

Disrupting knife crime through sport

Violent knife crime in the UK is on the rise and addressing the complex issues behind it may take generations. In the meantime, intervention programmes are a solid step towards stamping it out. However, success is intermittent. Even those with sport at their heart that seem more successful than others have mixed results. Research by Dr Holly Collison-Randall at Loughborough University London may have uncovered why. Her insights hold a key for successful intervention of sports programmes to tackle violent knife crime.

In the US, violent extremism plays out on an almost daily basis through the barrel of a gun. According to the FBI, 73% of all homicides involve a firearm. In the UK, that figure is 4%. Comparisons like this give support to calls in the US for gun control. There's merit in that approach – in the UK, access to firearms is strictly controlled. As a result, the knife is the weapon of choice for acts of extreme violence in the UK. In the year to March 2020 there were 46,300 knife-crime offences in the UK, and it's an escalating issue: knife-crime murders in under-eighteens sadly reached a record 30 victims in London in 2021.

However, restricting access to a cornerstone of every British kitchen is not an option to address knife violence. The broad social, cultural, and economic issues that underscore knife crime will take generations to correct, if they can be corrected at all. The best approach is through intervention, and some of the most successful interventions are based on one of the world's most popular pastimes.

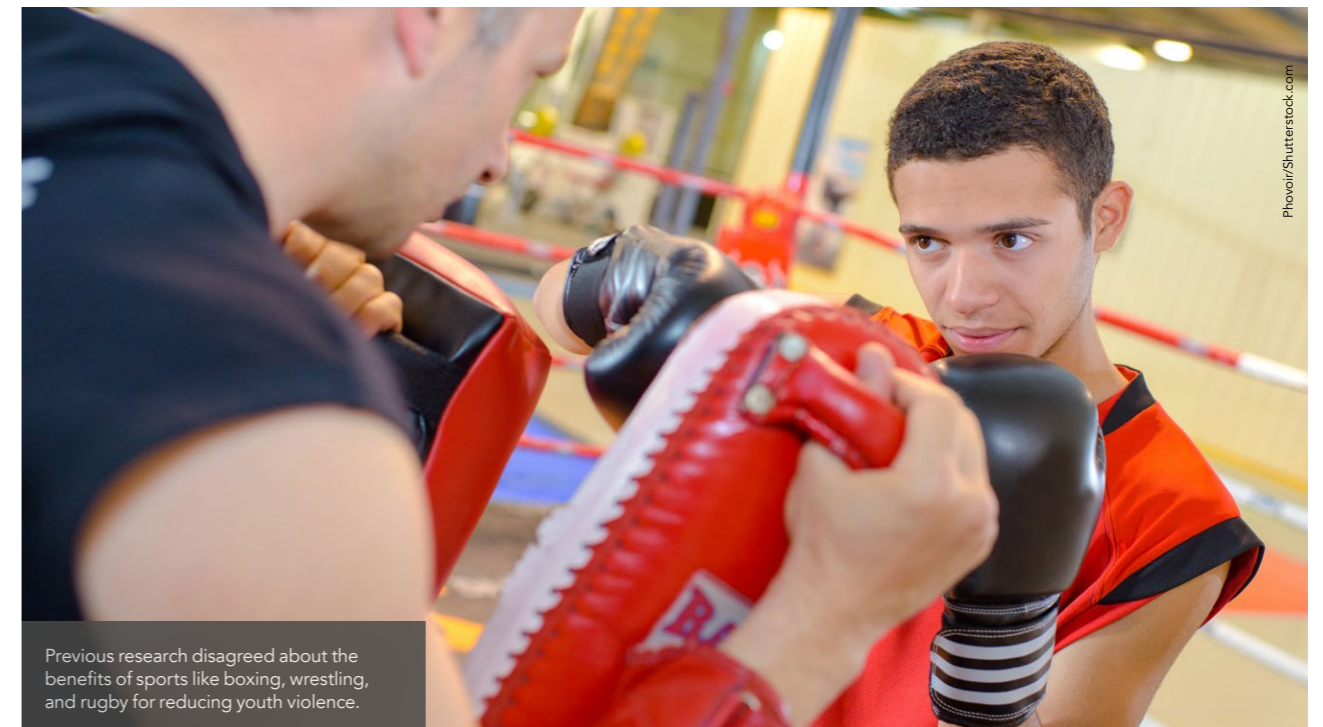
Dr Holly Collison-Randall is a specialist in this area. She is an anthropologist in the field of sport for development, and a senior lecturer at the Institute for Sport Business, at Loughborough University London. Her experience and research into the use of sport as a post-conflict development intervention have

taken her as far afield as Liberia, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka. This was vital in her selection by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as a senior consultant to produce the first technical and practical guide on 'Preventing Violent Extremism through Sport'. It was also why she was selected to guide the London Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) on using sports programmes to tackle violence and knife crime. Her research in this regard has contributed to some critical insights into what makes such programmes successful. This is important because sport intervention programmes have had mixed results and little empirical data exists on the effectiveness and long-term impacts of sport in the context of knife crime and youth violence.

MIXED RESULTS RAISE QUESTIONS

Whether domestic, gang-related, or terrorism, extreme violence emerges from a complicated but common mix of social, economic, and cultural circumstances. Research continually shows that youths involved in extreme violence are most likely from poor backgrounds and raised by single parents. In the UK, race and ethnicity also play a role, with Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic individuals statistically more likely to be involved, as both perpetrators and victims.

Sport intervention programmes are in place worldwide, but outcomes – though largely positive – have encouraged many questions. Some research suggests some sports programmes actually increase levels of violence in youths, with those featuring sports like boxing, wrestling, and rugby especially so. Other research has shown



Previous research disagreed about the benefits of sports like boxing, wrestling, and rugby for reducing youth violence.

the opposite: that boxing, for example, despite being naturally aggressive and combative, provides a healthy outlet for youths typically predisposed to acts of extreme violence. Dr Collison-Randall's research has shed light on this seeming anomaly.

Working with fellow researchers at Loughborough University London's Institute for Sport Business, Collison-Randall designed a two-phase research programme targeting selected sports programmes in the UK. The research had four overall aims: explore the nature of sports programmes focused on tackling knife crime; evaluate the effectiveness of the programmes; share best practices to help develop such programmes; and extend the programmes by providing action-based recommendations.

The first phase in September 2020 involved 30 participants with 28 UK projects completing the Program Quality Assessment for Youth Sports survey. The second phase, five months later, involved in-depth virtual interviews with coaches and managers of six such projects based in London. These projects were all supported by the Impact Partnerships Fund, part of the Mayor of London's Sports Unites and Young Londoners Fund for sports projects for at-risk youths. Three of the projects used football, two involved

mixed sport, and the sixth used boxing; four of the interviewees were male, two were female.

POSITIVE DISRUPTIVE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT

Insights around best practices from the survey and the interviews helped paint

a clearer picture of the components of a successful sport intervention programme. The first is a proper understanding of the context within which youths at risk of being involved in knife crime find themselves. This context is not only the physical place where they live – the postcode – but also the social, economic,

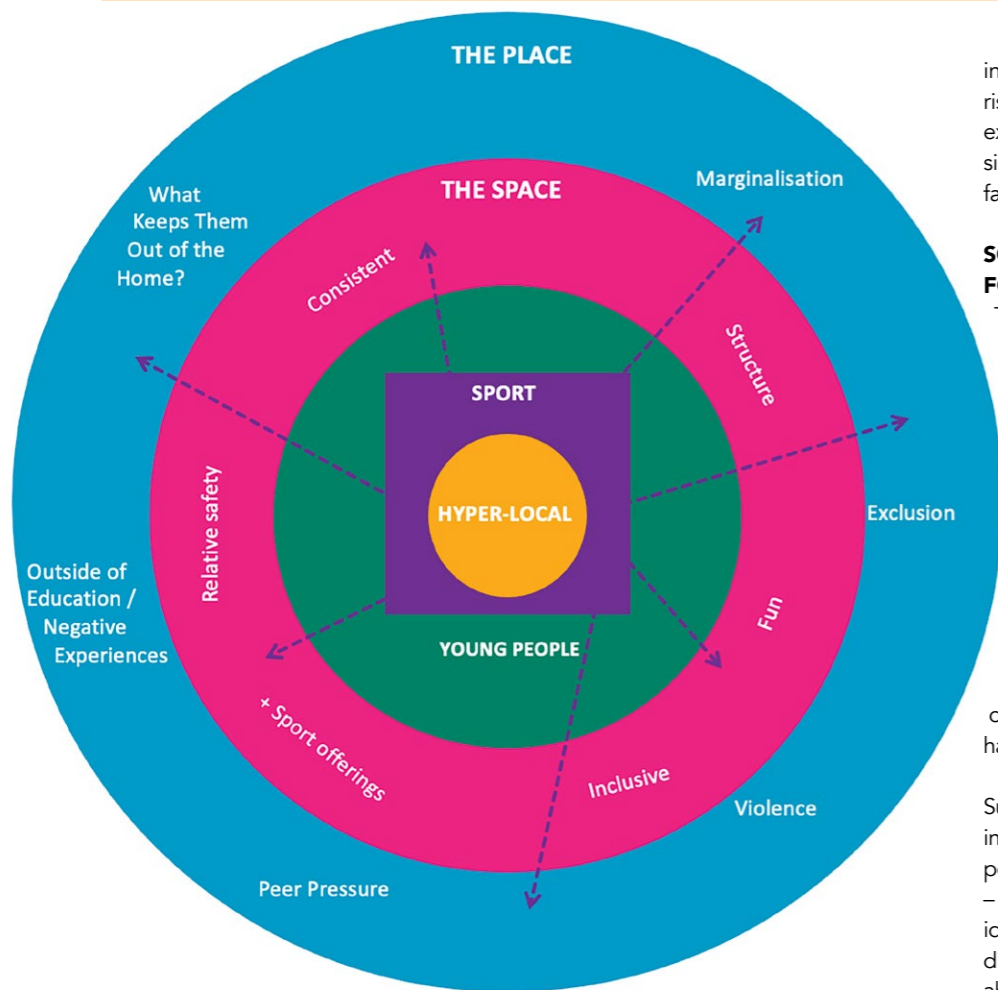
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Successful sport intervention programmes create a safe space for youths to interact with mentors.

emotional, and psychological 'place' they are in. Here, youths face the potential drivers of knife crime: poverty, lack of parental support or proper role models, violence, a sense of marginalisation, peer pressure, and a negative school experience. The result is a breeding ground for a cycle of violent knife crime.

The second is the importance of a safe 'space' where youths can engage with a sports programme, separated from the driving factors that might encourage them towards knife crime. Such a space had to represent a shield against the 'place'. In this stable environment, they could develop themselves and interact safely with mentors and others without fear of judgement or personal harm. Importantly,



Collison-Randall's conceptual model of disruptive development through sport.

it provided them with the stability and protection they would otherwise not have in their lives.

Thirdly, positive disruption in a sports programme focused on more than redirecting physical energy: the focus

A strong community presence was key to the success of a programme. Furthermore, managers, coaches, and mentors with specific, intimate 'postcode knowledge' of the community brought credibility to a programme, and therefore buy-in by the community, and ensured

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had to be holistic – developing personal, social, and mental wellbeing. Ideally, developing soft skills should go hand-in-hand with play. Most participants highlighted the value youths placed on sport in their lives and those of their families, peers, and communities. This lent credibility that other intervention programmes probably lacked.

Perhaps the most powerful insight was the importance of hyper-locality specificity on disruptive development.

its sustainability. A common theme that emerged from respondents was that the youths knew who they were and that they had always been part of the community. This built trust in the programme and its purpose and encouraged referrals through word of mouth.

One of the more enlightening insights from Collison-Randall's research was around the perceived stigma of attending development programmes – those programmes presented informally,

in hyper-local settings, minimised the risk of stigma. This probably helps explain why structured programmes simply rolled out to 'problem areas' risk failure, or worse.

SOLID RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMMES

Tackling violent crime anywhere in the world is a significant challenge. There is a further layer of complexity in the UK: the weapon of choice sits in a kitchen drawer. Collison-Randall and her team understand that hyper-localised sport intervention programmes are not a panacea to tackle knife crime among young people. Over-ambitious projects, no matter how well-intended, risk disappointment, or even failure. When the livelihoods of young, at-risk, potential knife-crime offenders are at stake, failure can have harmful consequences.

Such hyper-localised programmes involve intimate connections between young people and adults – coaches and mentors – with whom those young people can identify; here, messages can get mixed or distorted. Also, safe spaces are open to abuse – programmes are only as good as the people who run them. Furthermore, such programmes rely on secure funding; should an intervention programme with successful outcomes suddenly terminate because of a lack of funding, again, the consequences could be detrimental.

However, no intervention is risk-free, especially one where violent knife crime is the focus. This research helps address some of the confusion over mixed results from other sports-based interventions and provides solid recommendations. Collison-Randall presents two key evidence-based approaches: sport as an intervention should be hyper-localised and placed at the centre of a model that recognises the need for a safe, stable and accessible 'space' for the execution of a (preferably informal) programme; and this intervention must be made with a thorough understanding of the physical, social, economic, emotional, and psychological 'place' in which at-risk youth find themselves. This insight makes an indispensable contribution to our understanding of how sports programmes can tackle the scourge of violent knife crime.



Behind the Research

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Research Objectives

Holly's research is focused on cultures of youth crime and hyper-local sport interventions.

Detail

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Bio

Dr Holly Collison-Randall is a senior lecturer at the Institute for Sport Business, Loughborough University

London. She is an anthropologist in the field of Sport for Development. Her research explores youth identity, notions of community, radicalisation and violent extremism, knife crime and hyper-local sports interventions, and social justice. Holly's recent work has seen her collaborate with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and her role as a senior consultant has seen her produce the first technical

and practical guide on 'Preventing Violent Extremism through Sport'.

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Collaborators

Dr Collison-Randall would like to acknowledge her research team, Professor Aaron Smith, and Anna Farello.

References

- Collison, H, Farello, A, Smith, ACT, (2021) Tackling Knife Crime and Violence through Sport Programmes Evaluation Report, prepared for the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime
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- Preventing Violent Extremism Through Sport, Practical Guide, (2020) United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna



Personal Response

Your research presents key insights in how to intervene in the cycle of violent knife crime. To what extent is your model of Positive Disruptive Development able to strengthen existing sport-for-prevention efforts?

/// The research highlighted the incredible personal commitment and passion of local coaches and individuals who wanted to positively respond to the violent cultures surrounding them in their communities. Sport, in its various forms, provided a mechanism for creating relative safety within the streets, parks, and estates that were simultaneously the sites for knife crime. The research revealed that sport programmes are a positive disruptive force in the lives of young people. The programmes capable of providing disruptive development had four elements: knowledge of the place that contains driving factors towards knife crime and violence; sustaining and investing in the safe space that sports programmes provide; advocating and strategically implementing sport itself as a radical, positive disruption; and leveraging from hyper-local specificity of a programme. Collectively, the four elements encourage the best chance of impact. The Positive Disruptive Development through Sport model is therefore not a prescriptive formula to tackle knife crime through sport, but a flexible model that allows for hyper-local specificity, in local spaces for local populations. //