



**Brunel**  
University  
London

# SPORT FOR BETTER MENTAL HEALTH



How training a community sport workforce in  
Mental Health First Aid will support young  
people's mental wellbeing in the UK

**#21by21**





## INTRODUCTION

There's an established body of scientific evidence that shows how increased levels of physical activity, including sport, can offer mental as well as physical health benefits. Beyond making us feel good in the moment, sport can have a longer-term impact on our wellbeing, boosting confidence and resilience and reducing the risk of developing and living with mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety. So what happens if we take sport to where it's needed most? To areas where low-income households have limited access to sport facilities - and often limited interest in being physically active. Where young people living in poverty are three times more likely to suffer with mental illness than their wealthier peers and fewer than a quarter meet national guidelines for recommended daily activity.

We commissioned a research team at Brunel University London to help answer these questions by evaluating the impact of StreetGames 'Safe, Fit & Well' Doorstep Sport projects in seven urban communities in different parts of the UK. Their findings and recommendations are summarised on pages 10-11 of this report and make encouraging reading for those of us who believe in the power of sport and physical activity to drive positive social change and support better mental health for young people.

Youth sport coaches and activity leaders across the country tell us that they regularly see signs of mental ill health in their projects - young people experiencing depression, anxiety, alienation and sadly sometimes self-harm and suicide. They say that they are often looked to for support as trusted adults outside of family and education but they feel ill-equipped to help, not knowing what to say or how to direct youngsters to appropriate specialist support when they need it.

A recent national StreetGames survey of young people confirmed this 'trusted adult' view of sports coaches among many young people - nearly half (43%) of the 14-24 year-olds surveyed from the UK's general population said they would turn to their coach or club leader for emotional support and wellbeing advice.

When we looked closer at this overall response, we saw that more young people living in households with an annual income of £20,000 or less - the bottom 20-30% of households, as defined by England's Index of Multiple Deprivation - said they would confide in a community sports coach, compared to those surveyed from higher income groups. You can read more about the survey findings on pages 6-7 of this report.

This is why StreetGames' Mental Health First Aid training team is proud to be part of the UK's #21by21 campaign pledge to provide 21,000 sports coaches and volunteers with mental health awareness training by 2021. Launching the campaign, along with over 200 sporting organisations across the country, is part of our response to the findings outlined in this report. You can read more about how to get involved on page 13.

Through our support for #21by21 and our wider work with businesses, community employers and the 1,000+ organisations in our network, our aim is to make Mental Health First Aid training for youth sport coaches and volunteers as commonplace as physical first aid across the UK.

**Jane Ashworth OBE**  
Chief Executive, StreetGames



# CHANGING LIVES THROUGH DOORSTEP SPORT

StreetGames harnesses the power of sport to create positive change in the lives of young people across the UK.

Our Doorstep Sport approach brings sport to the doorstep of young people living in disadvantaged areas through fun, friendly and informal sessions delivered by a network of 1000+ organisations and specially trained coaches and activity leaders.

By providing access to local role models and opportunities to be physically active and get involved in volunteering, Doorstep Sport helps to support young people and their communities to be healthier, safer and more successful.

Some of our programmes are designed around the needs of particular groups of young people. Our 'Us Girls' programme empowers girls and young women by tackling barriers to their participation in sport; while our Community Safety projects work alongside police and the youth justice system to reduce anti-social behaviour and youth-related crime.



## OVER THE PAST 12 YEARS STREETGAMES HAS SUPPORTED

**OVER 3 MILLION**  
attendances  
by young  
people

**INVOLVING 40+ TYPES**  
of sport and  
physical  
activity

**TRAINING 33,280**  
sports  
coaches and  
volunteers



*“Our research shows that the wellbeing of some of Britain’s most disadvantaged young people can be significantly improved by training their community sports coaches in mental health awareness.*

*“Doorstep sport, particularly when tailored to the needs of young people with mental health issues, had a positive impact on self-reported mental health.*

*“We hope that this report and the awareness generated by the StreetGames network and the #21by21 campaign will help to provide a deeper understanding of the role community sports have in improving young people’s self-esteem, confidence and sense of belonging and in de-stigmatising talking about mental health.”*

Louise Mansfield  
Professor of Sport, Health & Social Sciences  
Brunel University London

*“A kind of lightbulb moment for me, if you like, was delivering [physical fitness & nutrition training] ... and having young people talk to me about self-harm, suicide, eating disorders, anxiety and depression, so that kind of kick-started me to do mental health first aid training as well.”*

StreetGames tutor  
Safe Fit and Well project

**BY AGE 14**

**50%**

**LONG-TERM  
MENTAL  
HEALTH  
PROBLEMS  
ESTABLISHED**

**BY AGE 24**

**75%**

**LONG-TERM  
MENTAL  
HEALTH  
PROBLEMS  
ESTABLISHED**

**4 TIMES A WEEK =**

**AVERAGE  
NUMBER OF  
TIMES UK 14-24  
YEAR OLDS SAID  
THEY TAKE PART  
IN SPORT OR  
ARE PHYSICALLY  
ACTIVITY IN  
STREETGAMES  
SURVEY**

‘Youth Sport & Mental Health’ UK survey of 1,000 14-24 year-olds, One Poll, April 2019

## **DOORSTEP SPORT PARTICIPANTS REPORT HIGH/VERY HIGH LEVELS OF:**

**HAPPINESS**

**79%**

**LIFE SATISFACTION**

**84%**

**CONFIDENCE IN TAKING  
PART IN SPORT AND  
PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

**87%**



# SPORTS COACHES AS ROLE MODELS TO CONFIDE IN

Youth sport coaches and volunteers can play a central part in young people's lives, not just as facilitators of sporting talent, but as role models and trusted confidantes who can support emotional development and mental wellbeing.

A StreetGames commissioned 'Youth Sport & Mental Health' survey in April 2019 of 14-24 year-olds from across the UK found that:

- Nearly half (43%) of the young people surveyed said they would turn to a sports coach or activity club leader for emotional support and personal advice
- 1 in 5 said they would talk about something that's worrying them; 21% said they'd turn to a coach for motivation for school, college or university; 15% for career advice; and 10% to talk about problems with friends
- More 14-25 year-olds living in households with an annual income of £20,000 or less said they would confide in a community sports coach or club leader, compared to higher income groups
- Over three quarters (77%) said they do sport or are physically active at least once a week outside of education
- 1 in 10 said they don't do any sport or physical activity at all
- More 14-24 year-olds living in households with an annual income of £20,000 or less (the bottom 20-30% of households, as defined by England's Index of Multiple Deprivation) said they were not active every week or at all, compared to those with household incomes of £20,000-£30,000, £30,000-£40,000, £40,000-£50,000 and £50,000+
- More girls than boys said they either weren't active at least once a week or don't do any sport or physical activity at all
- The older the respondent, the more they agreed/strongly agreed that it's harder to talk openly about their mental health than their physical health - 74% of 22-24 year-olds, compared to 69% of 19-21 year-olds and 65% of 14-18 year-olds



*"To this day, my coach is probably unaware of the profound positive impact he has had on me, not just in my sporting career but in my professional career in my life beyond sport. Great coaches can help change young people's lives for the better. They help us to achieve things we never thought possible, they offer support, encouragement and lift us up to be the best that we can possibly be."*

**Claire Bennett, GB fencer and former England captain, won Team Gold at 2010 Commonwealth Fencing Games**

*"Many coaches are often much more than just 'sports coaches'. They are often mentors, counsellors, father/mother figures, older brother/sister figures, friends, and that very important safe space and shoulder to cry on when you need it. When a young person feels they can confide and share their fears and worries with their coach, they are not only likely to achieve great things on the field, it also gives them the confidence to go out into the world and 'win' too. This is 100% what influence my coach had on me, and I'm sure, is still having with many of the young athletes he coaches today."*

**Jade Johnson, track and field athlete, represented GB at Summer Olympics**



**NATIONAL  
SURVEY  
FINDINGS**



**43%**  
EMOTIONAL  
SUPPORT AND  
ADVICE

**20%**  
SOMETHING  
THAT'S WORRYING  
THEM



**21%**  
MOTIVATION FOR  
SCHOOL, COLLEGE  
OR UNIVERSITY

**15%**  
CAREER  
ADVICE



**10%**  
PROBLEMS  
WITH FRIENDS



# SPORT FOR BETTER MENTAL HEALTH



StreetGames commissioned researchers at Brunel University London to examine how 'Safe, Fit and Well' Doorstep Sport projects led by Mental Health First Aid trained coaches and activity leaders can enhance the mental wellbeing of young people living in disadvantaged areas. The Safe, Fit and Well StreetGames national research and delivery programme tested the impact of Doorstep Sport on the mental health of young people across the UK.

Projects in Salford, Brentwood, Leeds, Birmingham, North Tyneside, Leeds and Warrington were included in the qualitative case study research. The projects offered 14-24 year-olds a range of sports and organised exercise, including boxing, mixed martial arts (MMA), circuit training, yoga, pilates, tai-chi, basketball, dodgeball, netball, badminton, tennis, table tennis, archery, running and gym-based fitness sessions.

Some sports were identified by projects as a way of managing anger and frustration or offering a counter activity to anti-social behaviours, some used sport as a vehicle for enhancing and protecting mental health through building self-belief, confidence, motivation, independence and resilience.

The research team used the Warwick-Edinburgh WellBeing Scale (WEMWBS) to evidence wellbeing improvements - a 14-item scale that rates the frequency or absence of specific feelings and thoughts.

Project participants were asked WEMWBS questions before the start of sports sessions and then during a follow-up period of at least two weeks after the sessions had started. The extent to which they felt relaxed, cheerful, loved, good about themselves, confident, close to and interested in other people was recorded. As were feelings of optimism about the future, being interested in new things, having more energy and being able to deal with problems well.

Results showed that all of the StreetGames projects demonstrated an increase in wellbeing. The project with the greatest increase in high wellbeing saw 11% of participants with high wellbeing at the start of the project and 74% at follow-up; the greatest reduction in low wellbeing for a project saw it drop from 49% at baseline to 14% at follow-up, a reduction of 35%.



## The researchers concluded:

- Community sport can enhance the mental health and wellbeing of young people living in disadvantaged communities, especially when coaches and activity leads are provided with Mental Health First Aid training.
- Sport has the potential to provide a space for young people to socially connect with others and experience positive emotions and a sense of belonging. It can also provide an environment where young people can escape from aspects of their life they find difficult or feel comfortable to reflect on their difficulties.
- Mental Health First Aid training equips a community sport workforce with the knowledge and skills needed to deliver sport for mental health and wellbeing and to encourage young people from disadvantaged communities to take part in physical activity.
- Sports coaches in the UK would benefit from sector investment in training to develop skills and understanding for the delivery of community sport for mental health and wellbeing outcomes.
- Local authorities, further education institutions, voluntary sector agencies and sports clubs are well placed as centres for the delivery of mental health and wellbeing focused training.
- A community approach is central to helping young people to realise the positive feelings that can be associated with sport participation and in addressing mental health stigma.
- Partnerships between community sport, mental health services, education, local authorities and the voluntary sector were a key ingredient of the Safe Fit and Well programme's success.

*"...it's improved sleep patterns, it's improved mood states, it's allowed them to become less socially isolated, integrate into social environments, it stops them from negative influences...the list is endless, especially with the groups that we're working with, who are more inclined to have mental health issues, who are more inclined to commit crime...So when we look at sport for good and changing lives, this is what this programme really is all about."*

**StreetGames Safe Fit & Well project leader**

'StreetGames: Safe, Fit and Well – Case Study Research' September 2018, Dr Alistair John and Professor Louise Mansfield, Brunel University London Sport, Health and Wellbeing Research Group





# TRAINING A WELLBEING WORKFORCE

StreetGames' Training Academy provides Mental Health First Aid training for community sport coaches and volunteers across the country, as well as for employees of private businesses, public and voluntary sector organisations.

When corporate employers bring Mental Health First Aid into their workplace through our 'pay it forward' Buy One Give One initiative, they also fund training for sports coaches and volunteers working with young people in disadvantaged communities.

For more on StreetGames Mental Health First Aid visit:  
<https://www.streetgames.org/mental-health-first-aid>



*"The StreetGames mental health awareness course needs to be attended by everyone working with young people."*

**Dominic Fenton**  
Former rugby player, Senior Youth Coach & Assistant Safeguarding Officer at Chelmsford RFC



*"Mental Health First Aid has helped me to listen more and to become more observant around changes in young people's behaviour, such as losing interest in activities they usually enjoy, having low confidence, getting tired easily, being irritable or disruptive. The course has helped me to understand more and to offer positive alternatives."*

**Shaheed Mia, Coach, Access To Sport project, London Borough of Hackney & Islington**



## #21BY21

#21by21 is a national campaign that brings together UK sport organisations with business and policy makers in a pledge to provide 21,000 community sports coaches and volunteers with mental health awareness training by 2021.

The campaign is being co-ordinated by The Sport for Development Coalition and aims to help more organisations feel more comfortable talking about mental health within their sport/activity setting and, by de-stigmatising the subject, for it to become commonplace.

Over 200 individual organisations and 40 national and regional sports agencies have signed-up to support the campaign including UK Coaching, The Premier League, The Rugby Football Union, Swim England, Sport Wales, FAW (Welsh Football) Trust and The Dame Kelly Holmes Trust; alongside mental health specialists, local authorities and academic institutions, such as Training In Mind, Mind, Mental Health First Aid England, Time to Change, West Midlands Combined Authority, Edgehill University and York St John University.

Visit [www.21by21.info](http://www.21by21.info) to find out more about the campaign and mental health awareness training options for sports coaches and volunteers across the UK.









**Brunel**  
University  
London