Sport as a Tool for Crime and Violence Prevention and Peacebuilding

Introduction

Worldwide, sport is increasingly being relied upon as a mechanism to promote peace. Not only do sports provide an opportunity for personal growth, but they can also promote positive change within communities—particularly where crime and drugs prevail. As UNODC recognises, “sport offers an ideal area within which life skills can be built”, and the development achieved through sport is “essential” for providing youth with “an opportunity to escape from crime, violence and drugs which can be so endemic in some communities”.¹

As this piece will demonstrate, sport offers a promising opportunity to become a tool for crime and violence prevention and peacebuilding in Rio de Janeiro. This research will first explore crime and violence in Rio. Second, it will demonstrate how alternative policies, such as the promotion of sports, offer a more effective alternative to prevent crime and drugs, and promote peace. The benefits of sports will be discussed in relation to the following themes: teaching life skills and values, improving wellbeing, promoting social inclusion, and creating opportunities.

Crime in Rio de Janeiro

In southeast Brazil, Rio de Janeiro is a city marked by perennial levels of high crime, where the potential for sports to prevent crime and drugs is substantial. Over the last 30 years, gangs have had a strong presence in the city². While not all crime in Rio de Janeiro is directly related to gangs, there is ample evidence suggesting a link between the two³⁴; for example, drug trafficking (of which gangs are heavily involved in) has been estimated to be linked to 25% to 52% of all homicides in the city⁵. Conflicts between drug gangs, militias and police have caused many deaths, including the deaths of those with no relation to criminal activity⁶. Ensuring that at-risk youth are deterred from criminal activity is essential for sustainably preventing crime and drugs; if gangs are repeatedly able to recruit new members, a cycle of crime and violence will be perpetuated. Initiatives to promote peace must be focused on driving long-term, systemic change, which tackles crime at its core.

1. Teach Life Skills and Values

In Rio, where gangs have a strong presence, crime and violence have dominated areas of the city, leaving citizens in chronic insecurity. The insecurity can negatively impact a person; for example, victims of crime might feel negative emotions, experience physical changes such as a lack of sleep or feeling unwell, or complications such as depression or anxiety-related illnesses might develop. One of the key benefits of sports is the capacity to teach life skills and values which enable youth to deal effectively with the demands of life. In a safe environment, at-risk youth can address the negative emotions they feel in a way that

harnesses the power of their feelings. Those who participate in sports must remain concentrated, and not allow themselves to be distracted. Young people can gain experience in building and maintaining relationships through competing in sport, and develop their ability to manage stress. These skills gained can then be transferred to daily life; at-risk youth learn to manage negative emotions, remain focused, and develop positive relations with others.

2. Improved Wellbeing
The skills learned through sport offer practical solutions to prevent at-risk youth from becoming involved with criminal activities. Sports can inspire individuals to lead an active lifestyle, contributing to a healthy social, psychological and physiological state. Programmes centred around sports have been praised for their ability to “promote mental well-being for at-risk communities through trauma counselling and inclusion efforts”. The effects of sports are twofold; not only does physical activity improve fitness, it inspires participants to make healthier lifestyle choices and avoid drugs or harmful activities. The improved wellbeing that sports offers could deter at-risk youth from engaging in activities, such as crime and drug taking, which affect their ability to participate in sport.

3. Social Inclusion:
Young people can gain experience in building and maintaining relationships through competing in sport, and develop their ability to manage stress. These skills gained can then be transferred to daily life; at-risk youth learn to manage negative emotions, remain focused, and develop positive relations with others. In Rio, gangs not only enact crime and violence upon a community, but also seek to provide a sense of personal security to local residents, through resolving disputes and maintaining order. Gangs aim to build support networks with the particular areas that will help them to sustain power, thus guaranteeing their protection and safety. Criminal gangs “actively recruit disaffected, abandoned, or homeless young people”. As a consequence, the sense of social inclusion offered by gangs can be attractive to vulnerable youth. Sport can also provide a sense of social inclusion, away from the harm of gangs. In sports clubs, a community is formed which can welcome vulnerable youths and provides an alternative social network. Those who attend sports clubs can meet new people and find a positive direction in their lives. Youth from low-income households are more susceptible to violence and drug abuse due to the social and economic challenges they face on a day-to-day basis. As a result, it is vital that viable alternatives exist in Rio, to prevent vulnerable young youth from being lured into criminal activities.

4. Increased Opportunities
Sports can also provide opportunities not just to develop personally, but also professionally. Successful athletes could have fruitful careers related to the sport they practice. Sports can be particularly beneficial in communities where crime is present, offering another avenue away from violence and drugs. Athletes

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can also serve as role models for others in the community, inspiring younger members of the community, who view them with admiration. This is a trend that can continue indefinitely; the effects of sport can contribute positive change to a society that lasts for generations. Role models can become leaders within their local communities, promoting peace and sharing the values learnt through sports with others. As the United Nations recognises, elite sport can be an “extremely powerful mass communication platform that can be used to promote a culture of peace”. High-profile athletes generate substantial media attention, which can be harnessed to raise awareness of social issues, such as drugs and violence. Internationally, successful athletes can create dialogues on certain topics, such as building peace.

**Conclusion**

Sport is a transformative tool that can deter at-risk youth from crime and violence; sports clubs can provide a close-knit community, centred around the values of personal growth, and physical and mental wellbeing. The values taught through sport can promote life skills to overcome adversity, which is essential in places marked by high levels of crime and violence. Sport offers innumerable opportunities, both at an individual level, and for a society. In Rio, where the issue of gangs is particularly pertinent, initiatives centred around sport prevent crime and violence by offering an alternative; not only do clubs offer a haven from gangs, but the skills and values taught through activities have the capacity to inspire and shape society for generations. As this piece has outlined, sport offers a promising opportunity to become a tool for crime and violence prevention and peacebuilding in Rio de Janeiro.

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