

COMMUNITY RECREATION WITH HIGH-RISK CHILDREN AND YOUTH: ARE WE DOING MORE HARM THAN GOOD?

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Introduction

This presentation explores risk and protective factors related to the harassment and abuse of young people in community recreation settings and discusses the impact of victimization on adolescents. It is based upon the Making All Recreation Safe (M.A.R.S.™) Literature and Best Practices Review (2004) written by the presenter for the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA). Four pilot sites across Canada implemented this CPRA model in order to test systems and processes to reduce harassment and abuse in community recreation settings. This initiative was supported by multi-year funding from Department of Justice Canada's National Crime Prevention Centre and Health Canada's Physical Activity Unit.

Prevention initiatives have traditionally focussed on harmful behaviours committed by adults in recreation - coaches, volunteers and staff in positions of authority. This study found that the victimization of young people by peers is far more prevalent and equally harmful.

Methods

A number of methods were used to collect data. Relevant studies were identified through Recreation and Leisure Abstracts, Leisure Information Network (LIN), Sport Discuss, PsychLit, ERIC, Criminal Justice Abstracts, Violence and Abuse Abstracts, and Sociological Abstracts bibliographic databases. Recent U.S., U.K. and Australian evaluations on after-school programs, at-risk youth recreation programs, and youth development programs were reviewed. There is a paucity of comparable Canadian data.

Different theoretical models were explored. Effective prevention strategies must be rooted in a sound theoretical framework capable of explaining the development of anti-social behaviour.

Results

Very few Canadian studies have explored the victimization of young people in community recreation settings. Research findings from international and Canadian studies demonstrate that in the absence of highly structured programming with the right mix of participants, traditional activities with high risk participants can clearly do more harm than good. This is a politically sensitive area, as the common assumption held by practitioners is that 'more recreation is always better.'

Physical and verbal forms of harassment and abuse most often come to the attention of practitioners. Boys are over-represented as both victims and aggressors in these incidents. However, the social manipulation and exclusion of peers, although not as easily detected, is equally harmful and more prevalent. These 'social' forms of abuse and harassment mask harmful intentions of those who do it, usually girls. Cross-gender sexual harassment (male-to-female and female-to-male) is also a serious problem, beginning as early as age eight. Homophobic harassment (primarily male-to-male) is pervasive. Victims are typically boys who are perceived to be effeminate or gay. Practitioners need adequate training in this area.

A social-ecological perspective is best able to explain the victimization of young participants in community recreation settings. Using this framework, recreation practitioners can better understand the underlying risk factors that contribute to harassment and abuse. It is clear that prevention can only happen if individual, family, peer group, school and community conditions are addressed.

Discussion

Recreation program and infrastructure variables can interact to increase the competencies of participants, thereby reducing the incidence of harassment and abuse. Favourable program culture (marked by a warm and caring social atmosphere, pro-social behavioural norms, strong emphasis on cooperative learning and parental participation) flows from and interacts with key infrastructural factors (benefits-based community development approach, rich staffing model) to produce a strong personal sense of program membership (based on high participation rates and feelings of acceptance and support from peers and practitioners). Feelings of membership in turn lead to improved social and behavioural functioning through enhancements in self-esteem. Principles of unity, equality, and shared values are inherent in best practices settings.

Recreation settings provide a context for peer interactions, along with the opportunity for participation in activities promoting pro-social values and the development of life skills (such as leadership, decision-making and problem solving).

A very small number of adolescents (about 5%) commit over half of all serious youth crime in Canada. The violent pathways of these young people develop at a very early age.

Practical Applications

Recreation programs can offer important protection for at-risk children (many of whom have emotional and behavioural disorders). Targeted recreation programs for disadvantaged families with very young children should be expanded. There is indisputable evidence that proactively arranging quality recreation for these families is strongly associated with the prevention of anti-social behaviour and mental health problems.

Unstructured programs with minimal supervision are risky; they can unintentionally reinforce negative peer interactions and harmful behaviours by failing to ensure an appropriate mix of pro-social and anti-social young people. Maintaining gender and ethno-racial balances in group programs is important. For adolescent girls, gender-specific programs offer protection from sexual harassment and aggressive boys.

Competitive sports, particularly those that are based on aggression (football, rugby, boxing, hockey), can teach young people that violent behaviour is desirable and necessary to win. The glorification of violence in some sporting activities is especially dangerous for those children who experience violence in the home, belong to anti-social peer groups, or have displayed aggressive behaviour at a young age.

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