The Positive Impact of Sport on Youth

Kyle Tysoe

Introduction
Sports are often used as a way to reach out to at-risk youth in a society. According to the International Child and Youth Care Network, the term ‘at-risk youth’ refers to those youths who are at a greater risk of being failed by adults and/or institutions because of poverty, single parent homes, or parents in jail (“A better definition of at-risk youth,” 2001). This paper will look at two different programs that use sport as a diversionary activity to prevent crime and anti social behavior.

The Midnight Basketball program was started in the 1980s as a way to try to reduce high youth crime rates. The program engaged youth in playing basketball at peak youth crime hours as a way to prevent them from committing crimes during these times (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). The second program, Kickz Sport in the United Kingdom, uses soccer as a means to reach at-risk youth, as well as youth that would not have the opportunity to get involved in sport (“Kickz first season progress report,” 2008). Both of these programs deal with crime prevention, reducing anti-social behavior, and encouraging positive youth development by using sport as way to provide constructive opportunities and options for the youth involved in each program.

The Positive Effects of Sport Programs
One benefit of sport programs used with at-risk youth is that the programs often help with the issue of crime prevention. Crime prevention, according to Oxford English Dictionary is “the adoption of measures intended to reduce or inhibit criminal activity, by implementing programs to deter potential offenders or to enhance the security of potential targets” (“Crime prevention,” 2010). Another benefit of sport programs is that they have been found to reduce anti-social
behaviors as well. According to the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998 in Great Britain, anti-social behaviors are behaviors or actions “that cause or are likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more persons” (“Anti-social behavior,” 2010).

A sport program is able to reduce criminal activity and anti-social behavior by engaging at-risk youth in sport, rather than leaving them to their own devices. Two programs like this are Midnight Basketball and Kickz, both of which use sports to reach out to at-risk youth. For example, research indicates that in cities where youth are involved in organized sport programs, there is a reduction in the crime rate (Carmichael, 2008). Several Midnight Basketball programs reported a one to two thirds reduction in juvenile crime following the implementation of the program.

It was also found that youth sport can promote the development of problem-solving skills as well as teaching youth how to work cooperatively with peers as a member of a team (Carmichael, 2008). According to the research of Wicks et al. (2007), youth sport is about promoting physical activity and healthy lifestyles as well as strengthening communities.

**The Program Details: Midnight Basketball**

Midnight Basketball is an organization that promotes positive behavior and uses basketball as a source of positive youth development and as a distraction from negative influences, or a diversion of attention (“Distraction,” 2010). The Midnight Basketball Program uses basketball as a distraction from crime and drugs with at-risk youth. Midnight Basketball runs during the time when the crime rate is high and kids might be drawn to the streets and committing crimes. Recent research has shown that crime rates among at-risk youth drop when they have something to occupy their time, such as a sport program or recreation center (Guest, 2005). In Australia, Midnight Basketball is described as a “national social inclusion program to help youth identify and embrace positive opportunities” (“The midnight basketball program,” 2010).

The first incidence of Midnight Basketball used as a youth crime prevention program occurred in Maryland, in the United States. G. Van
Standifer started the program because of the high youth crime rates in his area (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). Standifer saw that there was a lack of safe activities for the poor, inner city youth in his area to engage in during high crime hours of 10:00 PM to 2:00 AM (Hartmann & Depro, 2006).

Standifer’s original program was for youth aged 17 to 21 years old and the basketball games started after 10 PM during the summer months (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). They had two uniformed police officers at all the games to make sure the environment was safe for the participants (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). Since that time, Midnight Basketball has grown from a single site in Maryland to a national project in the United States, and beyond.

Midnight Basketball, in the United States, receives government funding (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). It is endorsed by famous athletes, such as Michael Jordan (Hartmann, 2001). The Midnight Basketball league currently accepts young adults aged 17 to 26 years old with games running from 7:00 PM to 1:00 AM and also includes workshops dealing with a wide variety of issues, such as drug prevention and education (“The midnight basketball program,” 2010).

The Research on Midnight Basketball
A study by Wright and Li (2009) found that positive youth development programs should strengthen social, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and moral competencies. In order to help at-risk youth develop personally, Midnight Basketball requires all participants to attended workshops in order to be allowed to play (“No workshop, no jumpshot,” 2009). Workshops cover topics such as drug and sexually transmitted disease prevention, academic help, counseling and employment, which provide young people with skills and tools to use after Midnight Basketball is over (“No workshop, no jumpshot,” 2009).

Another study described Midnight Basketball as a youth sport development program since the programs are outside of school and use a particular sport (basketball) to facilitate learning and life skill development (Perkins & Noam, 2007). Midnight Basketball offers a wide variety of workshops on that directly align with all of Wright and Li’s...
principles for positive youth development. For example Midnight Basketball offers workshops that focus on the youth’s emotional behavior. These workshops offer counseling services in order to resolve past issues and focus on healthy personal development in the future (“No workshop, no jumpshot,” 2009).

Standifer’s objective in starting Midnight Basketball was to get at-risk youth off the street and engaged in sport in order to help lower the crime rate in the surrounding area (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). Logically, it makes sense that if youth who might otherwise be committing crimes are otherwise engaged in a program like Midnight Basketball during the time when crime frequently occurs, the crime rate will go down. Research findings on whether programs like Midnight Basketball actually reduce crime have been debated politically and it is difficult to prove that it is the program that reduces crime rates and not other variables.

One research team found that in cities that had the Midnight Basketball program, crime rates were lowered at a significantly higher rate than cities that did not have similar programs (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). The study showed a five percent drop in crime rates in cities that have Midnight Basketball when compared with cities that do not have the program (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). When investigating crime rates, the researchers used statistical methods to rule out that the crime rate had dropped by chance.

They also looked separately at violent and property crimes in high-risk areas (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). The research showed that cities that had a Midnight Basketball program experienced a drop of 500 to 990 property crimes per 100,000 people (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). Results for reductions in violent crimes were less conclusive.

While the Midnight Basketball program has shown positive impacts in both youth development and crime reduction, it is not without its drawbacks. A study by Carmichael (2008) showed that sport as a youth development program should be 8 to 12 weeks long, as that is the optimal amount of time for youth development to occur. Since Midnight basketball traditionally only occurs summer months, it may not provide lasting change for these at risk youth. Guest (2005) found that sport
as a distraction only takes care of the problem of crime reduction for the amount of time of the program, and actually takes away from their healthy youth development because it implies, that without a program, the at-risk youth would not be able help themselves from committing crimes or behaving in an anti-social manner.

**The Program Details: Kickz**

The Kickz Social Inclusion Program was developed by the Metropolitan Police Force in three different cities (Manchester, London, and Fulham) in Great Britain, along with several other soccer leagues and foundations, including the English Premier League and the Football Association (FA). It was created as a way to reach at-risk youth and create safer communities through the positive development of youth (“Kickz first season progress report,” 2008). The Kickz program is funded through local police forces.

The Football Foundation donated $4.7 million to Kickz, which allowed the program to expand to over 100 projects nationwide (“Kickz first season progress report,” 2008). The goal of Kickz is to help lower crime rate and “create routes into education, training and employment” (“Kickz first season progress report,” 2008). Kickz focuses not only on playing soccer but also the coaching and officiating aspects of the game as well (“Kickz first season progress report,” 2008). The Kickz program also works on improving the relationship between police and youth by helping youth with education and job training (“Kickz first season progress report,” 2008). Kickz has reached over 7,000 participants and provided an average of 43 hours of direct contact time with each participant. Typically the Kickz program occurs three days a week, for a total of 48 weeks.

**The Research on the Kickz Program**

According to criminology experts, the most effective way of reducing youth crime is to lead young people away from negative social activities, such as a gang involvement, before they become involved in criminal activities (Carmichael, 2008). Since participants in the Kickz program
meet weekly for almost a whole year and have a large amount of contact time with program people, it is thought to lead participants away from criminal activities (“Kickz first season progress report,” 2008). In fact, Kickz has reported drops of 17 percent in burglary as well as a 14 percent drop in criminal damage in some areas (“Kickz first season progress report,” 2008).

Having an average contact time of 43 hours, the Kickz program is accomplishing one positive outcome. First, by having direct contact with a participant for 43 hours, that participant is not involved in negative activities, such as crime and drugs, but rather are involved in soccer for the those hours (Carmichael, 2008). By doing this they are essentially using sport as a positive distraction for the youth, by taking the kids and using soccer to distract them from drugs and crime (Guest, 2005). Second, the Kickz program keeps participants busy for a long period of time and, consequently, increases the likelihood of permanent behavior change (“Kickz first season progress report,” 2008).

The initiatives described so far promote positive youth development but there are other recognized requirements for positive youth development. The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine have listed physical, intellectual, psychological/emotional and social domains as the four main areas of positive youth development (Côté, 2009). In terms of how this description fits the Kickz program, there are several commonalities between Kickz and the youth development scheme developed by the National Research Council. For example, the Kickz program runs workshops for program participants that teach about the dangers of drugs and drug use (“Kickz first season progress report,” 2008).

Programs such as this one help youth grow intellectually, in terms of learning the effects of drugs and drug usage, and also socially because it teaches participants about social issues that might go on in their neighborhood. The Kickz program helps youth grow physically by teaching them proper soccer technique. One study found that soccer and the Kickz program will teach young children about flexibility, muscle strength, and even bone structure (Côté, 2009).
In doing so, the program teaches kids about taking care of their bodies. The program includes training on healthy eating and learning how to stretch properly before and after games ("Kickz first season progress report," 2008). When looking at it from a psychological perspective, Kickz helps youth develop positive self esteem through playing soccer ("Kickz first season progress report," 2008).

The project lasts for 48 weeks which is considerably longer than the eight to 12 weeks recommended for positive youth development (Carmichael, 2008). It is quite obvious that the Kickz project is trying to use this scheme in order to help kids have a positive youth development by keeping them away from drugs and crime.

**Similarities Between the Programs**

There are many similarities between the Midnight Basketball and Kickz programs. Both programs were found to lower crime rate and focus on youth development. Additionally both programs use police as a way to improve the relationship between police officers and at-risk youth (Hartmann & Depro, 2006; "Kickz first season progress report," 2008). One study found that youth who participate in or with police programs show positive changes in their opinion of police officers (Anderson, 2007). Research has also found that at-risk youth with no prior meetings with police officials in formal settings, such as youth-police programs, have a negative opinion of them (Rabois & Haaga, 2002).

Another similarity is that both programs use workshops to educate and inform at-risk youth on a variety of issues (Hartmann & Depro, 2006; "Kickz first season progress report," 2008). It is an important goal of both programs to not only ensure that young people are occupied for a certain amount of time but are also educated about how to make positive choices. Finally, evidence shows that both programs have achieved their goals of lowering crime rates in the communities in which they are run (Hartmann & Depro, 2006; "Kickz first season progress report," 2008).
**Program Differences**

While Midnight Basketball and Kickz share some common goals, they are unique programs with several notable differences. For example, Midnight Basketball is funded by the United States government (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). In Australia, Midnight Basketball is a national initiative, funded as a non-profit. Arguably, it lacks the popular appeal of the Kickz program, which is sponsored by the English Premier League soccer teams (“Kickz first season progress report,” 2008). Though as noted, Midnight Basketball occasionally brings in celebrities like Michael Jordan, the Kickz program may be more appealing to at-risk youth since some of their heroes and idols play for those clubs sponsoring the program.

Another major difference between the two is the contact time and length of each program. Midnight Basketball only occurs during the summer months (Hartmann & Depro, 2006), while Kickz is close to a 12 month program that meets three times a week (“Kickz first season progress report,” 2008). The Midnight Basketball program does not run as long as the Kickz program, but the Midnight Basketball program has the advantage in that it does require that all participants attend workshops (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). The Kickz program does not require attendance at its workshops (“Kickz first season progress report,” 2008).

**Conclusion**

Overall, the Midnight Basketball and Kickz soccer program have been extremely successful in lowering crime rates, anti-social behavior, and helping kids with positive development. Research indicates that Midnight Basketball and the Kickz have helped to lower crime rates in communities where programs were implemented. Both programs have successfully used workshops as a means for helping at-risk youth develop and provided them with the tools to make positive decisions. Most importantly, both Midnight Basketball and the Kickz programs have reached out to at-risk youth and given them time, attention, and positive role models that they may not have otherwise had.
References


