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Sport, Physical Activity and Antisocial Behaviour in Youth

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Sport and physical activity programs provide an effective vehicle through which personal and social development in young people can be positively affected. This paper summarises the main findings from a report by the Australian Institute of Criminology on sport, physical activity and antisocial behaviour in youth, funded by the Australian Sports Commission (Morris et al. 2003). The study identified and described programs that use sporting activities to reduce antisocial behaviour in youth across Australia. One hundred and seventy-five organisations replied to a questionnaire seeking information about their programs. About one-third of these programs were created with the aim of decreasing antisocial behaviour.

There is a view that providing an activity where previously there was none is more important than the type of activity provided. While young people often join sporting activities for fun, fitness and contest, over 80 per cent of the programs surveyed in this study focused on young people at risk of drug use or criminal behaviour, or youth already exhibiting behaviour of this type. These participants were often referred to the programs by school or the criminal justice system.

Maintaining positive benefits is dependent on the integration of community support services into the design of the programs. Good Practice Program Principles that outline important structural considerations in the implementation of sport and physical activity programs are included at the end of the paper.

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What Do We Know?

A century of literature documents the effects of sport and physical activity on antisocial behaviour through the targeting of underlying risk and protective factors and/or explicit behaviour (Reid et al. 1994). Together with the obvious physiological benefits, sport has been shown to improve emotional and cognitive skills including self-esteem and problem-solving (Collis & Griffin 1993; Danish & Nellen 1997; Novick & Glasgow 1993; Oman & Duncan 1995; Reid et al. 1994; Ryckman & Hamel 1995; Siegenthaler & Gonzalez 1997; Svoboda 1995; Ykema 2002). These improvements can impact directly on behavioural risk factors and, as such, sport may be a useful intervention strategy in reducing antisocial behaviour.

Two key aspects of sport and physical activity are that they:

- reduce boredom in youth; and
- decrease the amount of unsupervised leisure time.

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE
OF CRIMINOLOGY

trends
&
issues

in crime and criminal justice

April 2003

ISSN 0817-8542

ISBN 0 642 24295 X



ausport
Federal Government .gov.au

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Preventing and reducing boredom is important due to its reported links to depression, distractibility and loneliness (Coalter et al. 2000; McGiboney & Carter 1988 in Reid et al. 1994). In addition, there is consensus that if youth lack stimulation and have little to do they will seek their own, often antisocial, activities (Collingwood et al. 1992; Crabbe 2000; Felson 1998).

Despite the obvious benefits of sport, there is a lack of robust evidence of the direct impact of sport and physical activity on antisocial behaviour and the sustainability of any outcomes. There is general agreement, however, that the effects work indirectly through intermediate outcomes.

Sport and Physical Activity Programs in Australia

The Australian Institute of Criminology's project on sport, physical activity and antisocial behaviour in youth, funded by the Australian Sports Commission, identified more than 600 programs for young people in Australia that focused on sport and physical activity. The Institute conducted a postal survey of these youth programs to identify which program components lead to successful interventions for youth. Topics covered by the survey included:

- youth target groups and sources of participant referral;
- program development and implementation;
- key outcomes and impacts on success;
- resourcing; and
- monitoring and evaluation.

Case studies were undertaken of some of the programs (those which had been formally evaluated and were willing to participate in this stage of the research).

For the purposes of this report, youth were defined as persons aged between 10 and 24 years. Antisocial behaviour is linked to a wide range of social and health issues. In this report such issues included crime, substance use, suicide/self-harm, homelessness, unemployment, mental health, truancy and early school leaving. While some of these may not strictly be antisocial (for example, mental health), they were included as they are deviations from accepted (or ideal) social norms.

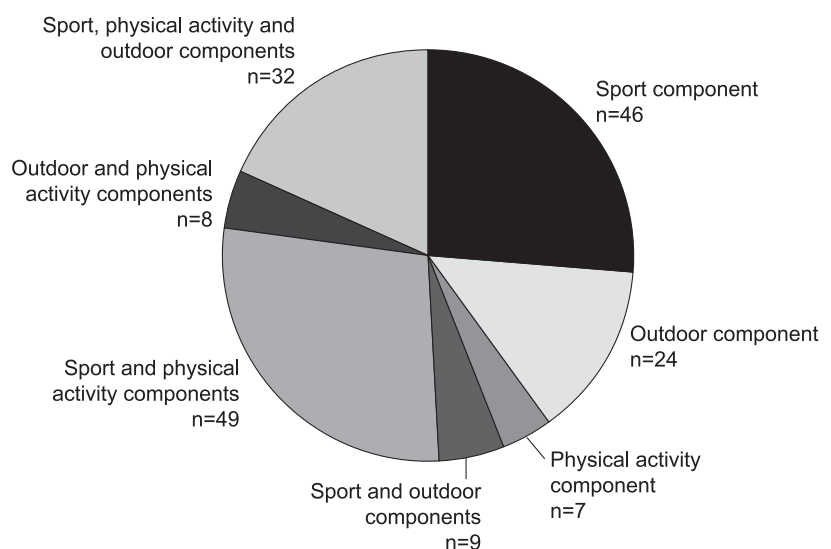
Of the 606 programs that surveys were sent to, 175 returned questionnaires providing information that addressed the key issues of the study. The activities offered by these programs ranged from accredited sporting activities to "outdoor" experiences (see Figure 1). Of the 175 programs that responded to the survey, 77 focused solely on physical activity, outdoor activity (opportunities for camping, wilderness experiences and learning about different environments) or sport. The remaining 98 focused on a combination of activities falling

within these three categories. The vast majority of programs incorporated sports activities.

Nearly all programs were open to both males and females (92 per cent) and catered for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people (80 per cent). Eleven per cent of programs focused solely on Indigenous youth. Programs most commonly catered for youth at risk of or involved in drug use and crime (81 per cent of programs). More than half of all programs surveyed were also open to youth *not* at risk of antisocial behaviour, effectively incorporating the importance of pro-social peer modelling (Mason & Wilson 1998; Reid et al. 1994; Mears & Field 2002). Participants were referred to programs in 53 per cent of cases, with the highest percentage of referrals coming from schools and the criminal justice system.

Seventy-four per cent of survey respondents reported that their main method of program delivery was to provide youth with diversionary activities (see Table 1). In this report, diversionary activities have been defined as activities

Figure 1: Program composition



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, *Sport, Physical Activity and Antisocial Behaviour in Youth* study 2003 [computer file]

Table 1: Program conception, delivery method and intended outcomes of programs (percentage)

Program conception	%	Delivery method	%	Intended outcomes	%
Meet youth needs	38	Provide diversion	74	Increase social skills	32
Decrease antisocial behaviour	22	Provide access to services	33	Reduce antisocial behaviour	30
Improve socialisation	13	Develop leadership skills	23	Improve self-esteem	29
Prevent boredom	3	Build self-esteem	22	None specified	20
		Provide community involvement	15	Education/employment skills	18
				Community involvement	17
				Access to services	13
				Positive alternatives	13
				Reduce boredom	5

Note: Due to multiple responses being possible, totals do not sum to 100 per cent.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, *Sport, Physical Activity and Antisocial Behaviour in Youth* study 2003 [computer file]

that “entertain” youth as an alternative to other, more antisocial behaviour. Analysis showed that providing youth with positive alternatives for their leisure time was the most likely intended outcome for these programs.

Two themes emerged in relation to program conception—meeting youth needs and decreasing antisocial behaviour. Interestingly, preventing boredom was not a common notion articulated by the programs either in the conception of the program or in its intended outcomes. Boredom may, however, be implicitly included in other categories (such as meeting youth needs and providing positive alternatives). To achieve these goals, programs used a variety of methods, including diversionary activities, providing access to services, developing leadership skills, building self-esteem and involving local communities.

Previous literature lends support to the finding that the typical method by which programs tackled antisocial behaviour was to address the underlying factors rather than the explicit actions of youth. The analysis showed that team activities were more likely to focus on social skills while

programs offering individual activities were more likely to incorporate skill development opportunities in education and training. Programs catering for Indigenous youth, young people with suicidal tendencies, the homeless and the unemployed were more likely to focus on improving self-esteem and self-confidence. Programs aiming to increase socialisation and to meet youth needs were more likely to report having links to community groups and support services.

As most programs offered a combination of activities, it is difficult to determine whether particular types of sport, physical activity or outdoor experience are more or less likely to be associated with discreet aspects of the program conception, delivery or intended outcomes. However, the analysis does suggest that providing an activity may be more important than the type of activity provided. This is because the activity is a mechanism for diverting youth away from antisocial behaviour. This is consistent with some research which has found that providing an activity, where previously there has been none, is more important than the type of activity provided (Catalano et al. 1998).

Case Studies

Fifty-one per cent of respondents (n=89) reported that their program had been formally evaluated. Programs that reported outcome monitoring commonly used internally sourced anecdotes (29 per cent of programs) and statistics (24 per cent of programs). Twenty-two programs (13 per cent of survey respondents) provided evaluative information allowing in-depth examination. The rarity of in-depth evaluations, and particularly long-term outcome evaluations, exacerbated difficulties in determining the most important components of effective programs. Programs generally received finite short-term funding that covered running costs, but rarely left extra for evaluations, or for setting up monitoring practices to record aims and gauge outcomes.

Further compounding this dilemma was evidence from the analysis of survey results that the majority of program staff were part-time volunteers. This may suggest that staff lack the resources or expertise to implement formal strategies to monitor and evaluate programs. However, three themes for program structuring and

development were strongly evident from the case study analysis:

- **Involve youth in program delivery and provide opportunities for leadership.** Consulting youth in program development, involving them in decisions about activity types and having them actually organise activities were found to increase feelings of ownership, loyalty and participation. Creating leadership opportunities promoted the program as well as helped develop social skills and reinforced positive life skills.
- **Create a safe and engaging environment for youth.** An important component of programs was to create an atmosphere in which youth felt comfortable about making mistakes without censure, where they could build a rapport with staff, ask for help if they needed it, and where activities were able to replicate the stimulation of antisocial behaviour (Collis & Griffin 1993).
- **Provide follow-up care and activities within the community.** The cases studies and literature highlighted the need for youth to be able to continue to choose pro-social activities once they have completed a program. Many residential programs found it difficult to provide follow-up care. In comparison, community-based programs were often able to provide ongoing contact points for youth.

Also evident from the case study analysis was the difficulty in measuring explicit antisocial behaviours, as they required both short- and long-term follow-up measurement. Underlying risk factors were more easily monitored through short questionnaires at the

conclusion of a program, and also through anecdotal reports of interactions among youth and with staff. However, this did not measure the long-term impact of a program.

Programs were found primarily to measure protective factors (such as self-esteem, interpersonal skills and leadership). Programs providing actual (achieved) behavioural outcomes most frequently provided measures of employment and education attendance/performance regardless of intended outcomes. Reducing drug and alcohol use and crime were the most prevalent intended outcomes of the programs under analysis, but were not always reported as being achieved. This was perhaps due to difficulties in measurement rather than non-achievement of aims.

The case studies show that programs did not target antisocial behaviours in isolation; rather, they tried to address problem behaviours and the underlying risk factors that may predispose an individual to seek out this activity. The literature supports this notion (see for example Darlison & Associates 2000; Loeber & Farrington 1998). It may be difficult to address one specific antisocial behaviour without impacting on other behaviours or the underlying risk factors.

Policy Implications

Sport and physical activity programs can provide an important vehicle through which personal and social development may occur and positively impact behaviour. The evidence suggests, however, that these programs alone will not impact directly on reducing antisocial behaviour. Rather they

should be a component of a broader strategy for reducing and/or preventing antisocial behaviour. The Good Practice Program Principles outlined in Box 1 provide a framework upon which administrators and practitioners could develop programs and upon which governments, funding bodies and other stakeholders could assess the integrity and rigorousness of programs.

A multi-agency model, where government and other agencies work together to fund and support sport and physical activity programs, is critical for successful implementation. It is important that there are links with health, welfare, education, employment and leisure services as such agencies can benefit from these types of programs. They can provide referrals to programs and provide links to support groups that are important for follow-up care of participants. More importantly, integration of these support services into programs at a local level will also maximise the potential contribution of sport and physical activity programs as any positive outcomes for participants could impact on these agencies, for example through improved academic performance.

Staffing and funding of programs were found to be critical to their success, with 59 per cent and 75 per cent of programs respectively considering these issues to have the largest impact. Many programs were funded for a finite period of time (around 18 months, on average) and this impacted on the ability of programs to affect changes successfully and maintain any positive outcomes.

Part-time volunteer staff were most frequently used in

programs. Forty-seven per cent of programs preferred or required their staff to hold professional qualifications.

Thirty-four per cent of programs required participants to contribute to the cost of the program. The highest contributions were for programs offering individual sports and the lowest for those offering team physical activities.

Slightly more programs received ongoing funding (56 per cent) rather than a finite amount, with welfare agencies being the main source of funding (40 per cent). Funding often does not allow for the provision of follow-up support services once young people have completed a program, especially in the case of residential programs. The evidence from this study suggests that follow-up in the community is an important factor in the success of programs and should therefore be an integral component of program development.

Conclusion

The research evidence suggests that sport and physical activity programs can facilitate personal and social development through which behaviour may be positively affected. This seems to be primarily achieved by focusing on improving underlying risk factors that predispose individuals to such behaviour. However, this assessment is based on a limited number of evaluations of varying quality. Before more definitive conclusions can be drawn, more rigorous and systematic evaluations are required.

Box 1: Good Practice Program Principles

Administrative

- Have clearly set out aims and outcomes that are monitored and, where possible, evaluated so that programs maintain their relevance to youth and resources are targeted effectively.
- Ensure that staff are interested and enthusiastic about the programs.

Environment

- Create an environment in which youth feel physically and emotionally comfortable and safe:
 - promote voluntary participation at all levels;
 - have minimal rules and reduced competition.
- Ensure staff are people youth can trust and develop positive relationships with.

Activities

- Offer novel and challenging activities that are engaging and relevant for youth.
- Ensure individual and team-oriented activities and program delivery are specific to the target group (for example, male/female).
- Run low-cost activities outside school hours and on weekends when youth are more likely to be unoccupied and/or bored.

Youth involvement

- Provide leadership opportunities for youth in organising and deciding activities.
- Engage youth in promoting the program.
- Consider promoting peer mentoring and support networks.

Accessibility

- Ensure the program is easily accessible to youth by providing transport after dark.

External support

- Develop links and provide information about other services and resources available to youth in the local community.
- Provide a continuing contact point for youth.

Underlying issues

- Promote fairness and equality.
- Be aware of self-esteem, family and social issues affecting youth behaviours.
- Engage with youth as individuals, don't just focus on their behaviour.
- Promote the relevance of activities for other life areas.

Note

See Morris et al. (2003) for the full report of this study.

Acknowledgement

We wish to acknowledge the valuable contribution of Dr Ian Ford of the Australian Sports Commission.

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Project no: 0053 Ethics no: PO2030