



**SOUTH ASIAN  
STUDIES INSTITUTE**  
University of the Fraser Valley



# Improving the Positive Impact of Sport-based Programs on Youth Development and Crime Prevention

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### Introduction

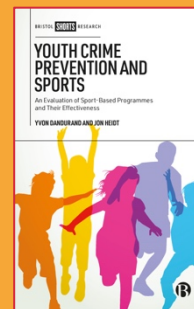
Sports stand with several other activities (e.g., education, mentoring, religious teaching, and volunteering) as a potential factor in influencing positive social development among children and youth. Crime prevention strategies have therefore tried to build on the popularity and benefits of sport activities to promote positive youth development and to influence risk and resiliency factors associated with criminal involvement. Various sport-based crime prevention programs, usually targeting youth crime, have been implemented over the last two decades. Unfortunately, very few of these programs, in Canada or elsewhere, have been subjected to a rigorous evaluation. As a result, many of these programs have overly ambitious crime prevention objectives, vague rationales for their activities, and limited evidence of impact on youth crime.

With the financial support of the Crime Reduction Research Program, British Columbia Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, the University of the Fraser Valley's South Asian Studies Institute (SASI) undertook a project to identify and review existing sports-based crime prevention programs in British Columbia. The review considered the programs main objectives and characteristics, as well as their theoretical foundations and

alignment with effective evidence-based practices in the field of sports and crime prevention. Unfortunately, none of the programs had been evaluated and their real impact on youth development or on youth crime is largely unknown.

However, based on a review of the relevant research and discussions and interviews with coaches and leaders of sport-based crime prevention or positive youth development programs in British Columbia, the study was able to identify some emerging good practices that may maximize the value and potential impact of crime prevention interventions through sports.

For a more in-depth discussion on emerging successful practices and the link with criminological theory, see *Youth Crime Prevention and Sports: An Evaluation of Sport-Based Programmes and Their Effectiveness* (Bristol University Press, 2022) by Yvon Dandurand and Jon Heidt





## Sports and Crime

The relationship between sport and crime is difficult to disentangle. There is evidence of the beneficial effects of sport participation, particularly on physical and mental health. However, the question of whether sport participation promotes or inhibits problem behaviours remains unresolved. Research on the relationship between sport participation and subsequent illegal behaviour does not clearly establish whether sports participation acts as a preventative measure or an additional risk factor for illegal behaviour later in life. Some studies have revealed a link between sport participation and involvement in certain types of delinquency including violence and problematic alcohol use. In fact, it is clear that involvement in sport can impact different aspects of one's personality and social setting in both positive and negative ways. Further research is needed to identify the processes through which sport participation may contribute to crime prevention. Further research is especially needed to clarify how and under what circumstances sports contribute to youth development and the extent to which helping youth develop human, social, and psychological capital prevents criminal behaviour or encourages desistance from crime.







The sport activity often merely acts as a “hook” to get youth’s attention and engage them in other positive development activities. Program outcomes may be determined much more by the strength of the non-sport aspects of the intervention, than by the choice of sport or the extent of sport participation.

Sport-based crime prevention programs take many different forms. They can be categorized by the relative role sport plays in them or the centrality of the role of sport within them. Some programs are focused on facilitating youth participation in sport and their acquisition of related technical and other skills.

Other programs consist of a mix of complementary interventions where sport acts as a ‘hook’ to attract and retain youth and as a platform for engaging them in additional interventions. For many if not most youth sport programs, the idea that the program could contribute to preventing youth crime or even youth gang involvement is often little more than an afterthought. Nonetheless, the sport environment is obviously a popular and important training ground for child and adolescent development. Together with several other activities, such as education, mentoring, religious teaching, or volunteering, sport holds the potential to influence positive social development among children and youth.

Crime prevention or desistance from crime is more likely to occur when the youth’s initial contact with the sporting activity leads to a deeper, more involved engagement from which relationships of trust and acceptance with activity leaders and others.

### Different Forms of Youth Participation

Different forms of participation in sport activities can provide a worthwhile platform for positive youth development. Opportunities to volunteer or participate in different capacities in a sport-based program (e.g., as a member of a coaching team or as a referee) can help recruit youth who would otherwise not be interested in joining a program. The experience of volunteering and gradually taking up responsibilities can help youth engage in a program at their own pace.



## Programming Principles

Some programming principles around which a consensus appears to be emerging include:

- The specific crime prevention objectives of the sport-based program must be explicit and articulated based on a clear and credible theory of change. The program rationale or logical framework should specify what in the chosen sport activities and accompanying interventions can be logically expected to lead to crime prevention outcomes.
- The intervention should be intentionally structured to teach life skills and help youth develop core competencies.
- The program should be tailored to the local context, interests, and cultural background of the young people it seeks to influence. It must address the local crime situation and respond to local crime prevention goals and priorities.
- The program must align its objectives with the youth's specific needs. Sports-based interventions must be sensitive to the diverse needs of young people, particularly if they are to tackle the underlying structural inequalities that are responsible for youth crime.
- The program should be gender responsive and respectful of cultural differences. Youth crime prevention programs based on skills and competencies development must be culturally relevant.

### Intentionality

Intentionality refers to program designs that deliberately and strategically create opportunities that maximize developmental outcomes, in particular by fostering life skills development and life skills transfer. The intervention should be deliberately structured to teach life skills and help youth develop core competencies. Intentionally structured programs score higher on program quality and positive youth development outcomes than non-intentionally structured programs.

### Choice of Sport

Youth psychosocial experiences in sport-based programs vary based on the type of sport activity involved. Sport activities which de-emphasize regulations and winning, and instead emphasize choices for participants and the tailoring of interventions to meet individual needs are most likely better at providing a suitable platform for crime prevention interventions. Program activities that have an element of thrill and excitement to motivate youth to participate and facilitate youth recruitment.



### Youth Recruitment

For sport to act as a 'hook', the sport activity must be popular among the target group and the youth must possess a clear sense of ownership and control over the activities that are offered and delivered through an intervention.

*Programs must have an effective, non-discriminatory, and non-stigmatizing youth recruitment strategy aligned with the program objectives and a clear definition of the intended program beneficiaries. Attracting and retaining hard-to-reach youths is difficult. Involving such youth requires most programs to strengthen their outreach, recruitment, and programing strategies.*

- The program should be accessible to youth from vulnerable and at-risk groups, without further stigmatizing them. Vulnerable groups are not homogeneous, and each group presents different challenges that must be considered during the planning and delivery of crime prevention interventions.
- When using sport as a 'hook' to recruit at risk youth, the sport activity must be popular among the target group and the youth must possess a clear sense of ownership and control over the activities that are offered and delivered through the intervention.
- The program must have an effective, non-discriminatory, and non-stigmatizing youth recruitment strategy aligned with the program objectives and a clear definition of the intended program beneficiaries.
- The program should offer intensive and lasting interventions through sustained delivery mechanisms that engage youth in the long-term and enable lasting relationships.
- The program must be delivered within a safe and supportive environment. The physical and psychological safety of participants is crucial to successful interventions.
- The program must recognize the significance of social relationships, create a sense of community, employ a multi-agency approach, build a structure to ensure sustainability, and be flexible enough to allow program activities to respond to changes in the local context and practical challenges that inevitably arise.
- The program must facilitate quality interactions between the youth and key social agents (peers, parents, teachers, and coaches). The integration of family, school and community efforts are important for the success of sport-based crime prevention programs.
- The program must have well trained coaches and facilitators. Specialized training programs for coaches and facilitators are needed.

## 5 Core Competencies



## The Role of Peers

Coaches and parents play very important roles in facilitating positive development through a sport program, but the youth's peers may be even more powerful influencers. Peer interactions appeared to be a most meaningful aspect of youth sport participation. Even when the teaching of life skills is not emphasized in a program, youth and their peers can produce experiences that support the development of some life skills.

## Promising Practices for Coaches, Facilitators and Volunteers

For coaches adopting a positive youth development approach, the desired outcomes of youth sport participation include not only higher levels of participation (engagement) and performance (sport expertise), but also enhanced personal development (e.g., life skills, core competencies, and various psychosocial outcomes). These coaches are also prepared to assume a role as facilitators/catalysts of social inclusion and integration in their capacity as role-models.

The coach-athlete relationship is at the heart of coaching and is central to determining the effects of youth sport participation. Coaches and other program facilitators have unique opportunities to influence the youth they are working with. People have different views on exactly what differentiates effective from ineffective coaches, but factors such as leadership, expertise, motivation, education, and experience are often cited, together with an ability to form meaningful relationship with youth.

Coaches usually understand the value of life skill integration within sport-based programs, but they do not always have the knowledge and skills to explicitly integrate life skills into their coaching practices. Coaches, parents, referees, especially in competitive games, can influence players' behaviour, learning and socialization. Their actions affect the players' learning and communicate what is regarded as important and valuable.

Research on the effectiveness of sport-based youth development programs emphasizes the importance of capacity building and the need to invest in developing and supporting key human resources, in particular coaches, volunteers, and other facilitators.



The following are some key findings of recent research on the role and practices of sport coaches, facilitators and volunteers involved in sport-based positive development programs.

- Positive development outcomes are developed through sport-based programs when coaches can create suitable environments. Coaches and other program staff members must be capable of developing a relationship of trust with the youth. They must be able to understand the world the youth live in and, despite this empathy, be able to set limits.
- Coaches and other program staff should work with specific values and define the meaning of these values to participants.
- By using specific practical strategies and reinforcing the parallels between sport and life, coaches can heighten the potential of sport as a tool for positive youth development.
- Meaningful relationships and interactions between youth and adults are crucial to foster young people's development through sport. The best predictor of positive developmental experiences is a combination of the quality of the coach-youth relationship and a coach's transformational leadership behaviour. The most influential leadership behaviours are individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, and appropriate role modelling.
- Coaches must understand that life skills transfer is not an automatic process and that it must be reinforced continuously in an explicit manner. Coaches must aim to increase youth's confidence in using their skills in life situation outside the sport.
- The practice of life skills is more conducive to development than the mere discussion of life skills. Coaches who intentionally integrate life skills into their regular coaching practice by providing opportunities for youth to practice life skills outside of the sport context further facilitate the positive development process.
- Coaches must be sensitive and responsive to the youth's developmental needs and signal their openness to discussing them with youth.
- Coaches should be reflective of their own behaviour as a role model to maximize the potential of sports-based interventions.
- Coaches and other program staff members who are perceived by youth as emotionally supportive and autonomy supportive can help youth improve their self-control.
- Involving athletes and participants in decision-making processes is crucial for maintaining adaptive motivation and positive consequences.



- Programs should be monitored and ensure the supervision of program activities to avoid situations where harmful behaviours can occur.

### Learning Opportunities

Sports-based crime prevention programs can learn from each other and should share good practices, tools, and resources with each other.

## Engagement of Parents, Family Members, and Other Significant Adults

Social interactions in the educational environment created by a well-designed sport-based program are central to how individuals learn life skills and develop core competencies. Interactions with peers, parents, and coaches are crucial components of how people learn life skills through their involvement in sport. Quality interactions between the youth and key social agents (peers, parents, teachers, and coaches) the integration of family, school and community efforts are important for the success of sport-based prevention programs.

Families are a crucial part of sport participation and skills development. Family members and family contexts are an active part of the acquisition and application of life skills. Having parents who are aware of one's leisure

interests, activities and friends is a protective factor. Programs need therefore to find practical ways to promote meaningful interactions between youth and interested and caring adults, fostering a sense of acceptance and belonging, placing value on individual achievement, encouraging a positive attitude to the future, and helping youth develop an ability to work with others and work out conflicts.

Parents are a critical sport socialization agent for children and adolescents as they are often invested emotionally, socially, and monetarily. Parental engagement in a sport-based program can obviously have many benefits from the point of view of promoting positive youth development. Positive psychosocial outcomes for the youth are associated with parental supportive behaviours displayed at home, in training and at competitions, while negative or detrimental psychosocial outcomes are associated with pressure, particularly in relation to competitions. Parents need to understand their role and utilize a range of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and organizational skills to support their child, manage themselves, and manage their interactions with others in the youth sport environment.



However, greater parental involvement does not automatically coincide with more positive experiences for children, or the parents. The parents' sideline behaviour does not always align with their stated goals for their children's involvement in sport. Parental antisocial behaviour within the context of the youth participation in sports and its impact on the experience of participating youth can be an issue. There is also the question of whether parents, coaches, and bystanders are willing and prepared to intervene when they witness the antisocial behaviours of certain parents.

Programs can optimize the role of parents by raising their awareness and facilitating opportunities for them to

support the child's psychosocial development and collaborating with coaches or improving coach education to facilitate parent-coach relationships. Moreover, a connection between parents and coaches is often important in terms of facilitating the children's psychosocial development.

### School Engagement

School failure is understood as a risk factor for criminal involvement, and there is some evidence that the acquisition of core skills is linked to school performance and school attachment.

Sport-based programs may promote social inclusion through interventions designed to sustain school engagement. Engagement or reengagement with education is a typical goal of sport-based programs designed to enhance social inclusion of marginalized youth by helping them acquire psychological capital.

Involvement in a community sport-based program can potentially reconnect young people with formal education or, more specifically, enhance their participants a sense of self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience, and encourage them to see school engagement as a means to achieve their goals.

A cooperative relationship between schools and community sports groups can ensure that community-based programs contribute to school engagement.





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