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Title: Using ‘sport in the community schemes’ to tackle crime and drug use among young people: Some policy issues and problems

Date: 2004

Originally published in: *European Physical Education Review*

Example citation: Lamb, K. L. (2004). Using ‘sport in the community schemes’ to tackle crime and drug use among young people: Some policy issues and problems. *European Physical Education Review*, 10, 279-298

Version of item: Author’s post-print

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/11867>

# Using 'sport in the community schemes' to tackle crime and drug use among young people: some policy issues and problems

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## Abstract

This article seeks, first, to offer some critical comments on the policy issues and problems surrounding the use of sporting schemes as vehicles of social policy in which the intention is to reduce levels of crime, delinquency and drug 'abuse' among young people; second, to examine a point of fundamental importance in policy terms: do such schemes work? In this regard, it is claimed that relatively few of such schemes - which are largely premised upon a one-sided perception of sport - have built in processes for monitoring and evaluating their impact on levels of crime or drug use among young people. It is also argued that these methodological weaknesses are exacerbated by the absence of any clearly articulated theoretical rationale for these schemes, which means that, even where success for them is claimed, it is unclear what specific aspects of the schemes account for that claimed success.

## Introduction

In Britain, as in many other western societies, there has been over the last two or three decades growing concern over what has been described as 'widespread drug use amongst very large numbers . . . of young people' (Parker et al., 1998: 1). In particular, concern has been expressed about the use of illegal recreational drugs such as cannabis and 'harder' drugs such as cocaine, as well as the many and various kinds of criminal behaviour said to be associated with drug use (Boreham and McManus, 2003; Condon and Smith, 2003). This concern has manifested itself in a number of ways, not least in the emergence of a plethora of policy initiatives designed to combat social problems of this

kind. Among these initiatives have been policies based on the assumption that the provision of sport and physical activities can make an important contribution to reducing crime and drug use amongst young people, a view which has been articulated in several policy statements since the early 1960s. Set in this context, the objects of this article are: (i) to offer some critical comments on the policy issues and problems surrounding the increasing adoption of sporting schemes - in particular, 'sport in the community schemes' — as vehicles of social policy targeted at reducing levels of crime, delinquency and drug 'abuse' among young people (see e.g. DCMS, 1999, 2000; DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002; Sport England, 1999, 2002); and (ii) to examine a point of fundamental importance in policy terms: do such schemes work?

### **The 'Januform' character of sporting culture**

Before we examine these issues, it is worth reminding ourselves of an important but frequently neglected aspect of sporting culture. As Dunning and Waddington (2003) have noted, sporting culture has what may be described as a 'Januform' character, for it has, at least since the late medieval/early modern period, been characterized by two different and contrasting ideological syndromes involving what one might call, on the one hand, a 'Dionysian' or 'Epicurean', that is, pleasure-centred, strain, and, on the other hand a 'Stoical' or 'Puritanical' thrust. The latter ideology found perhaps its clearest expression in the development in the 19th century of the *mem sana in corpore sano* ethos, a process which was bolstered in the wider society by the emergence, on the one hand, of the 'rational recreation' movement and, on the other, of what might be called the 'sport/health' ideology' (Dunning and Waddington, 2003: 355; Waddington, 2000). In contrast, the Dionysian/Epicurean aspect, which has long been associated, in particular, with physically dangerous contact sports such as football and rugby, involves, among other things, the idea that it is 'manly' not only to play such sports, but also to drink beer and to be able to 'hold your ale', that is to drink copious quantities of alcoholic beverages after matches without becoming visibly drunk and losing control. This subculture has also often included the following elements: alcohol-related initiation rites; ritualized drinking games which

had the dual function of, first, testing physical prowess and self-control under conditions of advancing inebriation and, second, of increasing the quantities of alcohol consumed; and the singing of songs and the reciting of verses which had explicit sexual themes and in which the mocking and degradation of females and male homosexuals were recurrent themes (Dunning and Waddington, 2003: 356). A recent study of athletes at a British university found that initiation ceremonies have become normalized within sports clubs at the university for both male and female athletes and that, although initiation ceremonies were in some respects gendered (for example, men's initiations more frequently involved nakedness, drinking urine, physical abuse and encouraging novices to vomit on one another), ceremonies for both males and females tended to involve the excessive consumption of alcohol (King, 2000). Alcohol-related initiation ceremonies, or 'hazings', are also common in American collegiate sports (Hoover, 1999).

While there have been fluctuations in the relative emphasis and importance associated with these two contrasting ideological syndromes, the Dionysian/Epicurean element began, particularly from the Reformation period onwards, to be pushed increasingly underground while the Puritanical/Stoical element came increasingly to the fore, a process that occurred correlatively with the emergence of Britain as a capitalist urban-industrial nation state (Dunning and Waddington, 2003). This is important, for it explains the current pre-eminence of the Puritanical/Stoical pole as a central aspect of the ideology of those charged with the promotion of sport in public policy.

An understanding of this Januform character of sport, we suggest, forms a vital prerequisite for understanding key aspects of the increasing use of sporting schemes as vehicles of social policy. In this regard, it is important to note that such schemes are premised on a one-sided perception of sport. That is, they emphasize the Puritanical aspects of sporting culture while largely ignoring the Dionysian/Epicurean aspects. In other words, such schemes are based on an uncritical perception of sport as an unambiguously wholesome and healthy activity in both a physical and a moral sense. Of course, such a perception is not wholly

inaccurate, but it is one-sided and an appreciation of the other side — that is, of the Dionysian aspects — of sporting culture might lead to a more realistic view of the likely effectiveness of such schemes.

### **'Sport in the community schemes'**

Among the most well-known sport-focused interventions designed to combat criminal behaviour among young people are the so-called 'Midnight Basketball' programmes which were introduced in the USA during the 1990s. These programmes were designed to reduce crime and prevent violence by young males (aged 16 to 25) in poor inner-city urban areas with high levels of recorded crime and youth delinquency by engaging them in supervised basketball matches during the so-called 'high crime' hours between 10.00 p.m. and 2.00 a.m. (for a review, see Hartmann, 2001). However, it is worth noting that, notwithstanding the rapid growth of, and success claimed for, such schemes, there is very little evidence for their effectiveness. And since they also lack any kind of coherent and evidence-based theoretical rationale, they represent, at best, 'an immediate, practical response to a perceived social problem' (Hartmann, 2001: 353).

In Britain, similar schemes that have sport at their heart have also won support from all of the major political parties as well as the police, the youth probation and educational services, local authority workers and organizations with an interest in promoting sport, including the national Sports Councils in the UK such as Sport England. On this basis, such schemes have attracted large amounts of funding both from the government and from voluntary sector organizations concerned with young people; at the moment they are of particular interest in terms of the British government's agenda on social inclusion (see e.g. Collins and Kay, 2003). Examples of these schemes include the Positive Futures initiative launched as a joint partnership project between Sport England, the Youth Justice Board and the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordination Unit in which approximately 35,000 young people (72% male, 28% female) took part between 2000 and June 2003 (Ramella, 2004). A central policy objective of the initiative is to use sport and

educational activities as well as other recreational activities 'to reduce anti-social behaviour, crime and drug use among 10-16 year olds within local neighbourhoods' (Sport England, 2002: 1) in 20 percent of the most deprived areas in Britain. It should be noted that, as the Home Office has repeatedly stressed, the Positive Futures programme 'is not a conventional "diversionary" or sports development project'; rather it is said to be 'a relationship strategy' in which these various activities are 'used to establish relationships with . . . socially marginalized young people who are alienated from officialdom and "authority" figures such as teachers, probation officers and even parents' (Home Office, 2003: 6). Consequently, the programme 'is not concerned with the celebration, development or promotion of sport as an end in itself, nor is it concerned with providing sports and physical activities as a diversion from, or alternative to, 'time spent engaging in substance misuse and crime' (Home Office, 2003: 8). Rather, sport, it is said, 'is just a hook, a means of establishing relationships with marginalized groups' (Home Office, 2003: 16) such as young people and it is the extent to which they form relationships with others on the scheme — in particular, the programme leader — as well as those within the wider society more generally that is taken to indicate the effectiveness of the programme (Home Office, 2003; Ramella, 2004).

A recent impact report on the Positive Futures programme recognizes that there is 'little evidence relating to Positive Futures' impact on wider patterns of life in the communities where projects are based' and that 'further research is needed to better understand successful delivery and the complexity associated with the long-term relationships between projects and individual participants' (Ramella, 2004: 46). However, there are a number of problems to be resolved before we can hope to measure more accurately the effectiveness of the Positive Futures project. For example, it is not clear from the report how we are to 'measure' — if that were possible — the relationships young people form with others on the scheme and within the wider society more generally. What criteria should be applied in this analysis? For how long do the young people involved have to have established a 'relationship' with others for the project to be

considered a success? Are these relationships likely to last in the long term? For it is the nature of people's — in particular, young people's — networks of relationships that they will frequently change as they grow older; some relations with friends will remain while others will become less significant in their lives. This is especially important when one considers that the relationships young people are expected to form with project leaders and others on the scheme are, in many cases, only temporary. Indeed, such close one-to-one relationships with the project leader are particularly difficult to establish on large-scale schemes; they are also particularly difficult to achieve on those schemes that are short-term and which have a high turnover of both project staff and volunteers as well as the young people themselves (see e.g. Coalter, 2001; Collins and Kay, 2003; McCormack, 2001). It is important to clarify these questions because, until they are answered, it will be particularly difficult to assess the effectiveness of such projects and the likely long-term impact that participating in them will have on the youngsters' lives.

During the summer of 2000 and 2001, another major project, the Summer Splash/Splash Extra scheme, was introduced and coordinated by the Youth Justice Board and delivered by local authorities in several of the most deprived neighbourhoods and city centres in Britain. The objective of this scheme was to reduce street crime and robbery by young people — in particular by those deemed most at risk of committing crime and/or reoffending — by providing sport and arts activities for 9-17 year olds during school holidays (DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002). It has been estimated that 91,000 young people participated in 296 programmes of this kind during the summer holidays at a cost of £8.8 million from National Lottery monies (DCMS, 2002). Approximately 2.5 million hours of activity were delivered, at a cost of around £2.60 per young person per hour based on the total scheme expenditure. Across all 10 areas in which the Summer Splash schemes were delivered, there was an overall reduction in the crime rate of 5.2 percent between July and September (DCMS, 2002). There are many other smaller scale projects that are currently provided by a range of organizations in many regions in the UK; these include the Leeds Football Community

Link, in which football is used as a means of diverting young people (5-16 year olds) in low-income communities in Beeston, South Leeds, who are identified as being 'at-risk' of engaging in criminal behaviour (Long et al., 2002), and the Street Sport schemes in the Stoke-on-Trent region of the UK, which have similar objectives (Collins and Kay, 2003).

The many schemes of this type vary considerably in terms of both the source of funding and the organizations and personnel involved. They also vary in terms of whether they are open to all members of the community or whether they are targeted at specific groups (e.g. drug users and ex-offenders). However, the critical question in terms of public policy is: do such schemes work? In other words do such schemes have a significant impact either on the level of criminal activity or on the amount of illegal drug use by young people?

### **Do 'sport in the community schemes' work?**

Notwithstanding the rhetorical and common-sense claims made on behalf of the effectiveness of 'sport in the community schemes', the consensus among more critical observers is that, despite the vast numbers of such schemes currently in operation in the UK, there is very little evidence for their effectiveness in reducing and preventing crime and drug 'abuse' among young people (Coalter, 2001; Collins and Kay, 2003; Dunning and Waddington, 2003; Hartmann, 2001; Long and Sanderson, 2001; Long et al., 2002; Nichols, 1997, 2004; Robins, 1990).

In addition to the absence of supporting empirical evidence — to be reviewed in more detail later — there are also a number of theoretical reasons why one might be sceptical about the claims made on behalf of the effectiveness of such schemes. One frequent justification for the use of sport in schemes where crime and drug reduction or prevention is the main objective is that sport can create enjoyment and excitement, and thus provide an antidote to boredom, for young people (Coalter, 2001; DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002; Nichols, 1997). It is certainly the case, as Elias and Dunning (1986) have argued, that sport can be

seen as a 'quest for excitement'. However, as Crabbe (2000: 383) has noted, 'this is often for much the same reason that [young people] might also choose to use illicit drugs, become involved in criminal activity or even sport-related violence'. In this regard, several studies have emphasized the importance that many youngsters, particularly young males, attach to the use of legal (alcohol and tobacco) and illegal drugs (such as cannabis and ecstasy) as one way in which to create excitement, enjoyment and self-confidence while 'hanging around' and socializing in the company of like-minded friends in their leisure time (see e.g. Measham et al., 1998; Parker et al., 1998; Pavis and Cunning-ham-Burley, 1999; Shildrick, 2002).

Even a cursory examination of some of the most salient aspects of youth cultures should therefore sensitize us to the fact that there are, as Crabbe (2000: 390) has put it,

. . . very real problems in using an activity such as sport that is seen to replicate the experience or excitement of drugs if it is intended to help young people come to regard drugs as a futile and sterile activity in comparison. The fact that the same emotions of excitement, euphoria, celebration, tension and fear are being used does not suddenly result in drugs no longer being seen as 'fun' or worthwhile.

To this we might also add that any scheme designed to combat drug 'abuse' among young people should also seek to account more adequately for the *context* in which they use illegal drugs as well as the people — namely, their friends — with whom they frequently consume them, not least because this might lead to a more secure basis from which to formulate policy that is based upon a greater understanding of the broader dimensions and realities of young people's leisure lives.

The need to account for the context in which young people use drugs becomes even more apparent when one examines another common-sense justification for the effectiveness of such schemes (known as the so-called 'displacement thesis'): namely, the claim that simply participating in sport as part of a programme prevents youngsters from

simultaneously committing crime or using drugs of one kind or another (DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002; Nichols, 1997). However, to the relatively detached observer — that is, to those who have some appreciation of the Dionysian/Epicurean aspects of sporting culture — it is clear that young people may play sport alongside other leisure pursuits which positively promote drug use and other deviant behaviour; a good example would be the heavy drinking culture which, as we noted, has traditionally surrounded a number of sports, including rugby and soccer, in the UK. Indeed, Crabbe notes that, in contrast to approaches which stress sport's allegedly wholesome and socially cohesive character, it might with equal validity be noted that sport provides environments in which 'acts of violence, confrontation and drug use may be licensed in ritualized fashion and given meaning through their association with the hegemonic masculine ideals of toughness, heroism and sacrifice' (Crabbe, 2000: 384). Specifically in relation to drug use, the preliminary findings of an ongoing project in which one of the present authors (AS) is involved indicates that large numbers of young people (15-16 year olds) who regularly participate in sports and physical activities of various kinds and at varying levels of formality also demonstrate a propensity for engaging in the regular (weekly) consumption of alcohol, while a smaller proportion also use illegal drugs (particularly cannabis) fairly frequently on a weekly and monthly basis.

What is true of sports and young people in Britain appears to be equally true elsewhere. For example, a Finnish study found that young people, particularly young males, who are involved in sports clubs and sports that are traditionally associated with a strong masculine culture, such as ice hockey, boxing and motor sport, are more likely to consume large quantities of alcohol and to be in an advanced state of intoxication each month (Koski, 2000). In France, Arvers et al. (2000) also noted a positive and significant relationship between 'doping products' (such as steroids and stimulants) and sports participation (especially football, swimming and cycling for males, and athletics and swimming for females), while those who participate in sport — in particular young

people — also report higher levels of consumption of cannabis, cocaine and heroin. Studies such as these should sound a warning against making simplistic assumptions about the effectiveness of sporting participation as a means of combating drug 'abuse'. However, let us now move away from the level of general discourse and examine some of the more empirically based studies within the UK which have sought to gauge whether or not such schemes are effective. We will first examine schemes which are aimed at reducing youth crime and delinquency, before moving on to examine some schemes designed to reduce drug use among young people.

### **Sport-focused interventions: reducing youth crime and delinquency**

Writing in 1990, Robins noted that 'research into the relation between sport and delinquency has been virtually non-existent in the UK' (1990: 1). One of the few systematic studies which existed at that time was that by Coalter (1989) who, following a review of the literature on the subject, was unable to conclude that there is a correlation between high levels of sports participation and low levels and frequency of delinquency among young people in the UK. Beyond Coalter's review, however, Robins observed that there was a dearth of properly conducted and monitored evaluation of schemes where the reduction of crime via sports participation was a main objective. It was in this context that Robins critically examined all the major programmes which had then been set up with the aim of using sport and recreation as part of a crime prevention strategy. These included a wide variety of schemes — for example, community development schemes, police schemes and schemes designed to rehabilitate young offenders - and Robins (1990: 89) concluded that there was 'little evidence of evaluation of the effect of programmes on young people' and that, as a consequence, 'information about outcomes was hard to come by' (p. 92). An additional problem, he added, was that none of the programmes surveyed included a process of follow-up or after-care in their objectives and, specifically with regard to those schemes which were targeted at convicted offenders, he noted that information about re-offending patterns, where

it was available, was generally sketchy. He also noted that 'no clear picture of aims and objectives and their underlying rationales emerge' (Robins, 1990: 88).

Despite the points raised by Robins and Coalter over a decade ago, there has been relatively little progress in terms of monitoring the effectiveness of such schemes. For example, Nichols and Taylor (1996) examined the effects of the West Yorkshire Sports Counselling Scheme and concluded that, while there was evidence of the effect of the programme on crime, with a significant reduction in reconviction for young offenders participating in the programme for eight weeks or more, the sample size of young offenders was too small to provide a statistically reliable estimate of the value of the benefits gained, to set against the cost of the programme. More recently, Coalter has noted that there is 'an absence of robust intermediate or final outcome data ... for large-scale diversionary projects' (Coalter, 2001: 31) as well as other rehabilitative programmes. Such programmes, he adds, also 'tend to have vague rationales, overly-ambitious objectives and a relatively unsophisticated understanding of the variety and complexity of the causes of criminality' (Coalter, 2001: 31). These are problems that are common to many kinds of schemes of this kind.

In addition, Taylor and his colleagues (1999) identified 54 programmes operating in 34 probation service areas; they noted the huge variety of programmes on offer, particularly in terms of their duration, scale and intensity (from one-day sessions to two-week residential programmes), and in terms of the activities offered and the programme rationales. As Gratton and Taylor (2000: 110) have pointed out, this diversity of programmes can be interpreted in one of two ways: either as a reflection of uncertainty about both why the programmes are provided and what is effective or as an indication that with such a complex set of intermediate outcomes there are many possible ways to achieve one or more of those outcomes.

**Sport-focused interventions: reducing drug use among young**

## **people**

Similar problems arise in relation to intervention schemes which use sport as part of a drugs education or drugs rehabilitation programme. For example, Crabbe (2000) analysed the rehabilitative and diversionary elements of the Leyton Orient Community Sports Programme in London, the objective of which was to establish a programme of activity which would provide local ex- and stabilized drug users with a range of sporting and personal development opportunities. Crabbe (2000: 388) concluded, following four months of observation of the project, that the participants 'are benefiting from the alternative focus that the sports activities provide and the need to remain "stable" that participation requires'. He noted that several participants, as a result of their involvement, had obtained qualifications ranging from junior team managers awards to qualifications in photography and places on other courses at local colleges. Two of the participants were subsequently employed on a casual basis in the community sports programme itself. Crabbe's evaluation is, on the whole, a positive one, although his evaluation is based — as is so frequently the case in such schemes — on the identification of individual participants who have benefited from the scheme rather than on the analysis of systematically gathered statistical information, which would provide a more reliable basis for judgements about the effectiveness of such schemes.

One of the most systematic and careful evaluations of such schemes was that carried out by Davis and Dawson for the Home Office (1996), which reviewed six projects using diversion to communicate drugs prevention messages to young people. One of these projects was based primarily around physical activities - in this case an outward bound camp — but other forms of diversion included a young people's music project, production of a local newspaper, summer holiday play schemes and the production of a newsletter using computer graphics and text.

Davis and Dawson (1996: 28-30) brought out a number of key themes from these projects. First, they noted that there was particular confusion about what is meant by 'diversion'. In this context, they noted that some

projects which they observed had been in existence for some time before a drugs component, linked to funding by the local drugs prevention team [DPT], was appended to it. They argued that, if these projects had previously been successful in attracting youngsters to the activities which they offered, then they could fairly claim to have been diversionary. If a drugs component were added subsequently, this could more accurately be described, not as diversionary, but in terms of drugs education. This is not merely a matter of semantics; the real question is whether the projects had been properly thought through and, in that regard, Davis and Dawson concluded:

. . . unfortunately this was not always the case and confusion surrounding the meaning of diversion may in some part be to blame. This is because the bolting on of a drugs education component to an existing venture was often motivated purely by the need to secure DPT funding and was unconvincing in educational terms, no matter that the original project may have been well received.

(1996: 28)

Second, it was suggested that drugs prevention team funding is not an unalloyed blessing. It was noted that pressure to secure funding for youth work leads project managers to cast their net widely. One possibility is to apply for funding to the local DPT. Sometimes, however, this money is applied for without sufficient thought or planning and on occasions, they note, the element of DPT funding created a pressure to address the drugs issue in ways which were perceived to distort the original nature of the project - perhaps because of the element of compulsion involved to meet the requirements of the funding body or, in some cases, because some workers (especially volunteer workers) lacked confidence in their ability to transmit drugs messages effectively (1996: 29).

Third, there were a number of weaknesses associated with short-term policy initiatives (such as using sport to reduce drug 'abuse' among young people) and, in this regard, Davis and Dawson (1996: 29)

argued that it is extremely difficult to convey drugs messages effectively on a short-term basis and they suggested that attempts to deal with the drugs issue in a concerted fashion in the context of a summer project were not notably successful.

Fourth, they argued (1996: 29-30) that the only projects which are likely to be effective in terms of 'diversion' are those which offer young people an activity about which they are passionate. The other key ingredient, they suggest — though they recognize that this is based on very limited observation — is that there needs to be some prospect of the activity in question having some permanent place in the lives of young people, perhaps even offering the prospect of future employment. They cite not just sport, but also music and computer technology as three examples of activities which have the capacity to excite passion and to offer the possibility of long-term engagement.

Finally, it was argued that a key factor in the success or failure of projects was the personalities of the coordinator and the other people drawn to work on the project. Specifically, Davis and Dawson (1996: 30) suggested that it is important that project workers should have 'authority' in the eyes of the young people attending these projects but it was also important that they should not be seen as authority figures; their authority must lie in relevant knowledge and practice and it is also important that project leaders have a high level of skill in the core activity (see also Coalter, 2001; Collins and Kay, 2003; McCormack, 2001; Ramella, 2004). They also noted the difficulties in conveying drugs messages to young people and the fact that volunteers often felt that they lacked appropriate knowledge. They concluded that the problem is 'best tackled not by giving volunteer workers some hasty drugs education, but rather by bringing in specialists who could more confidently address these topics'. The general conclusion of the report which they prepared for the Home Office was balanced and cautious and did not go beyond the evidence available. It is worth quoting at length, and we use it to precede our brief discussion of some of the major policy issues and problems associated with the use of sport-

focused schemes to reduce crime and drug 'abuse' among young people. They argued:

All the projects which we visited — even the most impressive — were modest in their claim to influence drug related behaviour in the longer term; what is more they all conceded that even if they did have an impact, this would be extremely difficult to demonstrate. But leaving aside this question of the impact upon drug related behaviour, it was evident that projects might be more or less effective in their pursuit of related goals such as the transmission of new skills, improving self confidence, developing good relationships with adults, and gaining an increased understanding of the potentially harmful consequences of drug abuse. Some projects appear to us to be powerful interventions if measured in these terms; others were less impressive. Perhaps all we can say is that it is at least plausible to suppose that some projects may have had an impact on the drug taking behaviour of some of their customers; and that in respect of some other projects it would have been implausible to suppose that they had any such impact. Powerful sustained interventions may influence behaviour; marginal, ephemeral interventions will not. (Davis and Dawson, 1996: 31)

### **Establishing the scale of the problem**

A long-standing problem in social policies which use sport as a vehicle for preventing and reducing crime and drug 'abuse' among young people is the lack of consistency and clarity regarding the objectives of those policies. When 'objectives' of one kind or another are identified, they tend to be overly ambitious, unclear, non-specific and often premised on poorly developed and vague rationales.

At one level the failure to clarify such questions is not altogether surprising since it is frequently the case that government and other interested organizations seek to develop such policies without first gathering baseline data that might be used to help clarify the size and nature of the problem before committing time and resources to its

achievement. While there are numerous methodological difficulties involved in trying to arrive at a precise estimate of the extent of young people's criminal activity and use of illegal drugs, it is important that we strive — insofar as it is possible - to estimate as accurately as we can the extent of criminal behaviour and drug use among the young people for whom the policy is intended. It is important that we begin to address such questions because until they are answered, it is difficult to know what criteria should be used in monitoring and measuring the success of drug reduction and prevention policies intended for young people. In this regard, there is clearly a pressing need to define more clearly the objectives of policies of this kind as well as the groups for whom they are intended, and to specify more exactly the criteria for monitoring the success of that policy. It is to a consideration of the latter that we now turn.

### **Monitoring and evaluating 'sport in the community schemes'**

The first point of note is that few of these schemes include built-in processes for monitoring and evaluating their effectiveness and outcomes so that the efficacy of the programmes is difficult to determine. Dunning and Waddington (2003: 359) have suggested that one possible reason for the absence of systematic monitoring and evaluation may be that

. . . such schemes are, all too often, based not on a relatively detached analysis of the characteristics of sporting culture but on a one-sided perception of sport which amounts almost to a statement of faith in its effectiveness to achieve desired social outcomes.

That is, sport policies which have as their goal crime reduction/prevention and the prevention of drug 'abuse' among young people often — although not always — reflect a particular ideological position based on an uncritical and one-sided perception of sport, rather than an orientation towards furthering our understanding of the social problems they are designed to address.

Having said this, it is also worthy of note that where monitoring and

evaluation processes are built in to 'sport in the community schemes', they tend to be applied rather inconsistently and the emphasis is often placed upon demonstrating the 'benefits' afforded individual participants on the programme (see e.g. Crabbe, 2000; Long et al., 2002; Nichols, 2004; Ramella, 2004; Robins, 1990; Sport England, 2002). While those involved in running and analysing these programmes often, with some justification, point to particular individuals whose involvement had led in the short term to changes in inter-personal relations, capacities for self-reflection and social adjustment, 'it should be remembered that whatever short term efficacy the programme may have on individuals . . . may be rapidly dissipated in the absence of any process of follow up and after care' (Robins, 1990: 93). Robins (1990), for example, has written in this connection of the problems of over-relying on individual data in his review of the Solent Sports Counselling Project in Hampshire, UK. The report included an analysis of the re-offending patterns of a random sample of 48 clients. Of the 13 clients who were involved with the project for less than three weeks, only two were not subsequently charged with offences within a year of leaving the project. The re-offending patterns of the remaining 29 (information was not available for six of the sample) indicated that almost half the clients had maintained a trouble-free record since being involved with the project and a further half-dozen clients appeared to have reduced their previous rates of offending (Robins, 1990). However, Robins points out that, although the evaluation refers to 'trouble free records' and 'reduced rates of re-offending' by almost half of the clients, it is not at all clear whether this is causally connected to attendance at the project and there may be other more significant reasons why such changes occurred.

Similar methodological problems of this kind also arise in relation to more recent studies in which there has been an attempt to provide evidence of the effectiveness of sports provision in terms of reductions in, or changing patterns of, recidivism rates. For example, in a study of four British schemes in the mid-1990s, Tsuchiya (1996) reported that on two of the schemes (data were unavailable for the remaining two

because no monitoring or evaluation of the schemes was conducted) re-offending rates were 36 percent and 50 percent after one and two years respectively. At first glance, such figures appear rather persuasive, although a closer examination of the data should encourage us to be more cautious about the claimed effectiveness of these schemes.

The first scheme on which Tsuchiya (1996) reports included four types of programme: (i) offending behaviour group work; (ii) craft workshops and education; (iii) life skills sessions; and (iv) sports and outdoor pursuits. From Tsuchiya's analysis, however, there is no indication of which of these elements, or which combination of elements, was responsible for the claimed effectiveness of the scheme and, while the evidence may be less convincing in the case of sport and outdoor pursuits, it would be surprising if the first three of the programmes — offending behaviour group work, workshops and education, and life skill sessions — provided as part of the scheme had no impact at all on reconviction rates. With regard to the second scheme cited by Tsuchiya, of the 483 youngsters who were referred to the scheme, 260 (54%) signed up to start the programme, but of these a further 67 (14%) failed to show up for the initial interview, 104 (22%) did not show up for the first session and 52 (11%) were not interested in taking part or were unable to participate for other reasons (Tsuchiya, 1996: 297). In other words, of the 483 youngsters who were referred to the scheme, only 37 actually started the programme and only half of these did not re-offend within two years. In the light of these considerations, one might justifiably question the likely impact of such schemes on recidivism rates as well as the generally positive analysis Tsuchiya provides of them.

The schemes reviewed by Tsuchiya are not of course unusual in relation to their failure to provide robust data in terms of which the effectiveness of such schemes can be properly evaluated. Collins and Kay (2003), among others (see e.g. Nichols and Taylor, 1996), have suggested that one reason for the lack of evidence for the effectiveness of schemes of this kind is 'because of the difficulty and cost in establishing the true re-offending rate amongst a very mobile population, even when costly

access is given to the national computerised crime records' (Collins and Kay, 2003: 170).

The problems associated with over-relying on individual data are also particularly clear in a more recent study by Nichols (2004), who outlines a sports-based project delivered by sports development officers (SDOs) in West Yorkshire and in which interviews were conducted with just nine young people. In his article — which provides detailed data on just four of the nine youngsters — Nichols notes that 'the programme has had a limited diversion effect' (2004: 191) both during and after participation on the scheme. Just how very limited this diversion effect was is clear when one considers that 'there was only evidence that three of the nine case study participants were progressing to independent sports participation and one of these would probably have done so anyway' (Nichols, 2004: 188). Indeed, the lack of evidence for the effectiveness of this project is perhaps unsurprising since 'its main focus was on achieving sport development objectives' (Nichols, 2004: 192) and because it was provided by SDOs whose primary interest was with the development of sport and *not* with a reduction in criminal behaviour by the participants.

It is also worth reminding ourselves of another equally important point: sport-based programmes are frequently only one of a number of projects that run simultaneously with the object of reducing crime and drug use among young people and this raises a number of additional problems. Indeed, if sport is combined with a range of programmes — which often have similar objectives and goals — then it is particularly difficult to establish whether it is the sport-based intervention that results in any change of behaviour, or an intervention of another kind, or a mixture of both. With regard to the Summer Splash schemes mentioned above, for example, Long et al. (2002: 44-5) have noted that, while there are some evaluative data in support of the effectiveness of sports-based projects in this connection, 'it is not clear precisely what the data relate to' and 'there is real difficulty in distinguishing between and accessing crime data covering the exact project boundaries of such schemes'. Similar problems also have the effect of obscuring, rather than clarifying, our

understanding of the likely effectiveness of the Positive Futures programmes which also rarely work in isolation and, as such, 'it is often difficult to differentiate the benefits emerging from this compared to other . . . projects working in the area' (Sport England, 2002: 15). These problems are compounded further by an additional problem, namely, that any attempt to identify and measure the effects of sport on crime and drug use is especially problematic since any influence these may have on actual crime and drug use rates is often indirect (Coalter, 2001).

In policy terms, the failure adequately to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of such schemes is a serious matter of concern, not least because without such in-built processes it becomes increasingly difficult to monitor the intended and unintended outcomes of the programmes and, most importantly, whether the programmes have had any long-term impact on participants' behaviour. A more secure and reliable basis from which to judge the effectiveness and outcomes of such schemes would be systematically collected data which can be compared to data from other similar schemes. While this is often perceived as a somewhat onerous task, the production of such comparative data, collected developmentally — that is, over the duration of the programme — would aid in the identification of the relative success and failure of such schemes as they develop. Having done this, we might then want to complement such data with those generated by interviews with, and observations of, the young people involved in order to triangulate — and thus help bolster the reliability of — our findings. In this regard it is encouraging to note that the monitoring and evaluation of the Positive Futures programme include both point-in-time assessments and longitudinal research in each of the areas in which the projects are run using several methods, including questionnaire surveys administered via email and telephone with project staff and the partners and stakeholders involved in the project, as well with the young people themselves, the use of audio-visual technology in the form of multimedia performances (such as video stories), and in-depth interviews (Ramella, 2004). While the effectiveness of such monitoring

and evaluation techniques is yet to be fully established, it may be the case that such techniques will help to provide a more systematic and adequate body of evidence for reviewing the effectiveness of schemes such as the Positive Futures projects.

### **Developing a theoretically and empirically grounded rationale**

In addition to the lack of systematic monitoring, several researchers have identified a further problem with most sport-based programmes: the absence of a clearly developed rationale for these schemes, a consequence of which is that in many of these projects the scale and nature of the problem to be targeted — as well as the goals to be achieved - become more diffuse, complex and wide-ranging such that the achievement of one goal might undermine the achievement of other goals and thus the likely success of the policy itself. This notwithstanding, proposals for the establishment of schemes of this kind are frequently accompanied by a list of alleged benefits of participation in sport without any attempt to articulate either the relationships between these alleged benefits, or the connections between these benefits and a reduction in crime and drug 'abuse'. For example, the DIVERT Trust in its booklet *Match of the Day* (described as a step by step guide to setting up football projects for young people at risk) draws upon the West Yorkshire sports counselling project to list five benefits of participation in sport. These benefits include: (i) improved self-esteem; (ii) improved relationships with peers; (iii) constructive use of spare time; (iv) the opening of opportunities, for example in training and employment; and (v) the development of new relationships with adults (DIVERT Trust, 1996: 10-12). However, the DIVERT Trust does not specify precisely how these alleged benefits have an impact on levels of youth delinquency; indeed, the West Yorkshire project, which provides the basis for these claimed benefits, was itself careful about over-emphasizing the link between sport and crime prevention.

The difficulties associated with such rationales might be fruitfully illustrated by examining briefly the claim that participation in sport leads to improved self-esteem, a claim which has been made in a number of

studies. There are several problems here. First, as Nichols (1997) has noted, the increased self-esteem which may be associated with excellence in sporting achievement is, by definition, only attainable by a few and there may be difficulties of readjustment when the individual loses the capacity to perform sport at an exceptional level. Second, it is in the nature of sport that there are winners and losers; if enhanced self-esteem is a consequence of winning then what, we may ask, is the impact on the self-esteem of those who are losers? In addition, the nature of the alleged link between enhanced self-esteem and reduced levels of criminal behaviour is by no means clear; indeed, as Crabbe (2000) has pointed out, in some situations the drug use-crime nexus can itself provide meaning and purpose in the absence of legitimate structured opportunities and can generate status and identity in contexts of social and economic exclusion.

In addition, Nichols (1997) has also attempted to review a series of potential rationales which can be identified as underlying sport as prevention schemes. These include: (i) reducing the ability to take part in crime; (ii) meeting a need for excitement; (iii) improving physical fitness; (iv) increasing self-esteem and sense of control over one's life; (v) the development of cognitive competencies; (vi) the importance of role models; and (vii) the importance of employment. As Nichols notes, these rationales have developed in an ad hoc way; they are poorly developed on a theoretical level and their relationships with each other are not clearly articulated. He suggests that it is a matter of concern that, despite many years of funding for such schemes, no clear rationale has yet been developed for programmes that use sport as a means of reducing criminal behaviour. He points out that we could, of course, adopt the approach which suggests that such schemes work, even if we do not understand why they work. However, this approach is inadequate, he argues, for three reasons. First, there is no clear evidence that these programmes do indeed reduce crime. Second, one of the reasons for a lack of evidence is the poorly developed rationale itself and such a rationale is required in order to justify measuring specific outcomes of the programme with reference to their impact on

crime reduction. Third, a clear rationale would inform the design of programmes and would allow the individual needs of participants to be matched to specific programmes (Nichols, 1997).

### **‘Volunteers are less likely to re-offend’**

Finally, many programmes require prospective youngsters to volunteer their participation. While this is not in itself problematic, it does create a number of problems in terms of evaluation. As Collins and Kay (2003: 170) have noted, one of the major problems with such studies is that any reported decreases in 'levels of delinquency may arise because the young people who come onto schemes are self-selecting and are (perhaps) more likely to offend less' than those who do not volunteer. In this regard, it becomes difficult to attribute any decline in the incidence of delinquent behaviour to the programme itself. At the very least, this emphasizes the need to ensure that the aims and objectives of any such programmes are clear and that the potential consequences of voluntary participation are carefully considered in the final analysis.

### **Conclusion**

In this article we have sought to offer some critical comments on the policy issues and problems surrounding the use of sporting schemes as vehicles of social policy in which the intention is to reduce levels of crime, delinquency and drug 'abuse' among young people. In doing so, we have attempted to show that there is little evidence of the effectiveness of such schemes in reducing crime or drug use. A major problem in this regard is that relatively few 'sport in the community schemes' have built in techniques for monitoring their impact on levels of crime or drug use; as a result, it is difficult to be sure about what impact, if any, they have on rates of crime or drug use. Moreover, the absence of any clearly articulated theoretical rationale for these schemes means that, even where success is claimed, it is unclear what specific aspects of the schemes account for that claimed success. Finally, as Gratton and Taylor (2000: 111) have noted in relation to crime reduction schemes - though the point would apply equally well to anti-drugs

schemes — even if it is accepted that crime may be reduced by sports-based schemes,

. . . the evidence does not extend . . . to proving that the value of the crime reduction is greater than either the costs of providing the programmes or the costs of dealing with crime after it has taken place, and more work is needed on these cost-benefit questions.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments upon the original version of this article.

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