Sport as vehicle of crime and drug prevention and social inclusion objectives


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Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I currently hold position as a researcher and lecturer at the Department of Social and Welfare Studies at Linköping University in Sweden, and my research interests are in the sociology of social work and social policy, with a particular focus on youth interventions aiming for social inclusion, and utilized by means of sport. In this presentation, I will speak about some issues covered and concerned in my research. The relation between sport and social objectives in general are complex and it is not easy to present unambiguous results, policy implications and recommendations. Relations are different if we, for instance, talk about primary, secondary or tertiary prevention, which is of course associated with the scope of risk-assessment (identified individuals or groups or the whole population), which is different between the variety of social policy contexts. Still, there are some general issues that I want to address at this opportunity given, with respect to sport as a vehicle to tackle crime and drug use and to promote social inclusion.

1. What is it about sport that makes it suitable as a means of social objectives such as crime and drug prevention? Sport certainly has potential to contribute to crime and drug prevention. However, there are no inherent or essential core of sport, necessarily making participation resulting in crime and drug prevention. The first thing we need to stress is that all depends on how interventions are conducted and designed – as with other crime and drug prevention programs. Crime and drug prevention – as with other forms of social work and welfare interventions – are complex issues. Prevention operates on a variety of levels and there is no single universal cure, sport for instance, that can be instituted in a general sense. If sport is to be utilized on the general level of prevention targeting whole populations, or targeting identified risk groups or targeting particular individuals, activities needs to be designed in different ways. Accordingly, sport is not a singular or coherent form of practice that can be understood as a cure and solution in itself.

2. What limitations can be discerned when utilizing sports-based interventions? A recurring theme in scientific discourse concern how sports-based interventions are often difficult to assess. Such interventions promoted are often under-theorized and lacking a coherent program theory, thus being hard to both follow and evaluate. In addition, we need to recognize the limitations concerning the outreach of voluntary participation in activities. Sport programs reach out primarily to young persons, already interested in sport. In particular, girls are hard to reach and include in activities. In that respect there is a serious need to look into the organization of practices to see how they can be made open and enable for girls to become interested in sport practices.

3. What works, and how does it work? Primarily, the expected outcomes of sport for development as a vehicle to promote crime and drug prevention can be assessed in terms of diversion and social change. Diversion regards the physical diversion of the bodies of young persons from sites of risk to sites of sport activities, while diversion of attention means diverting the interest and minds of young persons, away from delinquent conduct. Though, it
needs to be mentioned that diversion may result in temporary prevention effects rather than redirecting the conduct of young persons, long term. In that respect sport activities may also facilitate social change in a variety of meanings. Social relations can be formed, providing sound and healthy networks by means of relations with other young persons, with coaches and other adults as well as with representatives of social institutions such as schools. Still, the networks formed needs to be established with healthy and sound relations – and this is not necessarily or always the case just because they are formed through sport activities. Participation in sport activities may facilitate development of life-skills, or competences developed in sport and utilized in other social spheres of life. This has to do with skills in, for instance, cooperation with peers, problem-solving or following rules. Still, in order for programs to foster young persons, the activities need to be guided by clear strategies of how such skills are (implicitly or explicitly) transferred from sport to other contexts as well as how skills are utilized in other contexts. However, research shows that transfers do not happen automatically and are difficult to attain. Educational dimensions integrated in sports-based interventions can enable the empowerment of young persons. Empowerment can involve the development of self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of responsibility needed in order to function in a pre-defined social order. Such empowerment can – from a critical point of view – be seen as a form of control or subjection, though with potentially preventive effects on crime and drug use. Empowerment is also associated with critical pedagogy, spotlighting how educational elements integrated in sport can be used to create awareness among marginalized and under-privileged groups of young persons of injustices underpinning and causing social problems.

4. How is this achieved? When considering to potential outcomes of sport utilized as a vehicle to attain social objectives with respect to crime and drug prevention, certain patterns in the scientific discourse occur. Sport practices needs to spotlight the non-sport components of practices. That is, principally, a variety of educational elements, concerning reflection of moral issues, justice, rights, reflection on cooperation and rules, non-violence and more. In line, sport practices for social objectives needs to place social objectives in the foreground and therefore de-emphasize competition. Here, individual goals and standards of development should be emphasized over competition with other young persons. Sport for social objectives is not conducted as other competitive sports – it has other aims and objectives. Moreover, sports-based interventions should follow well theorized plans of action, with developed and explicit program theories, with clearly elaborated links between means and ends of the practices. Consequently, such programs preferably should be conducted by (professional) leaders competent in following such strategic plans of action.

5. There is however a risk of overestimating the value of evidence-based models from theoretically informed interventions that have been proven successful in one setting. Interventions do not simply transfer and replicate from on setting to another. Accordingly, interventions need to develop locally.

6. The issue of diffusion of sports-based interventions and the implementation of models of interventions alerts some concerns. The design of interventions can be understood on a variety of levels, with their own certain, but distinct, challenges – and the distinction of challenges must be recognized. Sport activities (practices) and their pedagogical arrangements can often be diffused from different sites however adjusted to the particular context and target group of interventions. Organizational arrangements (programs), partnerships, forms of funding and division of labor, needs to develop locally in alignment with the particular context of intervention – but, organizational knowledge and management capacities can be supported by
strategic agencies. Accordingly, both practices and programs can be governed, but in different ways, and this distinction is important to acknowledge.

7. However, viewing sport as a vehicle of certain social objectives, such as crime and drug prevention or social inclusion in a more general sense, is associated with a risk of reducing the social benefits and potential of sport and physical activities for young persons. Primarily, sport practices have a holistic social value which cannot be reduced to its potential outcomes in terms of externally articulated objectives, but which mainly has to do with young persons’ own will to engage in sport activities. Accordingly, policy makers in general must recognize that the provision of sport and meaningful activities for young persons has a value beyond the quantitative effects and outcomes measured in terms of levels of crime and drug prevention or reduction. Still, provision of meaningful leisure activities may in long term result in outcomes associated with social inclusion and cohesion in turn potentially having an effect on the levels of delinquency and disorder.

8. The roots of crime and drug use, whether understood on the individual level or on the level of the population, cannot reasonably be targeted single-handedly by the provision of sports. Broader social reforms for social justice and social inclusion, beyond the provision of sport opportunities, need to be placed in the foreground when targeting social problems such as crime, violence, drugs and social exclusion. But, sport for social objectives can compensate for inequalities in living conditions. And this is important to note. The important benefit from sport practices in relation to policy objectives must be recognized: it concerns the compensatory distribution and provision of sport (preferably because young persons want to practice sport and needs support for such opportunities) as an end in itself. On such a general level of prevention of social ills, it is reasonable to expect benign effects from sport participation. However, on the general level of prevention, developing sport practices with the premise of crime and drug prevention may contribute to increased stigmatization just as much as it may prevent crime and drugs.

9. Following from the previous notation, sport cannot be seen as an alternative to public social investments in education, social services crime and drug rehabilitation. Sport can be utilized as a tool and vehicle within these systems of inclusion, and as a method within the general apparatus of welfare provision.

10. Regardless of the results that sport programs can have in improving the lives of young people, some caution is required regarding expectations. Social interventions are multifaceted efforts that, even in cases where there are very good conditions, resources, elaborated action plans and professional conductors, risk to fail. To expect something different from activities just because sport is a tool is to overestimate the power of sport and to underestimate both the complexity of social interventions and the importance of the social structures that shape inequality, segregation and social problems. Accordingly, if expectations are not calibrated, even the benefits of interventions are shadowed by the assumed underachievement.

11. Particularly, in societies and in times of social inequalities and unequal opportunities to perform sports, practices promoted and provided to youth in marginalized communities – not least when expecting social benefits from them – needs more to be conceived of as a social right, and included in the general provision of young persons’ leisure activities. However, there is also a need to be aware of how particular interventions compensating for social inequalities and segregation when provided on basis of need assessment for those deemed at risk, may lead to the stigmatization and increased symbolic marginalization. Policy makers
ought to provide opportunities to do sports on the basis of social right rather than need (defined in relation to external policy objectives). In line, such opportunities of sport should be provided on the basis of potential long-term effects of crime and drug prevention or outcomes in relation to other social objectives, on the level of population, rather than on the premise of short-term assessment of quantitatively measurable outcomes of the particular targets of identified risk. This perspective is essentially intertwined with general ambitions of social justice, social equality and social inclusion.

In sum, sport has no intrinsic essence that makes it suitable as a means to promote social goods. Rather than seeing sport as an alternative to delinquency, discrimination and violence, and more, we need to recognize sport as a reflection of, and as an integral part of, society and that delinquency, discrimination and violence are also aspects of life played out in sport. If we want to use sport in a productive manner as a vehicle of social change, this must be recognized as well as the potential attributed. For sport activities to contribute to social goods, they need to be strategically designed with a clearly elaborated program theory. If this is attained, sports-based intervention can result in diversion and in social change working for long term crime and drug prevention, especially when focusing on the integration of education in the sport activities and downplaying competitive elements. However, the benefits of providing sport opportunities cannot be reduced to such expected outcomes, but should instead be recognized for the value of enabling participation on the conditions of young persons, themselves. Accordingly, expectations of outcomes must be calibrated with what is possible to achieve, and the complex of social structures at the cause of social problems, crime and drugs must be recognized. In this sense, the provision of sport can be seen as much as a social right for young persons, as it is proclaimed a vehicle of social objectives beyond the practice of sport itself.

Finally, I believe it is important to reflect about the context and frameworks of the integration of sport within the realm of social policy, in terms of crime and drug prevention. We need to reflect on how problems are made intelligible in order to make them potentially targeted by means of sport, what dimensions of social problems and causes of crime that becomes invisible and not potentially targeted by sport, what premises underlie our understanding of sport as a means of provision of social interventions and what it does to our general understanding of crime, drugs, social problems and social exclusion as well as social policy, when sport is conceived of as a means of crime prevention.