Policy Action Team 10 (PAT 10) and 17 other Policy Action Teams were set up, in 1998, to look in an integrated way at the problems of poor neighbourhoods. Each Team was made up of officials from Government Departments, experienced practitioners and academics. PAT10 focuses on the contribution that sport and the arts can potentially make toward neighbourhood renewal.

The research that underpinned the PAT 10 document by Collins et al published in 1999, led to suggestions in PAT 10, that sport might contribute [inter alia] to combating crime and particularly youth & juvenile criminal behaviours.

Crime and the possibility that sport may have an influence in the reduction of [particularly] youth crime has since become a focus of the sport development profession and a focus of academic study. These claims (inter alia) have spawned a number of National Initiatives, delivered by a variety of partnerships to develop the utilisation of sport as a context or catalyst for addressing youth crime and has filtered into an increasing variety of practice and academic arenas.

Whilst there is anecdotal evidence of involvement in sport being a powerful medium in certain individual cases, there is little evidence that sports involvement has any causal relationship with the reduction of youth criminal behaviour, other than that of immediate or short term reduction in reported crime (not suprising given that if young people are distracted by being involved in a sport activity - they are not available at that time to commit criminal offences - well off the field at least). Using sport as a long term distraction or therapy for a life of crime remains insupportable given the evidence and, we would contend, unlikely to do so other than in certain individual cases.

Academics in the area point to this lack of evidence being based in the design of programmes and the lack of well designed protocols for the delivery of any such evidence, maintaining that hope that sport may be therapeutic in a generalised form. We would contend that from a standpoint of dealing with “cause” rather than the “effect” that one must focus on the causes of youth criminal behaviour to provide a solution. Exclusion from sport, in our opinion, is not the cause and by inference, inclusion in it can not be the solution, other than in a few isolated cases (and for reasons that are probably not attached to sport).
The solutions offered by sport fall broadly into three categories;

1. Sport as a distraction (young people can’t be shoplifting at the same time as being the goalie on a Sunday). The subtext of these programmes are, for some at least, about the surveillance of young people. Given the meaning of surveillance, it could be argued that sport is being used as a punishment in this context.

2. Sport as a cognitive behavioural therapy (sport, it is suggested, may have a bio-social effect, teaching the values of morals, teamwork, respect for others, increases in self esteem and self concept, acceptance of authority (refs), teamwork and sharing of common purpose etc.) In this instance it is implied that the above, or elements related to them are those bio-social elements that may cause deviant behaviour.

3. Sport as a ‘hook’, in practice the use of sport as a means to engage young people at risk may be best described as a ‘relationship strategy’ (sport providing a motivation for young people to attend programmes that avail a variety of professionals the opportunity of delivering wider interventions (education, employment training, drug rehabilitation. etc.)) The salience of sport to young people in this instance is thought to attract and adhere them to programmes whose principal aims are about ‘youth management’ or ‘therapy’

The claim that sport might have an influence in the combating of youth crime was, in 1999, thrust on an unsuspecting sport development profession, their reaction was to develop sports programmes in this area and the academic reaction was to study these, well meaning, interventions. History may well record that no broad causal link between sport involvement and criminal recidivism can be substantiated but continuation in these programmes is and will continue to be driven by individual success stories. Whether funding will continue in this area is a matter for debate and politic - a couple of riots in inner cities will secure a future for these initiatives, as in 1981, a lack of which may mean this work will cease, until the next youth unrest.

Some serious academic heavyweights including Coalter, Collins and Long suggest that there is a need to clearly define the rationales that such programmes operate with at a design level, they each recommend that such programmes have a more structured monitoring and evaluation structure.
Whilst we would subscribe to these and similar comments (and defer to the wisdom of Coalter, Collins, Long and indeed others) we would suggest that the further development of this particular area is at a more fundamental level in that research in this area might benefit to a move to an analysis of the “causes of youth crime” as a starting point (and there are various theories offered in both positivist, radical and realist criminology domains, let alone those seated in youth culture and the sociological perceptions of youth), encourage the study each of which, match these to the various approaches to therapeutic interventions (learning theories, theories of behaviour change, cognitive behavioural theories, social theories etc.,).... and mediate these by the conditions that are provided by various sports and theories of sport involvement.

For students we would offer the same advice;

Start with a theory of the causes of youth crime and drill down to the domain assumptions. (the why!)
Identify a theory of intervention (based in the same domain as the cause) (the how!)
Analyse the conditions of sport and specific sports given the items above.(Related to the same domain as the intervention) (the process!)

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