcome is likely to be minimal. Encouraging young people may require nurturing and teaching them in a caring way.

With careful consideration of the content, programs can achieve desired outcomes. A crime problem we have not discussed involves a range of offences against the person, such as sexual assault. Sport and physical activity could contribute to changing relationships between young women and men, and thereby address some problems. Research has found positive changes in gender relations through a sporting program that encourages collaboration, understanding, and acceptance between participants. The program, known as Shotmoor, is run in Britain and is offered to boys and girls as part of their physical education. They undertake adventure activities, including cycling, climbing, skiing, archery, orienteering and a ropes confidence course. Afterwards, boys and girls were seeing a broader and more tolerant gender identity (Humberstone 1990, pp. 212–13). A number of documents are available to guide sports administrators in involving women and limiting harassment (Australian Sports Commission 1999 a, b; 1998 a, b, c, d).

While this discussion is based on issues of gender relations, general principles can be identified to consider in all

programs. Generally, programs can help young people develop greater social competence and autonomy (Martinek and Hellison 1997; Hellison 1995). Programs should be designed based on evidence that a problem exists and to encourage the values desired in young people. They should be reflected in those people who facilitate the programs.

Discussion

Questions about sport and physical activity as strategies in crime prevention need rigorous scrutiny. This paper has focused on sport and physical activity as a means of crime prevention. The case studies demonstrate opportunities for individual young people to engage in behaviours that are valued by society. They also suggest that it is possible to reduce the supply of motivated offenders by diverting young people from offending behaviour to engage in sport and other physical activities, and show how the environment and infrastructure in communities can help make the pro-social choice easier than the anti-social choice.

The case studies also suggest that the key ingredients are not the competitive or the physical aspects of sport alone. On one level, they keep young people out of trouble. On another level, sport and physical activity can be used as strategies within a broader context involving, for example, development of values, social support and positive role models (Mason and Wilson 1988, p. 8; Chaiken 1998). In both the remote and the urban areas, sport and physical activity were important, but not sufficient, components of a broader strategy.

The success of recreational activities as a means of preventing violence and property crime has not been evaluated in Australia. A few programs have been assessed internationally, and they show encouraging effects on the reduction of offending and drug use (Sherman 1997b, pp.

3.26–3.27). It will not always be possible to conduct evaluations. However, where possible, evaluation should consider the program's sustainability, its "active" ingredients, and what parts of the program result in change. In addition, cost-benefit analysis should be part of policy development and the planning of intervention projects (Welsh and Farrington 1999). This will ensure the most productive use of funding in the future.

This paper has sought to generate interest in sport as a means of crime prevention. A number of issues should be considered in the future development of this area:

- programs should be based on evidence that a problem exists, and that the solution works;
- programs should be sustainable; and
- evaluations should aim to identify the factors that influence crime reduction and change in the young person.

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