Sport in Prison: Exploring the Role of Physical Activity in Correctional Settings

Written by Professor Rosie Meek, Head of the School of Law at Royal Holloway, University of London, Sport in Prison: Exploring the Role of Physical Activity in Correctional Settings (Routledge, 2013) explores the role of sport in prisons and its potential impact on health and well-being, institutional behaviour and prisoner rehabilitation. This paper, prepared on behalf of the Butler Trust, summarises some of the book’s key findings.

Overview

Prison gyms have an important role to play in helping to promote the health and well-being of both prisoners and staff, contributing to a safer working and living environment, and helping prisoners to lead law-abiding and useful lives after release.

Health and well-being of prisoners

Professor Meek notes that:

…the benefits of regular physical activity to psychological and physical health are well understood and participation in physical activity is recognised as an important contributor to well-being and quality of life for people of all ages.

The Department of Health (2006) recommends the inclusion of a physical fitness element in the treatment of service users with mental illness, with physical activity widely recognised to improve psychological well-being.

…as communities that house those with an increased likelihood of significant health needs, prisons represent an especially important target population.

Professor Meek cautions that:

…in spite of the well documented health benefits of prison-based sport… physical activity will inevitably increase the chance of incurring sporting injuries. [And] since 2004 the prison Ombudsman… has considered at least 20 deaths occurring during or shortly following exercise sessions in prisons.

…involvement in competitive sports in particular can have a negative psychological impact upon those with low self-confidence/coping strategies and negative perceptions of peer and institutional support, thus leading to poor sporting performance and consequently reaffirming negative self-perceptions.

…although primary exercise dependency disorders are extremely rare, secondary exercise dependence more commonly occurs alongside eating and image disorders such as body dysmorphia… For some, exercise [can serve] as a new addiction in custody, one that could replace existing addictions to substances. [And] it is certainly possible that emphasising sport among vulnerable populations with high body consciousness and low self-esteem could increase risk of the misuse of performance enhancing substances such as anabolic steroids…

For all these reasons, it is important to tailor activities to individuals’ levels of fitness and physical capabilities, and to take particular care with psychologically vulnerable prisoners and those with a history of eating disorders and substance misuse.

In spite of these caveats, Professor Meek concludes that overall the physical and psychological benefits within a prison population of regular physical exercise far outweigh any potential adverse consequences.
Gym staff can also contribute to prisoner health in other ways, including:

- providing health advice within the gym and more widely across the establishment;
- running smoking cessation programmes;
- developing and supporting prisoners to act as health and exercise peer mentors.

Health and well-being of staff

In addition to the prisoner population, the gym and its staff can also have an important role in promoting the health and well-being of prison staff, including helping them to deal with the pressures and stresses of their working environment and ensure their fitness to perform their roles, by making facilities open to staff when not in use by prisoners, and running exercise classes and general health promotion activities specifically for staff.

A safer working and living environment

Professor Meek observes that, as well as improving physical and psychological well-being, sport and physical activities:

*can also contribute to fewer instances of violence and conflict…, encouraging individuals to manage their emotions and resolve conflict… and improving relations not just among prisoners but also between prisoners and staff.*

Professor Meek acknowledges that:

*…there are inevitably occasions when violence escalates within prisons, and the gym or sports pitch is no exception.*

However, such incidents are again outweighed by the overall benefits in relation to improved order and control, while:

*What appears to be of most significance when considering violence in prison sport is the way in which members of delivery staff manage and respond to aggressive outbursts and are able to use sport as a way of challenging (rather than reinforcing) justifications of violence.*

Prisoner rehabilitation

In terms of reducing re-offending, Professor Meek concludes that:

*…there is a rationale and plenty of evidence that sport within prison can promote desistance from crime.*

Professor Meek notes that:

*In interviews, prisoners consistently referred to the role that sport had played in transforming their outlook on life and in developing their social and cultural capital.*

*…many prisoners and ex-prisoners described how involvement in sport had not only motivated them and provided them with the support to identify positive and alternative futures, but had also enabled them to challenge their attitudes towards crime, encouraging them to adopt an alternative lifestyle upon release.*

In addition, Professor Meek notes that:

*…cultivating an interest in sport whilst ensuring access to ongoing participation after release may help fulfil identity needs and create the potential for positive new peer relationships.*

*…[while] prison gyms can also provide advice and information to prisoners nearing release about ways to continue sport and fitness activities in the community, whether through volunteering or participation at a gym or sports club, apprenticeships or college courses in the community after release.*
Professor Meek also points out that:

There is undoubtedly a link between improving educational opportunities, raising levels of numeracy and literacy, equipping prisoners with meaningful qualifications and skills and the likelihood that they can successfully desist from crime after release.

She identifies a range of ways in which gym staff can contribute to prisoners’ education and skills training, and help improve their chances of finding employment after release (another important factor in reducing reoffending):

...in the context of offender education, sport can obviously be effective in engaging with prisoners who are initially reluctant learners, by exposing them to learning in a non-threatening environment. [And] drawing on examples of good practice from across the estate tutors can, where safe to do so, spend time in the prison gym in order to engage with and motivate reluctant learners through embedded learning.

...the gym has a role to play in initiating reading, for example by establishing stronger links with prison libraries and/or developing a small library of books and learning materials relating to sports and fitness. [And by having a computer on site, if possible linked to the virtual campus, [prisoners can] develop their ICT skills, for example in creating session plans and tracking fitness progress using spreadsheets.

Sporting activities – in particular team sports – when used effectively can help develop a whole range of soft skills concerning communication, leadership, problem solving and group work. More specifically, prisons can develop the transferable soft skills that employers want by running specialist programmes such as the leadership awards and qualifications that are offered by the charity Sports Leaders UK.

In addition, while it’s important not to raise unrealistic expectations:

[By offering sports-based accredited qualifications] as well as inspiring participation in formal education, from basic skills right up to degree-level studies, sports-based learning and training [can] also offer a meaningful and rewarding route into employment.

Conclusion

To quote Professor Meek (again) in conclusion:

There is no denying that physical activity, the gym, and members of gym staff remain central, even critical, to every prison, and more influential than might be assumed when first considering the organisation and formation of a prison environment.