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The role of sport and physical activity programs in crime prevention

The range of benefits that sport and other physical activities can have in preventing or reducing crime and other antisocial behaviours among young people are widely documented. However, a shortage of good long-term research means that it is difficult to fully appreciate the impacts these sorts of programs may have over time.

Activity based programs typically target key risk factors for crime and anti-social behaviours, including individual, family, school, peer and community factors. In this way they serve as an important pathway through which personal and social development may occur. Other important mechanisms are through education, employment training programs, health awareness and other forms of personal development training.

Evidence suggests that to take full advantage of the potential contribution of sport and physical activity programs in preventing or reducing crime and other anti-social behaviours, program administrators must seek to integrate with all these services. This CRM looks at how these sports programs can operate through these mechanisms to prevent young people's involvement in crime.

Individual factors: - aside from the obvious physical benefits of sport, other potential impacts on the individual include improvements in emotional and cognitive skills, reduced boredom and substance misuse.

Family factors: - research suggests that leisure behaviour is affected by, and has an affect on a range of family factors. For example, partners who share leisure time in joint activities report higher levels of satisfaction within the relationship than those who do not. This environment facilitates good communication and family stability.

School factors: - sport and physical activities appear to have at least short-term positive impacts on school performance, in terms of personal attitudes and behaviour and academic grades. However, there is little data or research evidence on any long-term benefits.

Peer factors: - the role of peer groups in anti-social behaviour is well documented. Similarly, participation in constructive sporting and physical activities has been found to help with desirable peer associations by providing positive social contexts.

Community factors: - most programs targeted at young people occur out of school. Research into community-based and residential recreational programs (such as wilderness challenge programs) reports a number of positive impacts, such as decreases in recidivism rates and anti-social behaviours, as well as improvements in self-concept and self-esteem. Again, the long-term effectiveness of such programs is less clear.

Further reading:

Morris, L., Sallybanks, J. & Willis, K. 2003, *Sport, Physical Activity and Antisocial Behaviour in Youth*, Research and Public Policy Series, no. 49, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.
(<http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/rpp/49/index.html>)

