Reducing the Juvenile Delinquency Rate through Sports

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According to research, “juvenile crime is on the rise, becoming more sophisticated, and kids are beginning these behaviors at a younger age” (Wickliffe, 2013, “Introduction”).

Throughout history there have been many studies, arguments, opinions and possible solutions on how to handle the juvenile delinquency rate. Multiple studies have shown that the number of crimes being committed can be reduced by keeping children interested in sports. Sports keep children entertained, healthy, and motivated; therefore, they have little time to be causing problems within their communities. Sports alone will not solve the entire problem, but it can help to reduce it. If parents start children in sports in grade school, or even before, children may find that they enjoy them and will follow them throughout their middle and high school careers. Society wants to help promote a lifelong love of sports as a deterrent to less desirable behavior. Teenagers that are involved in extracurricular activities such as sports will be less likely to cause problems, get better grades, and live healthier lives overall.

Why is there a problem in the first place? Many people know that juvenile delinquency exists; however, people may not know the extent of those problems and what it can mean for the child as an adult. The number and types of crimes being committed are also on the rise: it is no longer the stealing of a pack of gum, but the stealing of cars. For example: “in 2010 there were 4,857 arrests for every 100,000 youths between the ages of 10-17 in the United States” (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2012, “Juvenile arrest rate trends”). This is a staggering number that is going to continue to rise if society cannot get a handle on what are teenagers are doing in their free time. In fact, there are “20-25 hours a week that children are out of school and parents are still working” (as cited in Afterschool Alliance, 2007, p. 1). If there is not something for them to do at this time than there is a high chance they will start doing
something out of boredom that could be illegal or dangerous, and once a child is in the system it may be difficult to get out. An example of this would be a child that steals something. The child would end up on probation; however, if he or she got into any more trouble after that, then it would be a probation violation and that could land the child into more trouble, starting a cycle that could continue into adulthood. A study in Washington done over 20 years found that “20% of juvenile offenders also committed a crime during adulthood” (Aos & Bornoski, 1996, p. 3). So by not keeping children out of trouble, parents would potentially be leading them to a life of crime.

Yet, what can be done to keep children busy? Especially when parents have to work to take care of their other needs? Sports are a great activity that can keep children out of trouble and healthy. There have been multiple studies on the subject and they seem to come to the same conclusion that sports do in fact help keep teens away from delinquent behavior. In Phoenix, “they kept public basketball courts open until 2am and saw a 55% drop in calls related to juvenile crime” (as cited in Up2Us, n.d., p. 1). That fact alone shows that teenagers who have something to do with their time will not go “looking for trouble.” With every sport there are practices which typically last for a couple hours and depending on the sport and age group, they could be anywhere from a couple of times a week to everyday. These practices are helping to keep teenagers busy after school, which is the peak time for violent juvenile criminal behavior and the hours when kids are most likely to be victims of crimes (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2013). Why then if society knows these are peak times for crime would they not want to promote a more productive activity? Aside from staying out of trouble, they are also learning a healthy lifestyle by staying fit and active, which for the purpose of this analysis is just an added bonus. There is a study that shows that, “students who participated in varsity sports were less likely than
non-participants to drop out of school or become smokers by their senior years.” (Zill, Winquist-Nord, & Spencer-Loomis, 1995, para. 11) so sports are essentially making children healthy for life!

While sports keep children entertained and healthy, they also help children build self-esteem, friendships, and discipline, which in turn help them to become more productive members of society. The goal of most high school sports is to prepare teenagers for adult life and turn them into well-rounded individuals, as opposed to counting stats and winning championships (although winning is an added bonus). A study in 2010 showed that in both, Arkansas and Kansas athletes had higher grade point averages and fewer absences then non-athletes (B. & Erk, 2011). In many schools there are also requirements as far as grades are concerned, if students do not maintain a certain grade point average they cannot play, and if they get into trouble in school or with the law they will also more than likely be put on a suspension or kicked off the team entirely. Therefore, a child will try to do better all-around and not just in his or her sport. In order to prevent a suspension, students need to stay out of trouble both in and out of school. Again, this is just one of the many benefits of teens being on sports teams; in order to play, they need to have clean records. Because of this, most teens will think twice about giving into peer pressure and doing something that may hurt their chances of say, playing in that championship game. By being a part of something bigger than themselves, teens will concentrate harder in and away from school which in turn helps them become prepared for adulthood. In sports, coaches are giving teens the tools to make better decisions about their lives, as well as the sense of accomplishment for a job well done.

There is one downside to children being involved in sports, and that is the cost that is associated with them. It can become expensive to buy equipment, uniforms, shoes and the gas to
get back and forth to practices and games. In fact in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, “the cost is $864 a year for students to participate in high school football” (“Public schools’ 'pay to play' fees,” 2011, para. 7): that is just the cost to play and does not include the above added costs. Yet, even though there are government assisted programs that can help to curb these costs for lower income families, the costs can add up for the median family who may have multiple children that are participating in sports. Therefore, there should be more programs implemented so that all children have the opportunity to join sports and hopefully stay out of trouble in the process. Communities could also build more areas like the one in Phoenix where there are public courts for teens to play on. Even if there is not a formal team in place through a school system, children will form teams and bonds and will have something to occupy their time. Most parents would rather have their children part of a non-organized basketball team than a well-organized gang.

With children participating in sporting events they are receiving a structured, safe and supervised environment in which they are also having fun. Children achieve more when they live structured lives that are bound by rules and consequences, and in some cases a sport may be the only place where a child receives this. By being a part of something outside of school, children learn the value of teamwork and friendships; the team in a way provides the same needs to the child as becoming a member of gang would. Even though there are many reasons juveniles join gangs, “most young males and females join for compassion and love” (Moore & Earls, 1997, para. 1). Everyone knows how unsafe gang life can be and the criminal behavior that goes along with it. It is astonishing to know that, “today there 775,000 youths in America that involved in gangs” (as cited in Up2Us, n.d., para. 1). Of course most parents would want to try to deter this behavior and again one way of doing that is by getting their children involved in
sports. By allowing children to become a part of a team, adults are fulfilling children’s needs to fit in somewhere, feel wanted and needed. Since these needs are stronger in adolescent years, it is imperative that adults try to fulfill those with healthy activities and hope that children will be deterred from unhealthy alternatives such as gangs. A sport is not just to teach a child how to play a game, and it is not about winning or losing either, but it is about so many more life skills that are needed to be successful in adulthood.

The studies show that not only is there a problem with juvenile delinquency in the United States, but that sports are a good way to help lower the delinquency rate. Sports offer a variety of benefits for children that can have a lasting effect on their entire lives. Therefore, society should be doing more things that are proactive to help alleviate this issue. Teens have a need to feel loved and wanted and when that does not happen, bad things can. Talking to children and teaching them about values and right from wrong is always the best solution to helping lower the delinquency rate. Although sometimes there are parents out there that are just ill-equipped to be parents at all, the rest of society needs to step up and help those children get the attention, love and direction they deserve! The delinquency rate may never reach zero, but the closer society gets, the bigger the accomplishments that have been made by parents, adults, and educators. Parents need to get their children involved in more sporting activities because there are so many benefits, but the biggest ones are to keep them safe and out of trouble. Adults know that one mistake can have a lasting effect on one’s life and that is something everyone needs to help juveniles understand; people are not invincible and eventually a life of crime will catch up with them. Adults need to steer children in the right direction and get them involved in something they enjoy and will carry with them for a lifetime.
References


