
Rescuing Young Offenders with Recreation Programs in the United Kingdom¹

Presenter:

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Background

The Solent Sports Counseling Project is probably the best known sport and leisure program aimed at preventing criminal youth behavior in the United Kingdom. This project is focused on Portsmouth, Southampton, and Basingstoke (cities in the County of Hampshire) located on the south coast of England.

The project was initiated in 1985 with a grant of \$150,000-\$200,000 per year for a three-year period, primarily provided by the British Sports Council. This is an independent body which is funded annually by central government, similar in concept but not content to the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States. The Sports Council supports and provides development of sport and physical recreation for all levels of ability and at all levels of government. It has a wide range of responsibilities and programs; amongst them is a mandate to support research and demonstration projects. The Sports Council's Research Unit monitored and evaluated the project for its three-year duration. The material in this article is drawn from that evaluation, from a report undertaken by the Centre for Criminology Research at Oxford University, from subsequent material provided by the project's director, and from discussions with one of the project's managers.

The project had its genesis in a local court in Southampton which established a pilot program to provide "sports counseling" for first-time offenders and young people at risk. The intent was to offer

them the opportunity to take part in sports and to introduce them to sports clubs and facilities. The initial success of this small-scale program encouraged the Sports Council to support it financially on a larger scale as a demonstration project.

The initial idea of working closely with the courts and for the courts to refer offenders proved difficult to implement, and it became obvious that links with the Probationary Service were a far more satisfactory means of recruiting participants. As the project proceeded, there was an increased belief among the staff that participation should be voluntary. They came to recognize the importance of participants being involved because they want to be, rather than because they have to be.

Program Description

Project Objectives and Staffing

The broad aims of the project when it was launched in 1985 were:

- (a) to enable an experiment to be conducted whereby first offenders with a spark of interest in sports may be given a chance to develop that interest in a constructive fashion with a view to introducing new purpose to their lives; and
- (b) to develop participation amongst an isolated element of the 15-24 target age group which includes many unemployed persons.

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The emphasis in sports was subsequently broadened to embrace other types of leisure pursuits. Within these overall aims, the following operational objectives were defined:

- (1) to provide a program of sport and leisure activities using resources in the local area;
- (2) to develop the goodwill and cooperation of appropriate agencies within the local community, and whenever possible use resources on a shared basis;
- (3) to reduce the rate of appearance and reappearance of clients in court;
- (4) to enable participants to develop social skills through the medium of sport and leisure activities;
- (5) to foster the self-confidence of clients through the medium of sport and leisure activities;
- (6) to facilitate clients participation in sport and leisure activities at their own level in a friendly and supportive environment; and
- (7) to introduce participants to various facilities within the local community so that the activities introduced through the project may be continued on completion of their program.

The annual budget for the project was approximately \$200,000 of which approximately \$140,000 went for staff salaries and other support costs such as training and travel. The other main budget items were rent for premises (\$12,000), office support costs (\$4,000), equipment (\$30,000) and travel and activity costs for the clients themselves (\$14,000).

The staff consists of three separate teams based in the cities of Portsmouth, Southampton, and Basingstoke. Each team is comprised of a senior leader with two assistant leaders, while a central project office in Southampton houses the project director and an administrative assistant. The project director reports to senior probation officers in Portsmouth, Southampton, and Basingstoke. Local advisory groups were also established in each area to advise the project director.

Staff, who brought a wide variety of background experiences to the project, were recruited and trained. Their objective is to build relationships with participants rather than to arrange activities for them. A strength of all the staff is that they are good communicators which is a vital asset for establishing the necessary rapport with participants. Staff training courses addressed personal development, management, sports specific qualifications, first aid, working with voluntary groups, racial awareness, and drug and alcohol abuse. The director insists on the

primacy of a client centered approach. In an interview, he was quoted as saying:

Our project works very much at the client level. Recently...staff had laid on an expedition. They were just about to go away...and I asked them how many people they had. They replied, 'Two.' I told them that we usually took eight. They said the people didn't want to go. I asked why were we doing the expedition then? 'You work to the needs of the people,' they replied.

Efforts are made to supplement the professional staff with volunteers who can organize specific recreation sessions or work one-to-one with clients. The quality of service offered to clients is perceived to be very important, and volunteers of the necessary caliber are not easy to find. However, several individuals have been found who have volunteered assistance, including a 67-year-old man who taught lawn bowls once a week and a lady who was a tennis coach.

Working with the Clients

The client profile is distinctive: over 92% of the clients are male; 66% aged between 17 and 21, and 86% of them unemployed. The nature of the participants' offenses vary widely. Many have a record of several different kinds of offenses, but the leading categories of the convictions were burglary (19%), stealing from or taking automobiles (16%), stealing from retail stores (31%), and other miscellaneous stealing (28%).

Following an initial referral, each client is contacted by a member of the project staff and a program of activities is arranged. The initial contact is crucial:

At Solent Sports Counseling Project (SSCP) a relaxed and informal 'softly, softly' manner is used as an initial befriending technique. The aim is to 'sell' the project counselor as someone the client can trust and who may be able to help them. Young offenders are therefore likely to be introduced to SSCP via a (not too early) morning telephone call asking them whether they would like to come out for a few hours and attend a session of their choice. If clients choose 'fishing,' they are likely to spend the morning out fishing with a SSCP staff member. Although some clients complain that 'it is all a bit vague, what they are trying to do,' many respond with initial enthusiasm, while yet others are at least curious. Client and counselor work out the content of the treatment program until mutual

agreement is reached. To ensure commitment to the program, many assessments are based largely on the client's own appraisal of his or her abilities and inclinations.

The project staff place emphasis on establishing an individual relationship with each client, both in terms of counseling and the development of an activity program. Defining a clear 'pathway' for each client is fundamental to success.

The client's work program includes three distinct stages. First, an *initial commitment* is vital. Both the staff and the probation officers are anxious not to push clients into an involvement; the clients have to possess a "spark of interest" and some sort of drive or ambition. In some cases, the staff realize that prospective clients are not suitable and that the project would do nothing for them.

The middle stage for each client is a process of *self-assessment*. Success at this stage for many clients is measured by the extent to which they have established appropriate links beyond the project (i.e., with sports facilities, sports clubs, informal groups).

The most difficult stage facing the project is *defining the limit of its involvement* with individual clients. To address this problem a definite program is developed for each client at the initial commitment stage which involves a half- or full-day session once a week for a period of eight weeks. Although it is not necessarily appropriate for clients to complete such a program, all are aware at the outset that, at the end of the eight weeks, the project has no further obligation to continue its involvement with them. In practice, many clients are sufficiently motivated to maintain their links with the project on an informal basis. In other instances, the staff have the option to offer a further eight-week option to clients when further involvement seems likely to pay dividends.

Several bases have been established around the three main centers, including satellite locations in the suburban areas. Participants construct their own program from a choice of more than 30 sports; indoor leisure activities such as music, computing and model building; and courses in health and first aid. Teams have been organized in local leagues for tenpin bowling, indoor cricket, and indoor soccer. The project has established links with existing community facilities to take advantage of the equipment and facilities available, and it places some participants in local sports clubs, assisting in most cases with their initial joining fees.

Clients are coached in individual sports and encouraged to work towards recognitions where they are appropriate (e.g., swimming, lifesaving awards). Each client is counseled to participate in a variety of activities, some new, with at least one activity taking

place each week. After the introductory weeks, most clients go on to specialize in two or three regular pursuits. In addition to the program of activities, each client undertakes a basic health test (e.g., blood pressure, lung capacity, fitness questionnaire) and is given advice on good hygiene, good eating habits, and basic information on drinking alcohol, smoking, drugs, and sex education. Results from these tests show that the majority of clients smoke heavily, drink alcohol heavily if money is available, and take little care of their bodies.

Some clients participate in team games against inmates in a local prison, which are played at the prison's facilities. The clients selected are those who are in the most danger of receiving prison sentences should they reoffend or breach the terms of their probation. The staff believe the experience "inside" is an eye-opener for some of them.

Benefits Received by Clients

The probation officers have identified a number of major benefits that clients receive from the project. One noted, "We are dealing all the time with damaged people." The project's approach allows clients to build self-esteem, substantially in many cases. Particularly for drug abusers and socially inept clients, this aspect of the project is considered to outweigh all the other benefits that might occur. Partly linked to self-esteem, the development of self-awareness is considered important for certain clients. Many develop a more disciplined attitude as a result of the project; others have broader horizons; some develop greater awareness of health and hygiene factors. Gains in confidence emerge from their having done something on their own for themselves. Many clients live in unstable environments, endure hardships in their upbringing, are often involved in broken homes, and feel society has somehow let them down. This gain in confidence helps to break this attitude.

The provision of an adult role model who cares about them is a vital beneficial outcome of the project. Many clients are "adrift from adults" and some have consciously rejected the adult world. The leaders often bridge this gap by being positive role models. Similarly peer group socialization introduces clients to new social networks and the "camaraderie" associated with the project's activities often leads to the development of new friendships. For certain clients, the project provides the chance to achieve, in some cases for the first time. Most of the probation officers contend that gaining a sporting award, certificate, or trophy is a major factor in encouraging clients to achieve in other areas of their life. Two presentation evenings a year are held to

recognize individuals who have completed the program by awarding certificates for a variety of achievements. Family, friends, and probation officers attend, adding to the sense of achievement for those receiving the awards.

Evidence of the Project's Success

The Sports Council's independent monitoring report concluded that the project worked well and effectively met its objectives. The authors stated:

The degree of support from within the probation service is immense; the reaction of outside agencies is both complimentary and enthusiastic; the clients themselves view the sports leaders as valued friends and confidants and in many cases have continued their sporting interests; sporting organizations, both public and private, have generally responded well to the project's ideals; and finally, the re-offending rates show some conclusive successes.

The report includes a number of individual case studies which effectively highlight the profound effect of the project on some of the clients' lives. The cases also illustrate that the project has an impact on a wide range of client types. However, it emphasizes that many of the positive results require time and patience to achieve maximum benefits, both of which have implications for the number of clients with whom the leaders can realistically work at any one time.

Constructing recidivism rates is difficult because British confidentiality laws constrain the police on the type of data they can reveal. Nevertheless, on the basis of a sample of clients' records, the Sports Council report was able to conclude that:

Almost half the clients have maintained a trouble-free record since being involved with the project....In some cases the project has had significant successes in helping to halt long-time criminals with histories of serious crime.

The success of the project in the eyes of those engaged in probation work can be gauged by the spread of similar type programs into other jurisdictions in England including Somerset, Leicester, Dorset, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, Coventry, Northumbria, and North Kent. Probation officers feel that clients are not capable of getting into the social structure of sport on their own and that leaders are the key to integrating them. This type of project was one of the few tangible things they have to offer people, and the leaders have the

time to do the job properly. As one officer noted, "It's starting where people are at, particularly the young clients."

A final convincing piece of evidence regarding its value came at the end of the three years for which the project was funded by outside grants. At that time, Hampshire County Council agreed to provide full funding for the project as a regular budgeted item and fully integrated it into the Hampshire Probation Service.

Although close relationships with probation officers are a key to the project's success, there is a firmly held belief by all parties involved that the project should remain separate from mainstream probation work. If it was seen as part of the probation service, there would be an image problem. This is not as likely to occur if those ties remain flexible and loose.

One of the major problems faced by the project's staff is getting the general public to appreciate the value of the project. The Director commented:

Whenever I go to speak at these meetings, people say things like 'it's not fair that young offenders should have all these facilities -my son never gets a chance to do any of these activities.' I tell them that there is a difference-'you care about your son, he's got love.'

The project director, Keith Waldman, would be interested in sharing more detailed information on the project and in interacting with individuals in North America who are involved in at-risk youth programs. His address is listed in the presenters section at the end of this book.