VULNERABLE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN AND SPORT
IN THE CONTEXT OF VIOLENCE REDUCTION

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Welcome to the fourth literature review summary on sport and youth offending in this series! This fourth literature review provides academically informed insight on the use of sport for vulnerable girls and young women in the context of violence reduction.

An initial literature review summary, which was published in 2019 looked at why young people offend, the role of sport in promoting desistance and early interventions for young people at risk of offending and can be downloaded here

A second literature review summary, which was published in 2020 provided academically informed insight on the role of sport in addressing serious violence and crime for young people and can be downloaded here

A third literature review summary, which was published in 2020 reviewed relevant literature in relation to the use of sport based mentoring programmes as an intervention for preventing and reducing youth offending and can be downloaded here

As content from the first three literature reviews has not been included in this document, it is recommended that the four literature review summary leaflets should be read in order of publication.

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

This literature review provides academically informed insight on the use of sport for vulnerable girls and young women in the context of violence reduction.

Although girls and young women are under-represented in the youth justice system, there is growing interest in sport as a form of prevention, early intervention and support mechanism for girls and young women who have been involved in violence as offenders, victims or both.
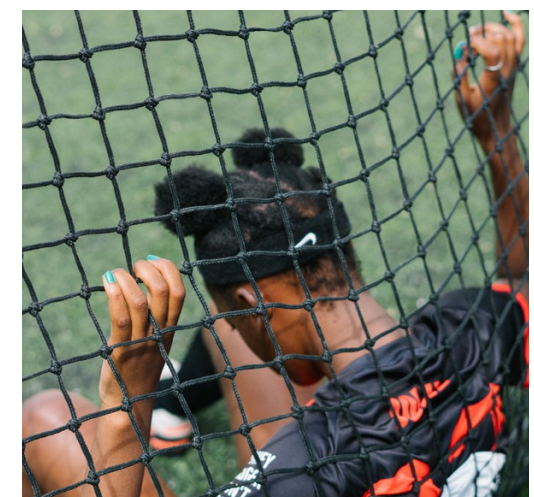
2. VULNERABLE GIRLS & YOUNG WOMEN

2.1 The term 'vulnerable' is complex and there is a lack of agreement about what is meant by the term.

It is important to recognise that children will have different experiences which indicate they may be vulnerable. Table 1 outlines nine key vulnerabilities experienced by children:

Table 1: KEY VULNERABILITIES (based on Bright, 2017)

Safeguarding concerns or in local authority care	Health and/or disability	Economic circumstances
Family circumstances/characteristics	Problems with educational engagement	Involvement in offending and/or anti-social behaviour
Experience of abuse/ exploitation	Missing and absent children	Being part of a minority population

Children can be identified as vulnerable because of their own actions, the actions of other children and the actions of adults (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014).

In the context of violence reduction it is important to acknowledge that violence can be a response to overcoming vulnerability and adversity(McAra & McVie, 2016).

There are many challenges that arise for practitioners seeking to support vulnerable children which are summarised to the right.

Challenges of working with vulnerable children (based on Bright, 2017):

Children can experience multiple vulnerabilities which can influencea child's outcomes

Belonging to a vulnerable group does not necessarily mean a child is vulnerable

Providing an appropriate child-centred intervention is complex

Identification of vulnerability is difficult as experiences may be 'invisible'/'hidden'

Labelling a child as 'vulnerable' carries the risk of stigmatisation

2.2. 'Vulnerable' girls and young women

Academic research focused on vulnerable girls and young women identifies a number of key factors which contribute to them potentially being 'vulnerable'. These factors include:

Poverty and living in neighbourhoods and communities with higher rates of material deprivation (McAra & McVie, 2016; Severinsen et al., 2016)

Gender norms and the way girls and young women perceive themselves (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014)

Low educational achievement including being excluded, poor level of engagement, poor relationship with teachers (Severinsen et al., 2016).

Specific vulnerabilities identified specifically for girls and young women within the criminal justice system include:

- Neglect
- Abuse
- Substance misuse
- Negative peer associations
- Absconding
- Mental and emotional health
- Sexually risky behaviour (Severinsen et al., 2016)

However, there is a lack of academic insight into vulnerabilities experienced by girls and young women which are particularly significant for the prevention and early intervention of offending which include:
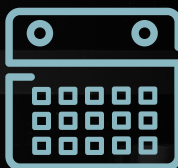
Realities of day-to-day life

Emotional and health needs

Impact of relationships

Inappropriate accommodation

Poor education

Alcohol

(Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014)

Research conducted with girls and young women revealed that they have their own views about being called 'vulnerable' and about their vulnerabilities which has significance for practitioners. Ellis (2018) found:

- The term 'vulnerable' was often rejected by girls and young women and considered as a stigmatizing, inaccurate label placed upon them by professionals.
- Describing girls and young women as vulnerable and needing to be looked after was often contested by girls and young women in light of their own life experiences and seen as contradicting the youth justice system which places the responsibility on girls and young women for their own offending.
- Some girls and young women who were described as 'vulnerable' rejected age as being relevant to their vulnerability as their lives 'had been full of 'adult' activities' such as sex, alcohol and drugs.
- Defining vulnerability in terms of age is also problematic because this suggests that girls and young women can 'grow out' of vulnerability.
- Some girls and young women denied their vulnerability as they saw it as a strength that they had survived their experiences and would have benefited from a 'reframing of vulnerability'
- Any reframing of vulnerability needed to consider structural issues such as including a recognition of emotional and financial vulnerability to support planning for the future.

Consequences of labelling girls and young women as vulnerable: A Theoretical Approach

Theoretical approach	Labelling Theory Becker (1997)
Link with vulnerability and/or offending	Negative labelling of a young person can reinforce a negative self-identity.

The labelling of girls and young women as 'vulnerable' or as an 'offender' is ineffective and may put them at greater risk of exploitation (Ellis, 2018). |
| Implications for sports practitioners | Although welfare agencies might describe girls and young women as 'vulnerable' or 'at risk', practitioners working directly with girls and young women should give careful consideration as to when, how or if to use these terms directly with girls and young women.

When working directly with girls and young women, practitioners should use positive 'labels' including for the naming of projects and provide girls and young women with rewarding and enjoyable opportunities, including sport and physical activities, for a more positive sense of self and identity. |
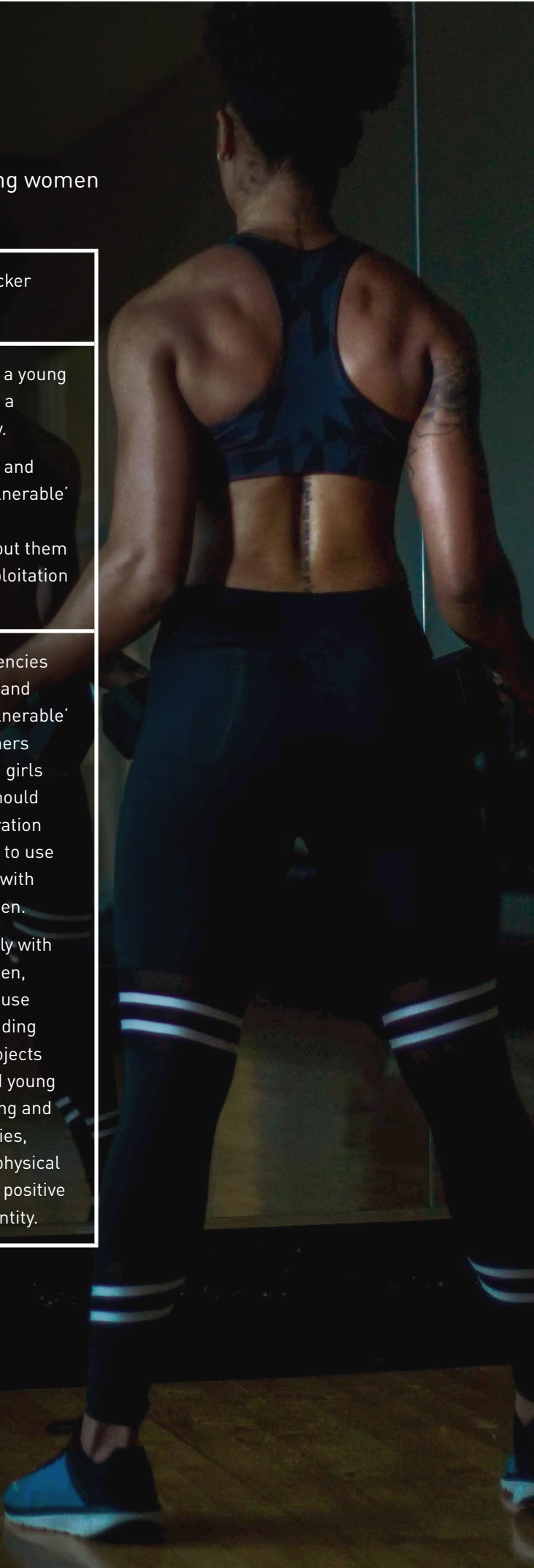
2.3 Vulnerability and Offending

For some girls and young women vulnerability and offending are linked because vulnerability contributes to offending and offending contributes to vulnerability (Severinsen et al., 2016).

Reasons why girls and young women become involved in offending include taking drugs, boyfriends leading them astray, involvement with older men, problems with other girls and problems at home (Garcia & Lane, 2013).

The links between vulnerabilities and offending are helpful in understanding how and why girls and women become involved in gangs:

Girls and young women are more likely to join a gang if they are vulnerable and have experienced physical and sexual abuse and family conflict and are seeking protection, a sense of family and to escape the history of trauma (Sutton, 2017).

Girls and young women living in socially disorganised neighbourhoods are more likely to join a gang for protection (Auyong et al., 2018).

Girls and young women reduce their victimisation from certain threats by belonging to a gang but this increases their risk of victimisation by members of own gang (Miller, 1998).

One study found that 48% of girls and young women who were gang members were more likely to commit crime than non-gang girls and young women and that 65% of all girls and young women in gangs had committed at least one crime. (Auyong et al., 2018).

3. GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Academic insight suggests that girls and young women are 'overlooked' and 'invisible' in the criminal justice system since the majority of offending is carried out by males and being 'female' is viewed as a protective factor which reduces the risk of offending (Youth Justice Board, 2005).

The majority of females in the criminal justice system are adult women which draws attention away from the needs of girls and younger women (Goodfellow, 2017). It is important to note that girls and young women:

• Constitute 20% of the Youth Offending Service caseload and are often overlooked as the system has been developed to deal with boys (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014).
• Offend less than boys and those who do offend have shorter criminal careers i.e. transitory (Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009) ,and they desist from offending at a lower age (Goodfellow, 2017).

Girls and young women are often seen as: :

• Either:
  'Troubled' – offending to survive as a result of a lack of resources, childcare or drug/ alcohol use
• Or:
  'Troublesome' – motivated by personal acquisition

Even though there are often common pathways into offending, insight into explaining why girls and young women offend is limited as it is often difficult to gain knowledge of all the circumstances and factors involved (Tasca et al., 2012).

• Have different reasons for offending and their response can vary dramatically from boys (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014).
• Tend to commit less serious offences than boys (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014). And their first reprimand is usually between 13-15 years and the first conviction usually between 15 -16 years - often for theft or handling stolen goods (Goodfellow, 2017).
• Often felt that they had been treated unfairly in the justice system and that boys were treated more leniently (Garcia & Lane, 2013).
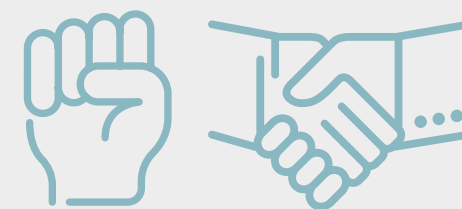
When girls and young women do offend, they tend to enter the criminal justice system more quickly even though the offences are often minor youthful transgressions (Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009).

Girls' and young women's offending can either be treated more leniently or more harshly in the criminal justice system depending on the view of their behaviour regardless of their vulnerabilities.

However, academic research suggests that offences committed by girls and young women are often seen as a response to emotional well-being and relationship issues i.e. with parents, partners and peers including unstable families, adverse environments, chaos and interpersonal conflict (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014; Severinsen et al., 2016).

• Girls and young women tend to have a high level of welfare need including underlying issues of self-esteem and identity (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014.
• As a result of exposure to trauma, girls and young women can either internalise feelings leading to depression and anxiety or externalise it leading to aggression and oppositional defiance (Severinsen et al., 2016).
• High percentage of offending females are victims of trauma and/or abuse (Severinsen et al., 2016).

Common pathways into offending for girls and young women are often complicated (Tasca et al., 2012):

• Complex and difficult family circumstances including severe poverty, parents as drug users, in prison or neglectful.
• Over half of girls and young women who were both victims and offenders had experienced repeated forms of sexual abuse and/or witnessing physical violence in the home, often instigated by the father.
• This can lead girls to fight back, run away, drop out of school and self-medicating often using drugs or alcohol which gets them into trouble.
• 'Doing gender' - acts of violence by girls on girls, 'getting even', 'boy issues'.

If family circumstances are difficult, this can lead to vulnerable girls and young women seeing peer relationships as important for their status, support and identity. However, this can lead to disappointed expectations and the potential for altercations with violent consequences arising from the following areas of conflict (Beyond Youth Custody, 2014):

• Boys
• Gossip
• Name calling
• Defending their reputation

Girls and young women are also vulnerable due to the actions of others. There is significant concern about the prevalence of child sexual exploitation where vulnerable girls and young women have been victims, often of older men, and involvement in gangs (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014).

• Girls and young women involved in offending may have an intimate relationship with males who offend (Severinsen et al., 2016)
• There is a risk of girls drawing other girls into offending by befriending and grooming vulnerable girls to meet adults that pose a risk e.g. sexual exploitation (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014; Severinsen et al., 2016).

However, little is known about the relationship between gender, age and ethnicity in relation to Youth Justice rates (Gelsthorpe & Sharpe, 2006). There is limited research about black girls and young women in the justice system. Research suggests that Asian girls are 'a small and hidden group' in the British justice system although little is known about offending patterns (Toor, 2009). It is suggested that the concepts of honour (izzat) and shame (sharam) which are embedded in some Asian communities serve as a tool to prevent female youth offending. These concepts arise from public knowledge of activities such as becoming 'western' in terms of clothing, behaviour or activities, engagement in sex or relationships before marriage and the use of drugs and alcohol (Toor, 2009).

4. INTERVENTIONS FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN INVOLVED IN OFFENDING

4.1 Introduction

Prevention and early intervention work which builds resilience for girls and young women has the potential to contribute to reduced offending (Severinsen et al., 2016) but there is little insight about what makes an effective intervention for girls and women.

There is limited knowledge about girls and young women in this context but it has been identified that girls and young women are less likely to be referred to intervention programmes due to the limited availability of suitable programmes to refer them in to (Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009). This section outlines some of the considerations that are relevant specifically to interventions for girls and women.

4.2 The need for gender specific interventions – 'female only'

As noted above there is limited evidence about effective interventions for girls and young women (Severinsen et al., 2016). However, there is a lack of targeted, gender-sensitive female provision and if it does exist, it is usually targeted at custodial, high risk young women (Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009). Sometimes girls and young women participate in interventions designed for boys and which are not adapted for girls (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014).

The evidence to determine whether gender-specific programmes are needed is not clear. Males and females may share similar risks (Severinsen et al., 2016). However, girls and young women in the Youth Offending Service were found to experience better outcomes when their needs were accurately assessed and they received the right support adapted to their specific needs (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014).

Academic insight suggests that there are particular challenges for working with girls and young women in this context.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR WORKING WITH VULNERABLE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014):

- Keeping girls and young women safe
- Support is not coordinated as too many workers are involved
- Some agencies focused too much on sharing data rather than on targeting work to reduce risks
- The broader picture of health problems, family and friends was often not taken into account when working with girls and young women

Some practitioners were reluctant to work with girls and young women in the Youth Justice System (Garcia & Lane, 2013) because:

They viewed girls as 'manipulative', 'devious', 'hysterical' and used more positive words about boys such as 'sincere', 'active' and 'less spiteful' (Lanctôt et al., 2012).

Some male practitioners preferred to work with boys rather than girls as boys were seen as less difficult than girls who were perceived to have more complex needs.

They also experienced fears and discomfort about girls' sexualised attitudes and behaviours, possibly including the fear of liability (Lanctôt et al., 2012).

Some male practitioners feared girls talking about sexual abuse or sexually risky behaviour and the practitioners did not want to work with 'victims' (Lanctôt et al., 2012).

(Similarly, female practitioners often reported feeling uncomfortable talking with boys about violence and aggression).

Overall, practitioners sharing the gender and background with the young people that they were working with found it easier to identify their needs and priorities (Lanctôt et al., 2012).

This highlights the need for training and supervision with a focus on the different needs of male and female practitioners working with girls for the first time and a better system in place to match practitioners to the young people that they are working with (Lanctôt et al., 2012).

4.3 Features of interventions for girls and young women

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the complex nature of girls and young women's vulnerabilities research indicates that girls and young women benefit from programmes that focus on building trust as well as addressing relationships and past trauma with empowerment as the central focus and with the aim to promote resilience and self-esteem (Goodfellow, 2017).

Girls and young women in the youth justice and criminal justice systems have clear views about how interventions should be designed and delivered (Arnull & Eagle, 2009; Garcia & Lane, 2013). Expectations include:

- Preference for a female-only environment
- Access to role models and mentors
- An emphasis on building one-to-one relationships, based on respect
- Opportunities to develop their life skills
- Access to programmes and support to help to deal with abuse
- Support in working towards long-term goals and qualifications
- Ongoing sustained engagement after the programme

They have mixed views about whether group work or one-to-one work is the best approach for interventions.

Some girls and young women:

Prefer one-to-one work

because no one judges them, no one can spread gossip or talk about their personal details. However, some girls and young women think that one-to-one work is boring. (Arnull & Eagle, 2009)

Others prefer group work

as it is interesting to hear about other people's experiences (Arnull & Eagle, 2009)

Features of services and interventions for girls and young women in the youth justice and criminal justice systems include (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014):

• The need for protection and safety
• Addressing social and emotional risk (Severinsen et al., 2016):
• Able to respond to a girl's unique situation
• Rights-based approach which listens to girls and young women and responds constructively
• Options for girls and young women to have female workers but if not, girls will need reassurance and introducing to male workers
• Staff with skills and training to meet the specific needs and interests of girls including the skills to support friendships between girls (Ellis, 2018)
• Recognising the importance of relationships for girls, including family relationships even if they are difficult (Beyond Youth Custody, 2014)
• Staff as a champion of girls' needs
• Choice of one-to-one or group work
• Continued engagement after the interventions has ended

Additional considerations for practitioners working with girls and young women include:

• Sensitivity to the needs of girls and young women (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014):
   • Awareness that girls and young women internalise feelings
   • Knowing how to make girls and young women feel safe
   • Developing key relationships so that interventions work
   • Helping girls and young women to manage emotions
• Girls and young women might have difficulties in trusting adults and developing relationships with workers (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014).
• Girls and young women respond best to well-planned and structured sessions Arnull & Eagle, 2009).
• 'Group work' skills and training for practitioners working with girls and young women (Arnull & Eagle, 2009).
• Although professionals might have concerns about the potential for the 'contamination' of girls and young women that might lead to copied behaviours including self-harming, group work offers girls and young women the potential to develop their own strategies to manage behaviours and to develop meaningful friendships if it is run in a safe space with additional emotional support (Ellis, 2018).

Thinking about the outcomes of interventions, there is the potential to positively affect feelings of self-worth and provide social recognition if they are based upon: (Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009)

- Positive opportunities
- Pro-social
- Connecting girls to support networks and other projects
- Providing hope
- Broadening horizons
- Capacity building
- Feeling included in the local community

5. USING SPORT AS AN INTERVENTION FOR VULNERABLE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

5.1 Introduction

There is limited academic insight on vulnerability, girls and young women in the context of sport and physical activity. This section focuses on girls and young women in the context of the types of sport and physical activities, the importance of 'place' and poverty, experience of PE at school, the significance of the family and the need for 'gender-sensitivity' around the design of interventions.

5.2 Type of sport and physical activities for interventions

Academic insight about which sports should be provided for 'vulnerable' girls and young women might be limited but clear messages emerge about providing types of sports that are viewed as being 'traditionally feminine' as well as 'traditionally' masculine (Simon et al., 2020).

- Marginalised girls wanted to have opportunities to be competitive, to be noisy and excited and aggressive within the sports sessions, in opposition to the stereotyped view of girls being quiet, polite and calm (Simon et al., 2020).
- For girls taking part in 'traditionally' masculine sports and having to navigate being seen as either 'manly' or 'lesbian' including negative views from family members about taking part in these sports, making sure that there was a strong sense of belonging at the session, positive female role models and mentors were important (Bevan et al., 2020).
- Girls had high levels of awareness about gender inequality and the differences between boys' and girls' behaviours where boys were allowed to be competitive and aggressive whereas there was pressure for girls to be 'girly' (Simon et al., 2020).
- Some girls who stopped playing traditional 'masculine sports' such as cricket, rugby and football did so because of being harassed or judged (Bevan et al., 2020).

5.3 Considerations for sports interventions for 'vulnerable' girls and young women

The context of (often multiple) vulnerabilities experienced by girls and young women which include living in poverty/ low income households, neglect, physical and sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, substance misuse, negative peer group, school exclusion and emotional and health, needs to inform the design and delivery of sports interventions. This is important to ensure that taking part in a sports intervention does not increase their vulnerability (albeit unintentionally).

- The transition to secondary school results in an increased internalised fear around their safety, not just as a result of conversations (from teachers, parents etc) but also their experiences of harassment which affect and restrict their choice of activities. (Clark, 2015).
- When girls are described as 'sexually vulnerable' and 'victims', it affects their engagement in outdoor physical activities regardless of class or race (Clark, 2015).
- Harassment in relation to girls' bodies has been shown to have a negative effect on girls' motivations to take part in physical activity and sport as the body is on display. (Holman, et al., 2013).
- As girls get older and they reduce their participation in sport and physical activity in response to 'sexual vulnerability', this contrasts with the empowerment, enjoyment and sense of physical/ bodily competence that they can gain through sport (Clark, 2015).
- Girls fear victimisation more than boys even though there is a greater threat to boys from harassment and violence (Deakin, 2006).

5.4 Previous experience of Physical Education (PE)

Previous experiences of taking part in PE at school have the potential to affect engagement and to deter 'vulnerable' girls and young women from wanting to take part in sports interventions:

- Mixed PE lessons were a site of sexualised taunts and innuendos (Clark, 2015).
- PE was seen as 'not enjoyable', humiliating and a male space which had a negative impact on marginalised girls in terms of class and race (Simon et al., 2020).
- Reinforcement of gender stereotypes in PE including the use of spaces by moving girls away from 'unsafe' physical activities towards calmer activities (Simon et al., 2020).
- Clothing that was seen as suitable for boys was seen as 'inappropriate' for girls by PE teachers, coaches and other adults e.g. short shorts and T-shirts/ vest tops in school and community settings (Clark, 2015).

5.5 Providing a safe space

The choice of the location and venue of a sport intervention in terms of being a 'physically and emotionally' safe space for girls and young women is fundamental. Understanding the social dynamics of neighbourhoods, especially for disadvantaged communities is important for considerations of unsafe and safe spaces for taking part in physical activity (Clark, 2015).

Further considerations include:

- Increased restrictions to the use of outdoor spaces for girls by parents, teachers and coaches as they became teenagers relating to sexual vulnerability (Deakin, 2006).
- Consideration of the perceptions of 'safe' and 'unsafe' spaces is important as the use of local outdoor spaces for sport and physical activity

such as parks can be associated with sexual vulnerability and risk for girls (Clark, 2015)

- Being outdoors after dark can lead to negative sexualised labelling (Clark, 2015)
- Sexual threat and vulnerability reduced female enjoyment in physical activities in the outdoors, especially for individual sports such as running or cycling (Wesley & Gaarder, 2004)

> ### A KEY DESIGN POINT FOR A 'SAFE' OUTDOOR SPORTS INTERVENTION:
>
> - 'Supervised activities' or 'informal' group activities were seen as enabling safe outdoor spaces for girls (Clark, 2015).

5.6 The role of the parent/ caregiver

The significance of the parent or caregiver's role in supporting the engagement of 'vulnerable' girls and young women in sport deserves further attention especially around the impact of gender on their views towards youth sport (Eriksen et al., 2021).

Although parents have been shown to play a positive role in supporting their children to take part in youth sport as a protection against risk in the form of inactivity and an unhealthy lifestyle, recent research has shown that:

- Family members can have negative views about girls taking part in masculine sports (Bevan et al., 2020).
- Parents act as gatekeepers to their children's engagement in formal youth mentoring programmes (Mendelson et al., 2010).
- Coaches need to have meaningful engagement with young people's caregivers (Van der Veken et al., 2021).

5.7 Mixed or female only sports interventions

The academic insight about whether 'female only' or 'mixed' sports interventions are more appropriate for vulnerable girls and young women is not straightforward. Although academic insight from both the youth justice and criminal justice sectors suggests that female-only provision might address the needs of vulnerable girls and young women more effectively, this is not always possible or perhaps appropriate in every sporting context. As an example, practical limitations include not enough girls to run female-only sessions, not enough female staff to lead sessions or provision taking place in a mixed sport setting such as boxing clubs and martial arts facilities.

There is little insight into the impact of experiencing sexual abuse, sexual exploitation or male violence either inside or outside the home and its associated trauma in relation to 'vulnerable' girls and young women taking part in community sports interventions. This would suggest that further research is needed to ensure that sports interventions are designed well otherwise there is the risk that sport can make matters worse (Abbott & Barber, 2007).

Based on limited academic insight, some considerations around providing female only or mixed sessions include:

- Avoiding mixed gender sports sessions if boys and girls are given responsibility for organising their own indoor sports activities as it can lead to male dominance and female exclusion from the activities (Skille & Waddington, 2006).
- Girls are often excluded by boys from playing alongside them solely because they are girls (Simon et al., 2020).
- As girls grow older, they are often unable to play alongside boys, leading to feelings of sadness, but this can lead to involvement in female only sessions which are positive as a result of gender similarities, peer support and friendship (Bevan et al., 2020).
- Coaches need to focus on the empowerment of girls within mixed sports sessions as a potential strategy for addressing humiliating behaviours towards girls by boys including verbal harassment and violent behaviours 'on the court' (López et al., 2021).
- Male coaches working with young people can be seen as 'dangerous', 'in danger' and 'observer of and for danger' which is particularly heightened when working with girls (Bennett et al., 2021) and is particularly relevant for working with vulnerable girls and young women in the context of child safeguarding policies.
- There is the potential risk that female-only sessions create myths and stereotypes about girls and women taking part in sport and that resources are only given to women in this context, continuing the marginalisation of women (Lindgren et al., 2002).

6. CONCLUSION

Although academic insight on the needs of vulnerable girls and young women and community sport is limited, there is a growing body of research around vulnerable girls and young women in relation to the youth justice and criminal justice systems which is of interest to policymakers and practitioners in the community sport sector.

As highlighted in sections two and three of this literature review summary, this includes considerations around definitions of vulnerabilities, the interplay between vulnerabilities and offending and the specific needs of vulnerable girls and young women.

Sections four and five outline the need to consider the pervasive effect of living in poverty, the impact of emotional and physical abuse and the need for gender sensitivity in designing interventions.

This combined insight is important for policymakers as well as practitioners for the funding, design and delivery of community sport interventions that are appropriate for the needs of vulnerable girls and young women as a form of prevention, early intervention or diversion.

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