

# **London South Bank University – Written evidence (NPS0116)**

## **Breaking barriers to sports participation for young people in Tower Hamlets**

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### ***Summary***

This research examined the impact of youth sports programs (YSPs) on identified barriers to participation to physical activity in a deprived and ethnically diverse community in Tower Hamlets. Participants were recruited from a YSP delivered in the local area. Participants took part in focus groups organised into sub-groups. The focus group questions explored participants' understanding of their community and social environment, their social interaction with the local young people, youth gangs, their perception of youth services available to them, and how they feel these services impact their lives. Data was analysed and key themes associated with social cohesion, youth safety and the support network were all identified as barriers to participation. The general consensus across the focus groups was that the YSPs were able to successfully address these barriers – ultimately increasing the participation of children and young people in physical activity. Some context-specific barriers to participation were also identified in this study, highlighting the importance of outreach and consultations prior to the implementation of YSPs to enhance their potential for impact.

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1. Reasons for submission**

Our findings successfully highlight the success that YSPs can have on: addressing barriers to participation for young people from socioeconomically deprived and ethnically diverse communities in London, as well as their ability to engage people from BAME communities to become more physically active. It has provided practical implications & suggestions for future physical activity programs delivered in similar communities, whilst also highlighting the importance of a context-specific approach to delivering physical activity – all of which can help influence the approach and strategy to get more children and young people (particularly from BAME communities) being more physically active outside of school.

#### **1.2. Our organisation and research**

This submission is based on research run by a team from the Sport and Exercise Science Research Centre (SESRC) based at London South Bank University (LSBU). Established in 1994, the SESRC mission is to address major scientific priorities and societal challenges by undertaking world class research in sport

performance, and physical activity and health. Our mainstream research engages vulnerable, marginalised, excluded or hard to reach groups to investigate the barriers to sustainable engagement in sport and exercise across the lifespan - from children, adolescents to older people. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative methods we work from a community/client centred perspective to evaluate the experiences of the communities and populations served and the individuals that provide services themselves. We explore the potential of sport- based activities to facilitate community development and prevent young people's engagement in antisocial behaviours.

The team is committed to knowledge transfer and ensuring research impacts directly on policy and practice. We work collaboratively with local authorities, NHS Trusts and charities to co-produce research and evaluation and influence both practice and policy. We understand the priorities and conditions under which decisions as well as the value of research by co-production. We recognise the complexity and interconnected context within which public health issues exist and are addressed and adopt a systems-thinking approach where appropriate, examining "what works, for whom and under what circumstances". We hold information and experience, which would be valuable, especially during the current pandemic, for modelling risk and informing consequent service demands.

This study was the part of a series belonging to a PhD research project and centred on Youth Sports Programs (YSPs) currently delivered by the Active Communities Network – a sports charity founded in 2006 to deliver high quality grass roots sports and youth work projects across London.

## **2. The Research**

This study was part of a research project conducted a series of studies using a mixed-method approach to investigate the impact of YSPs on the social behaviour of young people from socioeconomically deprived communities across London. The study adopted a qualitative approach to data collection which involved focus groups with the young people taking part in the YSP, as well as with programme leaders and coaches. The report is, thus, grounded in first-person opinions, perspectives, perceptions and subjective experiences, offering evidence of trends and patterns of engagement as well as an overall sense of the 'impact' of the youth sports program.

### **2.1. Data Collection**

Primary data was collected by the following methods:

#### *One Focus Group with Active Communities Network (ACN) Staff*

A focus group was conducted with ACN project leaders and workers across all Tower Hamlets sessions. Questions focused on uncovering information about the kinds of young people and communities engaged, the social interaction of the young people with the different peer groups, community and environment risk/safety & available resources, and the relationship between project participants and staff members.

### *One Focus Group with ACN project participants*

Focus groups were conducted with project participants in order to explore young people's personal experiences of engaging with the YSP. The questions focused on uncovering information about young peoples' perception of the project and project leaders, understanding of a "community", their interaction with other social groups within the community, perceived environment risk/safety, and the available resources available to them within their community.

### *Observations of Project Sessions*

Project sessions were observed, and field notes were taken on the participant-coach interactions/relationship, participant behaviour, and the participant engagement. The research team used an 'Observer as Participant' approach where the researcher was slightly involved in the delivery of the session to familiarise the participants with the researcher conducting the observation.

## **2.2. Data Analysis**

All focus groups were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Thematic coding was used in relation to the analysis of qualitative data and the research team adopted a six-phase analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to draw out themes and meanings from all of the data in response to the primary aims of the research. In turn, researchers familiarised themselves with the data prior to generating initial codes. Codes were then collated into potential themes and reviewed by the research team leading to a creation of 'thematic maps' for each set of focus group data. After defining and naming the themes, a scientific report was produced simultaneously with this report.

From the above process, a series of key themes emerged, and it is in line with these that the findings from this study are based on. The report aimed to develop an understanding of: (i) how and to what extent physical activity operates as an effective tool for engagement in young people across Tower Hamlets; (ii) the impact of physical activity on the overall development of young people and their capacity for self-change, social inclusion & interaction; and (iii) how physical activity can be used to prevent young people partaking in gang-related antisocial behaviour & crime. Ethical approval for this research was gained from London South Bank University Research Ethics Committee.

## **3. Findings**

### **3.1. Barriers to Sport & Physical Activity**

Young people across Tower Hamlets are subject to an array of social issues, including the rising issue of youth street gang ASB and crime – all of which can serve as barriers to participation in sport and physical activity. To get an accurate depiction of these barriers to sport & physical activity we included the views of youth workers from 'Spotlight' youth service as well as young people who attend their programs. Several key themes/barriers to participation emerged from the two focus groups, which were: *lack of support (from elders)*, *(lack of) perceived environment safety*, *socioeconomic deprivation*, as well as *ethnic/cultural segregation* within the community.

### **3.2. Impact of the YSP**

During the focus groups, the research team aimed to investigate the potential implications that the YSP had on young people and identified: an improved level of social cohesion, development of a 'safety network' for young people, as well as the production of positive role models.

#### **3.2.1. Improved social cohesion through sport**

One of the focus points for the YSP was to address this issue of segregation within Tower Hamlets by using physical activity as a tool; one youth worker spoke on the integration of different racial groups during the activities:

*"I feel like our football sessions bring them together because if they have another identity (besides race) that they share then they will be more likely to come together. It's not so much about where they are from or where they live but more so about what they're new focus is."*

Using the physical activity as a tool to create a new identity for these young people not only helps to reduce racial segregation but can help mediate the issues between young people from different postcodes. The sessions provide the young people with the opportunity to integrate with other social groups and develop new relationships, one young person quoted:

*"It's a social thing, at first you don't know everyone there, so it gives you a chance to meet new people within your community. People I didn't know before I know well now and we all work really well together"*

This is in support of previous research indicating a higher level of both individual and community level social cohesion as result of increased levels of physical activity (Yip, Sarma, and Wilk 2016). One youth worker gave an account of his experience of the racial segregation within the borough and physical activity was used to break down this tension:

*"A couple years ago we went to run a session that was historically run by an Asian man and the session was well-attended by predominantly Asian kids, a few Somalis but very little black or white kids. We knew kids from these backgrounds and invited them down but the Bengali kids didn't like it, I'm not sure if they felt threatened/intimidated but a few weeks later the Bengali kids stopped coming. That's when it was evident that there is/was a huge divide in the Tower Hamlets among different racial groups. Some people don't mind mixing but it appeared most people just stuck to their racial groups. However, over time we've developed a good reputation within the different ethnic communities and it's not perfect, but they definitely take part in more of our sessions"*

Through observation of the session it was evident that the coaches had developed a good rapport with key people within the different sub-communities across Tower Hamlets, were very familiar with the local issues and had open discussions about these issues with the young people prior to inviting them down to the sports program. The coaches were well respected by the young people and displayed really good behaviour management throughout the sessions

providing a peaceful environment for all the attendees – regardless of ethnicity/culture. The coaches took it upon themselves weekly to go around the local housing estates for outreach and familiarise themselves with young people in the local area by speaking to them – this appeared to be an effective recruitment tool to the sessions. This is concurrent with Yip and colleagues' (2016) findings suggesting that efforts to promote social cohesion and integration within communities may also promote physical activity.

### **3.2.2. Providing a safety network for young people**

The environment safety for young people is a key concern for young people whilst serving as a risk factor for street gang involvement. An outcome of this YSP was a safety network for the young people, one of the young people reported that:

*"Apart from giving me a chance to play football, it gives me a chance to be around some good people and enjoy myself without worrying about my safety"*

Young people who were part of the program were well-aware of the gang-related issues within their community but felt that the sport provided them with a "safety net". Group members from the program were from different estates across Tower Hamlets and other surrounding communities, this association with peers from "opposing areas" serves as a protective factor in the form of a safety network. A member of the youth workforce was in strong support of this safety network and quoted:

*"It's great that the kids from different postcodes in East London can mix and have each other's' back, that would never happen in any of our South London projects..."*

By mediating the issue of 'Environment Safety', the program not only serves as a preventative intervention for youth street gang involvement but also a tool to help develop overall social cohesion across different peer groups in Tower Hamlets.

### **3.2.3. Positive role models through sport**

Across the two focus groups conducted a strong theme was identified, sport served as an opportunity for the young people to develop strong personal and social bonds with the professional coaches involved. One young person stated:

*"The coach is almost like a big brother to us. He's honest and open with us but is real so we know he actually cares about us."*

Young people who engage with the program are often encouraged to take on leadership roles that can develop into paid work through coaching with sessions delivered by ACN. This can potentially serve as preventative measure for peer influence risk factors as young people often seek to engage successful former participants as peer leaders and embedded role models in the program as well

as in their local neighbourhoods (Spaij 2009). The program leader and coaches were familiar with the Tower Hamlets community and its uniqueness, this was reflective in the delivery and planning of the program. One youth worker indicated his awareness of being like "big brother" to the young people and described the importance of this:

*"More often than not these lot don't have fathers, older brothers, or any other good men in their lives so it's kind of up to us to show a good image and teach them how to move"*

This highlights the transformative capacity of sport-based programs for disadvantaged youth and their impact on both social and personal development, by not just offering physical activity but also focusing on the development and growth of the young participants.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This evaluation has found that the YSP has been successful in engaging with a hard to reach and high-risk group of young people through football – ultimately increasing the participation of physical activity in the community of Tower Hamlets. The program had addressed the array of barriers to physical activity in this community by: serving as a protective factor to street gang involvement, improving the social cohesion between the different sub-communities in Tower Hamlets, as well as providing young people with access to positive role models through physical activity. One of the key elements of the program was its social impact on both the individuals and group dynamics, young people increased levels of safety, togetherness, and support as a result of the program.

The program consisted of young people who were residents of different post codes (some outside of the borough) and programme leaders and coaches were able to maintain a peaceful environment for the young people despite this well documented issue (Irwin-Rogers and Billingham 2020). The young people engaged were also members of many other different communities (religious, race, school, etc) but they had built their own "football community" through the development of the program. This improved social cohesion amongst the group was a testament to the extensive outreach done by the coaches and programme leaders on a consistent basis to raise awareness of the program and familiarity of the youth workforce attempting to further understand and alleviate the social issues acting as barriers to participation in this community.

#### **5. Practical Implications**

Several practical implications on how the youth programs delivered in local communities can be developed more to effectively tackle some of the barriers to exercise and improve overall participation and social cohesion amongst young people have emerged from our findings and observations. Future YSPs should aim to:

- Identify acute social issues (racial, religious, cultural etc.) and, if existing, work with individual groups while developing and implementing

- educational programs to foster social cohesion.
- Address concerns with environmental safety by aiming delivery in closer to home venues.
  - Maintain lasting relationships with young people by ensuring sustainability of the activities and continuity of youth services through long-term strategies and secure funding for operation and delivery.
  - Develop detailed and diligent outreach strategies to familiarise the organisations and coaching staff with the communities they are delivering in – providing young people a chance to get more information on the sports programs prior to committing.

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