



Loughborough  
University

## LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY

### ***USING SPORT TO PROVIDE SAFE SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE CONTEXT OF PREVENTING SERIOUS YOUTH VIOLENCE***

Produced for StreetGames by: Loughborough University  
Author: Dr Caron Walpole

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## OVERVIEW

*This literature review summary provides academic insight for policymakers and practitioners into the use of sport as a safe space for vulnerable young people.*

*Section A provides a summary of the general academic insight into the importance of safe spaces for young people which goes beyond physical safety. This section then looks at young people's views of a space as being safe or unsafe and the different strategies that young people use to deal with the risks of unsafe spaces but recognising that these can be different relating to gender.*

*Section B provides general academic insight into the features of a safe space for young people and offers a strategy for creating safe spaces whilst acknowledging the challenges.*

*Section C provides academic insight into the role of sport for creating a safe space and the benefits that it can provide for young people. It focuses on the role that sport can play for vulnerable young people and makes use of the public health approach to identify the role that different types of sport programmes and interventions can play in providing a safe space for young people. It then offers academic insight into the planning and management of safe spaces within the sporting context, types of activities including positive risk-taking, the engagement of young people, the need for contextual safeguarding, the nature of the sports organisations and workforce requirements. This section ends with insight into the benefits of sport for safe spaces within the wider community.*

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## INTRODUCTION

This guidance note has been designed for use by policymakers and practitioners and presents insight into the use of sport as a safe space for young people at risk of or already involved in offending behaviour (which includes serious youth violence). It has been based on academic insight and theory from the fields of youth and criminal justice, youth and family work, urban geography and community sport, as well as learning from a series of research and programme evaluation programmes undertaken by Loughborough University (Loughborough campus) since 2015. This is part of a series of resources that has been produced by Loughborough University in partnership with StreetGames.

Other resources can be found on the StreetGames website:

1.

Theory of Change for Enhancing Positive Outcomes for Young People in the context of Serious Youth Violence

2.

Literature Review for policymakers and practitioners: Safer Together: Creating partnerships for positive change

3.

Literature Review for policymakers and practitioners: Sport and Serious Youth Violence

4.

Literature Review for policymakers and practitioners: The Use of Sport-based mentoring programmes as an intervention for preventing and reducing youth offending

5.

Literature Review for policymakers and practitioners: Vulnerable Girls and Young Women and Sport in the context of Violence Reduction

6.

Making referrals: Guidance and Toolkit to support referral agencies and Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs)

7.

Literature Review Summary: Workforce Competencies and Skills for Practitioners delivering 'SportPlus' Sport-based interventions

Insight from research and programme evaluations has been based on:

1.

Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Violence Reduction Partnership funded: Evaluation of the Sport Diversion Programme (2023-24)

2.

Active Essex Foundation: Evaluation of the Youth Crime and Sport Programme- Positive Outcomes for Young People (2022-24)

3.

Plymouth OPCC funded: Supporting Vulnerable Young People Through the Power of Sport Programme (2020-21)

4.

Youth Endowment funded: Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Sport-Based mentoring Programme (2020)

5.

Sport England funded: Evaluation of Serious Youth Violence Summer Programme.

6.

West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit funded - Vulnerable Girls, Young Women, Sport and Crime Programme (2020)

7.

Home Office funded: Sport and Serious Violence Prevention Programme (2019-2020)

8.

Home Office funded: Safer Together Through Sport Programme (2017- 2020)

9.

Warwickshire Police and Crime Commissioner funded: 'Get on Track' Evaluation for the Warwickshire Multi-Agency Serious and Organised Crime Joint Action Group (SOCJAG) (2017)

10.

Home Office funded: Reducing Youth Crime Through Sport Programme (2015-2017)



## CONTEXT

Serious Youth Violence (SYV) is a global epidemic affecting young people and their families, including in the UK (Gwata et al., 2024). It includes aggravated assault, murder, rape and robbery, carrying a knife or weapon (McAra and McVie, 2016; Malti and Averdijk, 2017) and can also be associated with gang membership and county lines involving drug dealing (Robinson et al., 2019). Violence is closely linked to aggressive behaviour, not always against the law, which can be defined as intentionally causing physical or psychological harm to others and can include arguing, physical attacks and reputational damage (Krahe, 2013). Levels of homicide, knife crime and gun crime have risen in the UK since 2014 (ONS, 2019) leading to an increased focus on serious youth violence.

Neighbourhoods where people live in poverty and deprivation have higher rates of violence compared to others (McAra and McVie, 2016) which means that having access to safe spaces in these neighbourhoods is important for preventing and reducing young people's involvement in serious youth violence.



THE NEED FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO HAVE ACCESS TO SAFE SPACES

Young people living in deprived communities commonly experience violence and often feel unsafe especially if they have been a witness to or a victim of violence and do not feel protected by statutory agencies (DaViera et al., 2020); Zuberi, 2018). An unsafe space for young people typically involves violence (sometimes committed by other young people), alcohol, drugs, lack of security including police presence and an area having an unsafe reputation (De la Vega-Taboada et al., 2023; Rudner, 2012).

Access to a safe space is important for young people as both a protective factor and an opportunity for positive development.

- When young people see a social space as safe, this can lead to fewer negative behaviours and more positive relationships with others in their community (Donenberg, 2020)
- Safe spaces can ‘buffer’ the effects of stressful events and promote resilience which can help young people to move forward in their lives (Chu et al., 2010).
- When young people live in a safe neighbourhood, it helps them to establish a sense of place and belonging, it helps them to get involved in community life as well as helping them to take advantage of opportunities to increase their levels of physical activity (Mackett et al., 2007; Beunderman, 2010).
- A safe space can provide an environment for young people where they can express their individuality which is important whilst growing up (Hausfather et al., 2023).
- Safe spaces help young people to feel valued, develop their competencies including effective communication and leadership skills so that they can have fulfilled lives (Lerner, 2004).

Young people living in deprived neighbourhoods have a greater reliance on public spaces as they do not have the same level of access to private indoor and outdoor spaces as those in affluent areas. This means that they make more use of public spaces for everyday activities such as work, travel, socialising and recreation including sport (Fischer and Poland, 1998). This can mean that they are more likely to encounter ‘unsafe’ spaces in neighbourhoods where violence takes place.

Understanding the types of spaces that young people use is helpful:

- A specific (private) indoor space that is a primary destination (i.e. the young person’s home)
- A specific indoor or outdoor space that is a secondary destination such as a school, youth and community centre or sports club (Carroll et al., 2015).
- Informal spaces where young people meet such as places on streets, parks and cafes can be identified as threshold spaces which are neutral spaces and accessible to all (Carroll et al., 2015)
- Spaces that young people use to move around or across their neighbourhoods from one destination to another.

Understanding this complexity in terms of the characteristics of a space can be helpful. It can be described in terms of (Rudner, 2012):

- the physical environment
- the different ways that it is used
- the social context in relation to who else is using the space
- the emotions, feelings and memories connected to a space

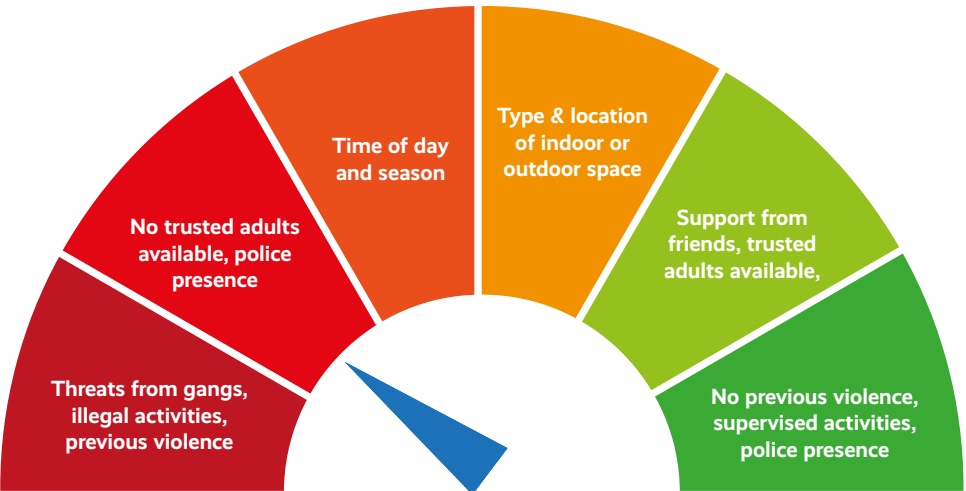
FIGURE 1: THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A SPACE



SECTION A | YOUNG PEOPLE’S VIEWS OF A SAFE SPACE

Young people’s view of a safe neighbourhood is a local area where they can meet their friends and move around safely without being afraid (Nordstrom, 2010). In the context of youth violence, identifying whether a space is safe or not is complex. A space only becomes safe or unsafe depending on the physical environment and the relationships with others. This means that a space does not stay either safe or unsafe but it changes and evolves. It can be seen as a shifting continuum of unsafe and safe spaces over time and between different individuals (Massey, 1994; Oosthuizen and Burnett 2019).

FIGURE 2 THE SHIFTING CONTINUUM OF SAFE AND UNSAFE SPACES



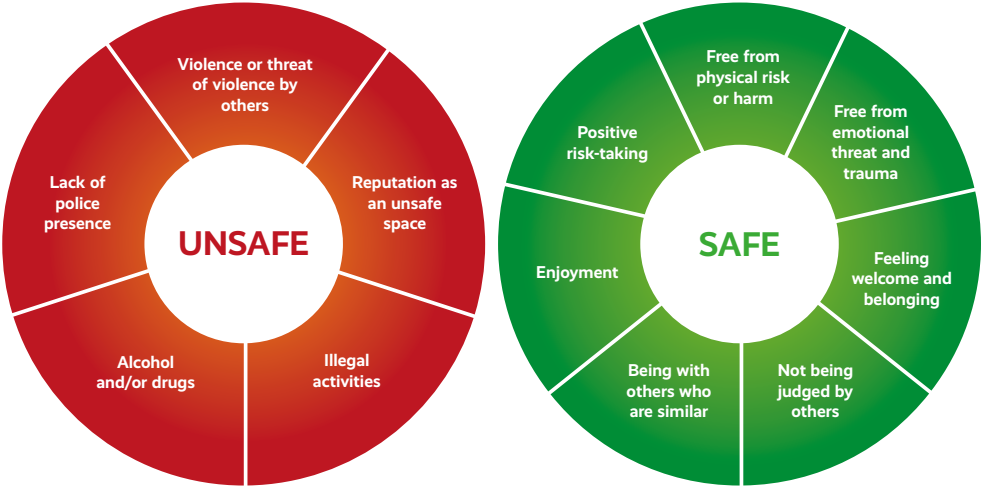
This can also be described as a ‘mixed’ space – which can be both safe and unsafe for young people.

- Young people make a judgement about whether a space is safe or unsafe depending on their own economic status, the level of support from friends or adults, threats from gangs, perceived threats to young people from interacting with the police, levels of violence as well as their own ‘developmental local maps’ based on personal experience and memories of where they have felt threatened in the past (Rengifo, 2017; Valentine, 1989).
- Streets are seen as being unpredictable as young people don’t know who they would meet. If they met friends, it would be a safe space but if there were illegal activities taking place or they met people who had been involved in conflict, then it would be unsafe for anyone nearby (De la Vega-Taboada et al., 2023).
- Home was a ‘mixed’ space as it could either be protection from or exposure to violence. They might escape from violence on the streets but might experience violence in the home which was normalised for some young people (De la Vega-Taboada et al., 2023).

Although a space can be seen as unsafe and threatening to young people, it can be managed and become a safe space (Borg, 2023). Moreover, it is possible for young people to still have access to safe spaces in dangerous contexts (DaViera et al., 2020; Teitelmann et al., 2010). Figure 3 shows the features of safe and unsafe spaces for young people.



FIGURE 3: FEATURES OF SAFE AND UNSAFE SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



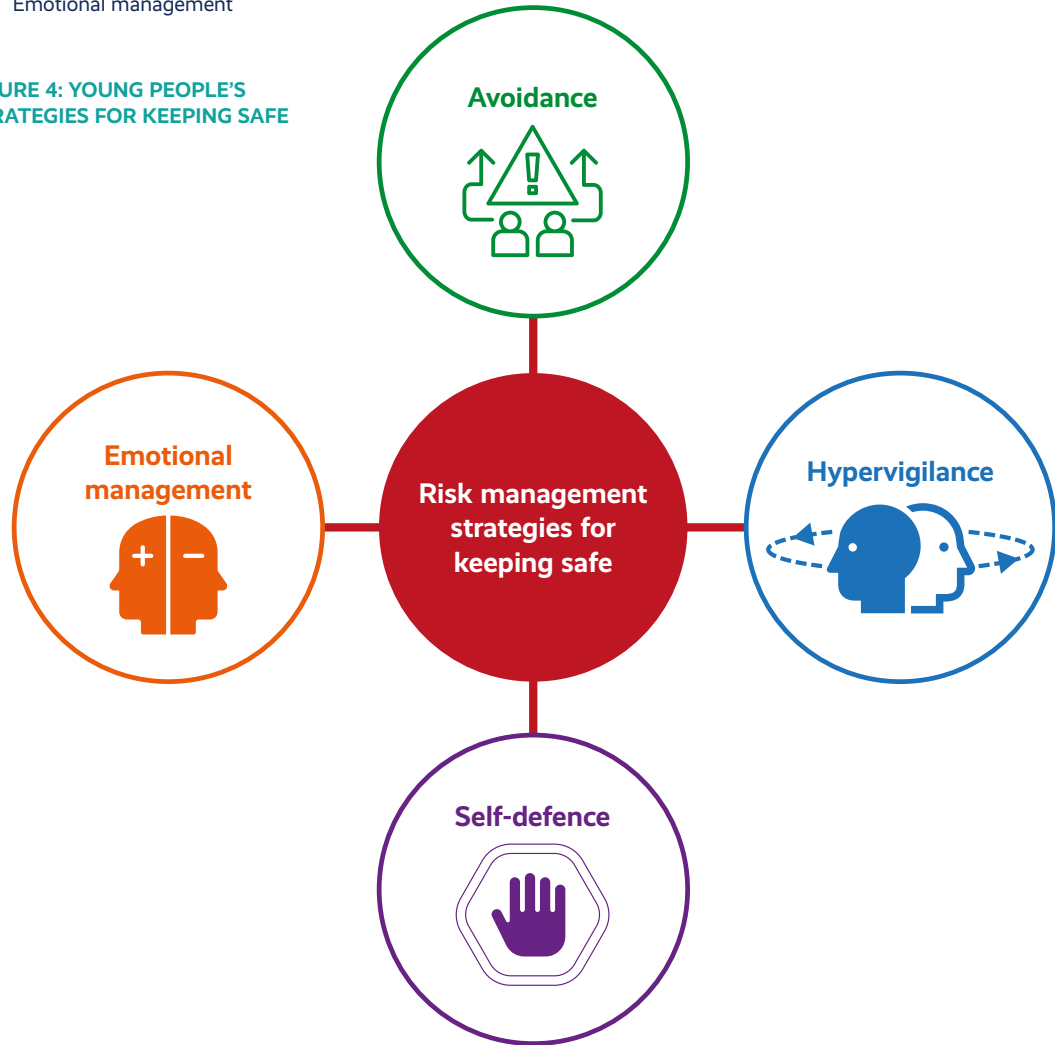


## GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF FEELING SAFE AND UNSAFE

Although young people actively navigate unsafe spaces and violence (Borg, 2023), gender can determine young people's experience of a safe or unsafe space as they can have very different experiences of violence (Day, 1999). They often use different strategies to keep themselves safe whilst managing risks and perceived threats. (Rengifo, 2017). Young people's risk management strategies for keeping themselves safe can include (DaViera et al., 2020):

- Avoidance – avoiding people, places and situations
- Hypervigilance – being aware of internal and external cues and trying to blend in
- Self-defence
- Emotional management

FIGURE 4: YOUNG PEOPLE'S STRATEGIES FOR KEEPING SAFE



However, for boys and young men, in particular, some of these strategies can result in placing themselves at greater risk. Boys' and young men's experiences of feeling unsafe included:

- More likely to experience and witness more physical violence (Finklehor et al., 2015).
- More likely to see themselves as targets of gangs, violence and police harassment (Cobbina et al., 2008)
- More likely to get involved in confrontation (not necessarily physical violence) which could increase the risk of future victimisation.
- Increased aggressive behaviour by boys often led to more chronic involvement in violence
- Although police presence could be a protective factor, it could also be seen as a threat by boys, related to negative interactions and harassment (Rengifo, 2017)
- Gendered expectations for how to cope resulted in 'hypermasculinity' for some boys (DaViera et al., 2020) and the drive to 'conquer' the streets (De la Vega-Taboada et al., 2023)

## Boys' and young men's risk management strategies to keep themselves safe included:

### Avoidance strategies:

- More likely to go out with friends in the daytime and avoid going out at night, choosing to stay at home. If they did go out at night, they were less likely to travel alone (DaViera et al., 2020).
- Good knowledge of which places, times and people to avoid (DaViera et al., 2020)
- Avoided certain forms of public transport, routes or times as well as eye contact with certain people (DaViera et al., 2020)

### Hypervigilance strategies:

- More hypervigilant than girls and young women (DaViera et al., 2020)
- Managed their appearance depending on the time and place by looking clean and blending in with the social context such as wearing the same colour clothing as the local gang although this was also a risk as it could make them seem as if they belong to the gang and attract police involvement (DaViera et al., 2020)
- Actively tried to reduce perceptions by other young people that they might be a threat (DaViera et al., 2020).

### Self-defence strategies:

- Boys and young men were more likely to carry a weapon (DaViera et al., 2020)
- Carrying a knife in public can make boys and young men feel safe (although this has the potential to lead to involvement in serious violence) and can give them 'street cred' with their peers (Harding, 2020)
- Although carrying a knife in public provides young men with a sense of authenticity and allows them to be released from the pressure for revenge or retaliation, it can become a normal way of life for them and place them at greater risk of being a perpetrator and/or victim of violence (Harding, 2020)

### Emotional management strategies:

- Boys and young men were more likely to become de-sensitized to violence and danger over time. This meant that they were more likely to feel safe in unsafe situations resulting in a reported decrease in distress, depression and anxiety as they dampened their emotional responses in preparation for expected stressful situations associated with chronic violence (DaViera et al., 2020).

### Girls' and young women's experiences of being and feeling unsafe included:

- More likely to experience relational violence, sexual violence or harassment although in some very deprived areas, it was the same types of violence across the genders (Finklehor et al., 2015).
- More socialised to admit feeling afraid than boys and young men (DaViera et al., 2020).
- More aware of social norms and how they should use spaces
- Awareness that the spaces that they wanted to use must be culturally acceptable to parents and other family members (Brady, 2005; Walpole et al., 2021). This included spaces being considered as safe which were:
  - » Conveniently located or with transport to and from the site
  - » Already familiar, near home (Walpole et al., 2021)
  - » Not subject to intrusion by males
  - » Not putting girls and young women at emotional threat or harm
  - » Offering girls and young women privacy and confidentiality (Walpole et al., 2021)



## Girls' and young women's risk management strategies experiences included (Cobbina et al., 2008):

### Avoidance strategies:

- More likely to use avoidance than boys and young men which included avoiding being outside at night in favour of staying at home (DaViera et al., 2020; Walpole et al., 2021))
- More likely to avoid boys and young men (DaViera et al., 2020).
- Managing travel including public transport as buses were seen as a danger at certain times and place and required avoidance techniques such as only using certain routes at certain times (Rengifo, 2017).

### Self-defence strategies:

- Girls and young women were more likely to carry a form of weapon for self-defence including house keys (DaViera et al., 2020).



WHEN CREATING A SAFE SPACE, TWO ESSENTIAL FEATURES NEED TO BE IN PLACE:

[1] FREE FROM PHYSICAL RISK OR HARM:

- Indoor and/ or outdoor spaces with an absence of actual or threatened physical violence (De la Vega-Taboada et al., 2023).

[2] EMOTIONALLY SAFE WHICH MEANS FEELING COMFORTABLE, THAT YOU BELONG, CAN BE YOURSELF AND SAY WHAT YOU WANT:

- Feeling welcomed and understood (Carnevale et al., 2024)
- An absence of trauma, excessive stress, actual or threatened emotional violence or abuse (De la Vega-Taboada et al., 2023).
- A space where you can speak freely without being afraid of judgement by peers or other adults and yet structured by rules to ensure dignity and civility (Flensner and Von der Lippe, 2019)
- Being with others who have experienced similar struggles which helps young people to express themselves and to come out of their comfort zone (Carnevale et al., 2024)

Although a safe space needs to offer protection from physical or emotional harm, it still needs to be enjoyable and include opportunities for young people to take part in positive ‘risk-taking’ including experimentation (which means trying out new social situations and experiences) that can result in positive transformative outcomes for the young person (Holley and Steiner, 2005; Hunter, 2008).

However, there are challenges to creating safe spaces in neighbourhoods where young people experience violence:

- The boundaries of public spaces identified by statutory agencies do not always match those of residents including young people and can change over time which can mean that resources and efforts to create safe spaces might not always be effective (Fischer and Poland, 1998).
- There can be significant variations in crime and disorder in an area on a street by street basis and over time which can be hidden when looking at larger geographical areas (Weisburd et al., 2012)

STRATEGIES FOR CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

It is helpful to consider the following four pillars that are needed to create a sense of safety and security in times of stress and trauma (adapted from Greenman, 2005):

1. Place: Providing a supportive and safe physical environment

- A physical indoor or outdoor space with safe routes for young people to get there that is free from the risk of physical harm
- The timing of activities, well-lit routes and facilities alongside the availability of resources and staffing are important for creating safe spaces, especially when it gets dark early during autumn and winter (Borg, 2023).

2. People: Providing young people with the opportunity to have a trusted adult relationship

- This includes access to ‘significant adults’ (including professional staff) who can provide stability and support by listening, answering questions and creating situations where children and young people have a sense of control. Being listened to is important as it helps them to believe that what they think about, feel and experience matter and is worthy of being shared.
- Providing young people with positive relationships with other young people and adults including professional staff can help to interrupt violence and protect young people from unsafe spaces (Borg, 2023)
- Providing young people with spaces supervised by adults who put ground rules in place, support youth voice and are trained to be confident about how to deal with controversial issues (Flensner and Von der Lippe, 2019)
- Providing quiet spaces for young people to focus on themselves, to reflect and to talk to a trusted adult with no fear of judgement from peers or mentors when they show their vulnerability. This requires emotional support from their mentors and social support from their peers and can lead to personal growth (Rubin et al., 2021)
- Staff supporting young people who are able to provide them with psychological safety which is the extent to which people feel comfortable sharing different perspectives despite the possibility of feeling discomfort as this then provides the opportunity for young people to take part in risks for personal growth (Williams et al., 2016)

- Creating ‘brave’ spaces so that young people can see the world and events from new and unfamiliar perspectives (Flensner and Von der Lippe, 2019)
- Adults who live in the same community as young people can be important positive role models when they interact with young people and demonstrate the positive, pro-social values and behaviours that are expected. When this happens over time, this can build a wider sense of community responsibility for overseeing the behaviour of young people in an area and for keeping them safe (Cantora et al., 2016)

3. Routine: Providing regular opportunities in the same place and at the same times

- Regular routines are important for vulnerable young people experiencing trauma, as this provides a sense of structure and consistency in a confusing world and acts as an important source of emotional safety.

4. Ritual: Providing activities that are meaningful to young people:

- This is when routine activities take on an emotional significance, including familiarity, being welcoming and providing a sense of community
- Bringing young people together with similar struggles helps them to express themselves and enables them to feel emotionally safe enough to step outside their comfort zone (Carnevale, et al., 2024)



Sport has a role in providing safe spaces through its prevention, early intervention and diversion work with vulnerable young people at risk of or already involved in offending behaviour. Firstly, the term ‘sport’ should be understood broadly as it includes a wide range of different sports and physical activity, sometimes also described as community sport, grassroots sport and recreation. Types of sports can include indoor and outdoor sports, martial arts, lifestyle sports<sup>i</sup>, dance, team sports and individual sports and physical activities such as going to the gym, cycling and walking. Sport can be provided as an organised sports session, as part of a club or informally.

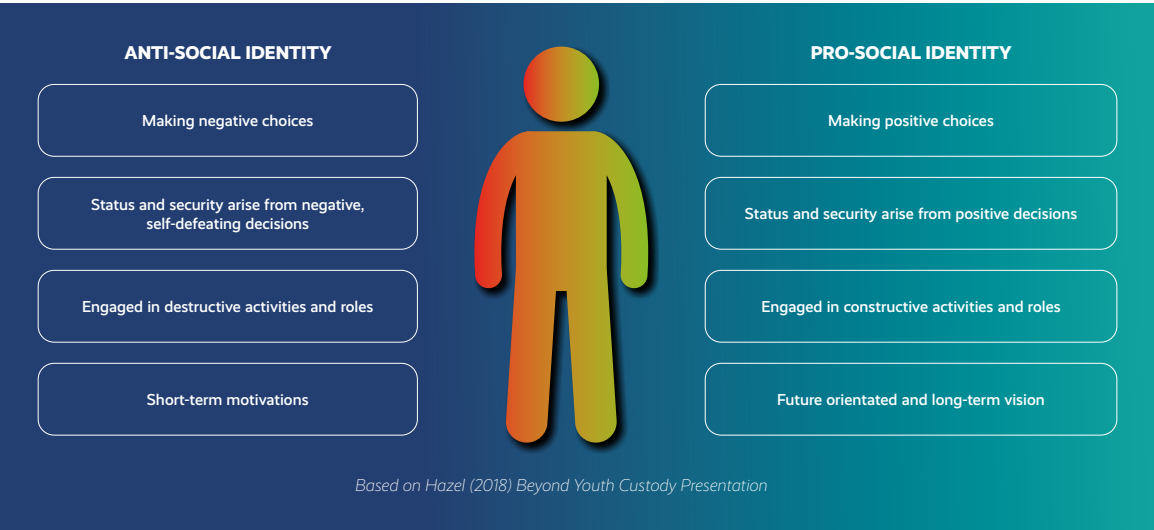
Sport can offer young people<sup>ii</sup>:

- Supervised, positive, fun activities
- Routine activities<sup>iii</sup>
- A physically and emotionally safe environment
- Sense of belonging
- Pro-social friendships
- Positive adult role models
- Relationship with a trusted adult
- A form of diversion from the youth justice or criminal justice system
- Sport can be one element of a ‘holistic’ package of interventions developed with other welfare agencies
- New pathways back into education or training and employment
- Achievements
- Support for the development of a young person’s pro-social identity

Moreover, sport can support a ChildFirst approach (Haines and Case, 2015) by working with a young person and offering positive activities as an intervention within a safe space, based on a strengths-based approach with positive roles, choices, decisions and opportunities for empowerment rather than a deficit approach. This can help a young person to have hope for the future based on positive aspirations which can contribute to the development of a young person’s pro-social identity (Hazel and Bateman, 2021) as shown in Figure 5 which is important for preventing and reducing involvement in offending and thereby helping to keep young people safe.



FIGURE 5: PRO-SOCIAL IDENTITY







In terms of safe spaces, sport has the potential to provide physically and emotionally safe spaces for young people living in deprived communities where there is a risk of actual or perceived violence (Oxford, 2017).

FIGURE 6: SPORT’S ROLE AS A SAFE SPACE



Sport’s offer for providing a safe space

Sport can provide:

**1 A PHYSICALLY SAFE PLACE IN A LOCAL COMMUNITY:**

- A space which is supervised by experienced adults and where young people can meet others ‘on the doorstep’ in their own community, play sport on a regular basis, take part in positive activities and have fun

**2 AN EMOTIONALLY SAFE PLACE:**

- A positive and comfortable environment based on positive values and behaviours created by experienced adults who enjoy working with young people and who are positive role models
- The opportunity for the young person to benefit from a supportive relationship with an experienced ‘trusted adult’ at the sports session
- Where everyone is welcome and young people don’t need to be good at playing sport
- Opportunities to get better at playing sport if young people want to
- Opportunities to try out and learn new sports, including sports that offer positive risk taking
- An opportunity to meet new people and to make new friends
- Young-person centred (also known as a youth work approach) and trauma-informed
- Focused on ‘youth voice’ so that young people are listened to and supported to act
- At some projects there might be opportunities for a young person to have a mentor - an experienced adult who will listen and support them to achieve their goals

**3 A SAFE PLACE FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT:**

- A safe environment for the young person to build confidence, learn new ways of dealing with difficult situations and how to deal better with emotions
- An opportunity to experiment and take ‘positive’ risks’ such as new leadership roles whilst being supported by trusted adults as this helps the young person to grow which is important for the journey through adolescence
- An opportunity to take on new roles by helping out, volunteering and getting involved in new projects in the community as a form of social action, helping to build a sense of belonging to the community and develop a ‘pro-social’ identity

**YOUNG PEOPLE WHO WOULD BENEFIT FROM SPORT’S ROLE AS A SAFE SPACE**

Young people are often more likely to be affected by violence if they live in a deprived community. Moreover, there can often be other underlying factors including vulnerabilities which can increase their likelihood of involvement in violence (Fox et al., 2015; Walpole et al., 2021).

Examples of young people’s vulnerabilities
<b>Underlying factors contributing to being vulnerable can include one or a combination of some of the following:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Living in poverty</li><li>• Involved in ASB/ contact with the police</li><li>• Community trauma – witnessing violence, incidents of serious violence in local community involving others</li><li>• Struggling with emotions - anxiety, mood swings, anger, frustration</li><li>• ACEs – Bereavements, shooting, domestic violence, neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse, PTSD, parent with mental health issues</li><li>• Low confidence/self-esteem</li><li>• Autism/ADHD</li><li>• Family problems – relationship breakdowns, instability, carer/in care/adoption</li><li>• Homeless</li><li>• Excluded from school/struggling</li><li>• Being bullied</li><li>• Going missing</li><li>• Self-harming and wanting to harm others</li><li>• Negative thoughts, suicidal</li><li>• Socially isolated, no friends</li><li>• Drug taking</li><li>• At risk of exploitation and county lines</li><li>• Online risk</li></ul>

Using a public health approach is valuable as it helps to identify and match the level of need of a vulnerable young person which includes access to a safe space. The public health approach can help to identify the level and type of need depending on a young person’s vulnerability in terms of:

1. Primary level (a low level of vulnerability): Preventing their involvement in violence
2. Secondary level (one or more underlying factors causing concern about their vulnerability): intervening at an early stage when they are at risk of or on the cusp of getting involved in violence
3. Tertiary level (very vulnerable, complex needs): Already involved in violence and needing support to help to reduce or desist from offending.

As shown in table 1, providing access to a safe space is important for preventing and reducing involvement in violence. This involvement can be as a witness to violence, as a victim and/or as a perpetrator of violence.

TABLE 1: A PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH FOR IDENTIFYING THE IMPORTANCE OF A SAFE SPACE FOR A YOUNG PERSON

PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH	IMPORTANCE OF A SAFE SPACE FOR A YOUNG PERSON
<b>PRIMARY LEVEL</b> Prevention before offending and violence takes place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prevention of involvement in violence as a victim, witness or perpetrator in the future</li><li>• Prevention of trauma</li><li>• Focus on positive activities and a sense of belonging as the ‘norm’</li></ul>
<b>SECONDARY LEVEL</b> Intervening at an early stage when there are signs of involvement in offending/ violence	Plus... <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Providing a physical safe space to prevent involvement in violence including grooming for joining a gang, drug dealing, knife carrying.</li><li>• Providing a safe space as protection and respite from challenging situations at home e.g. lack of personal space, domestic violence</li><li>• Preventing the young person from thinking that involvement in violence in the near future is inevitable, normal or desirable</li><li>• Focus on positive activities, values, behaviours, sense of belonging and aspirations as an alternative to violence</li><li>• Providing a quiet space and support for doing school homework to keep young people in school and achieving in their education</li><li>• Providing the opportunity for new pro-social friendship groups</li><li>• Providing the young person with support and critical thinking skills to be able to make positive choices and decisions</li><li>• Providing opportunities for personal development including positive risk-taking</li></ul>
<b>TERTIARY LEVEL</b> Intervening when offending/ violence has already taken place	Plus... <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Preventing the young person from thinking that further involvement in violence is inevitable, normal and desirable</li><li>• Providing the young person with more personalised and intensive holistic support including critical thinking and reflexive skills to be able to make more positive choices and decisions</li><li>• Providing a physical safe space for young people wanting to move away from violence including gangs.</li></ul>





APPROACHES TO PROVIDING SPORT AS A SAFE SPACE

Providing the appropriate type and level of sport programme can help to provide young people with both physical and emotional safe spaces. Building on the public health approach, it is helpful to think about different types of sport programmes in terms of Sport, SportPlus or PlusSport interventions as shown in Table 2 (based on Coalter, 2007) as we know that working with young people at a secondary or tertiary level requires a programme that is more than just playing sport, namely it requires a sport intervention (also called a Sport-Based Intervention). This approach recognises that young people with different levels of vulnerability need different types of sport interventions which can provide the appropriate level and type of access to safe spaces.

TABLE 2: THE POTENTIAL FOR SPORT INTERVENTIONS TO PROVIDE SAFE SPACES

PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH	TYPE OF SPORT INTERVENTION	DESCRIPTION	SPORT'S ROLE IN PROVIDING A SAFE SPACE FOR VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE
<b>PRIMARY LEVEL</b> Prevention before offending and violence takes place  <i>Open access recruitment of young people</i>	<b>Sport</b>	Focus on <b>Sport</b> - sports activities and playing sport, coaches might have ad hoc, informal conversations with young people, some opportunities for young people to help out at the sessions	<i>Primarily providing a physical safe and comfortable space.</i>
<b>SECONDARY LEVEL</b> Intervening at an early stage when there are signs of involvement in offending/ violence  <i>Often a targeted recruitment of young people including referrals</i>	<b>SportPlus</b>	Focus on <b>Sport</b> activities <b>PLUS</b> other activities to support young people including volunteering, mentoring, advice, workshops and training/ qualifications.	<i>Providing both a safe physical and emotional space</i>
<b>TERTIARY LEVEL</b> Intervening when offending/ violence has already taken place  <i>Almost always a targeted recruitment of young people based on referrals</i>	<b>PlusSport</b>	Focus on <b>Plus</b> holistic activities first including family support, housing, education, substance misuse, mentoring, and workshops on an individual or small group format with <b>Sport</b> used as a hook, a reward or engagement tool.	<i>Providing both a safe physical and emotional space as part of a holistic intervention. Putting this into place can require significant levels of expertise and resources</i>



For sport to provide a safe space effectively, young people must feel that a sport programme is physically and emotionally safe, otherwise they are less likely to get involved (Spaaij and Schultenkorf, 2014). This requires careful consideration, planning and ongoing management (Brady, 2005).

There are five factors to consider when creating safe spaces for sport projects (based on Spaaij and Schultenkorf, 2014):

1 - PHYSICAL SAFETY

Providing safe and accessible sports environments:

- Using a facility that is connected to the local community including being owned or run by the local authority is more likely to be seen as a neutral and safe space (Jones et al., 2021)
- A facility that young people can walk to safely and then go back home including in the evenings during autumn and winter
- An outdoor facility which can be supervised by staff and where young people can feel safe as there is the potential for greater risk if it is part of an open public space
- For outdoor spaces, such as sports fields, boys felt safe if sports activities were supervised and monitored by adults but the same sports field had the potential to become unsafe and threatening when there was no adult presence and drug taking and selling was taking place (De la Vega-Taboada et al., 2023).
- Providing transport to and from a specialist sports facility that is located outside the local community (e.g. swimming pool, BMX track) to avoid the use of public transport in the evenings
- Ideally, providing a private indoor social space in addition to the sporting space for informal and formal conversations and for personal development work



Ongoing management of the physical safety of the sports environment

This requires:

- Adopting a contextual safeguarding approach which requires spaces to be identified where children might come to harm. Plans to safeguard children in these spaces need to be based on child welfare and protection approaches, supported by local partners involved in these spaces, with planned reviews for situations if harm does take place (Firmin, 2017).
- Continuously keeping up to date with what is happening in the community informed by local knowledge from partners, staff and young people
- Having a plan in place ready to be part of a co-ordinated response to critical incidents involving young people and serious youth violence in the community which includes working closely with local partners to provide additional support and reassurance to young people, parents and guardians and community members.
- Having a flexible approach to the delivery of the sports sessions and recognising that changes might be needed to keep young people safe
- Having resources available to put measures into place with local partners to keep young people safe including providing additional staff, supervised routes or transport to and from the session
- Working closely in partnership with the local community and key agencies to prevent opportunities for deviancy training including grooming at sports sessions.
- Taking care with the use of social media to advertise the location and timing of the sports sessions so that it isn't seen as a potential target for violence related activity
- Staff who are well-trained, observant both during the sports sessions and outside in the local community and trusted by young people

2 - PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Creating a space where young people feel at home:

- Creating a sense of belonging towards a particular space, where young people feel comfortable with those involved and which offers protection from emotional stress, trauma or challenging events (Jones et al., 2021)
- Having staff in place to build trust and engagement with young people and who have experienced similar problems as a form of shared lived experience.

Ongoing management of the psychological safety of the sports environment

This requires:

- Staff who are observant and sensitive of what is happening in young people's lives
- Staff who are aware of changing group dynamics and who are able to respond and ensure a positive environment for young people at the sports session





3 - POSITIVE SOCIO-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

Providing a space where people from diverse backgrounds feel welcome

- Making sure that the sports sessions are welcoming and inclusive for young people in terms of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality and religion so that sport can promote positive relationships
- Providing spaces for socialising, conversations and for personal development work (Jones et al., 2021)

Ongoing management of the socio-cultural safety of the sports environment

This requires:

- A pro-active approach to the engagement of young people so that they feel that the session is 'for them'
- Staff who reflect the diverse backgrounds of young people in the local community and who understand young people including in terms of shared lived experience, shared interests, shared language and tastes
- Staff who are observant about what is happening at the sessions and who is and who isn't attending

4 - SOCIO-POLITAL SAFETY

Providing a space where young people feel confident and safe in sharing personal and, in some cases, conflicting views on prevailing social and political issues

- Providing young people with the opportunity to share experiences, views and their sporting and other identities

Ongoing management of the 'political' safety of the sports environment (i.e. young people's views about what is happening in the world)

This requires:

- Staff who are aware of the current issues which young people are concerned about
- Staff with the youth work skills, knowledge and confidence to facilitate discussions appropriately that might be uncomfortable for some young people

5 - EXPERIMENTAL SPACES

A space that encourages individuals and groups to push beyond passive safety and risk avoidance:

- To use sport as a safe space for young people to step outside their comfort zone as a form of personal growth whilst being supported by experienced staff
- To provide young people with opportunities including sport-based social action projects.

Ongoing management of the 'experimental' safety of the sports environment (i.e. taking positive risks safely)

This requires:

- Staff with the skills to recognise when individual young people are ready to face new challenges
- Staff with the ability to 'scaffold' young people's involvement in new, 'risky' experiences by helping them to build the skills and confidence needed on an ongoing basis
- Staff with the skills to provide the appropriate level of support to the young person for facing new challenges recognising that this might change depending on factors including what else is happening in their lives

FIGURE 7: FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR SPORT



**THE RIGHT KIND OF ORGANISATION FOR PROVIDING SPORT AS A SAFE SPACE**

The type of organisation responsible for providing sport and in particular SportPlus and PlusSport programmes is significant for its effectiveness in providing a safe space. Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs) are appropriate as they are based in local communities and are trusted by the people that live there. LTOs are different types of organisations providing different types of sports activities and programmes for young people.

LOCALLY TRUSTED ORGANISATIONS (LTOS)

Different types of LTOs include: :

- Small, medium and large community sports organisations run as CICs or charities offering a range of different sports
- Community and youth organisations offering sport as part of their activity programmes
- Small sports clubs including boxing, basketball, martial arts and football
- Large sports organisations such as Community Trusts attached to major sports clubs including football, cricket, rugby and basketball clubs

An LTO that has an 'ethos' of being community-based and young-person centred is well-placed to provide sport as a safe space. They often have practitioners as staff (often with the role of a SportPlus coach) who know both the local community and the young people and so know what's going on. These local staff are important for having up to date knowledge about whether young people will be safe travelling to and from a place where they play sport and if they will be safe there. As these practitioners are already known to young people and often have 'shared lived experience', this helps to build the trusted adult relationship with the young person which is essential for the young person's emotional safety.

These LTOs are also more likely to have formal referral pathways and partnerships in place with statutory or voluntary agencies which involve data sharing about the associations that young people have which can help to prevent deviancy training which is a potential risk to safety (Hennigan et al., 2010) and avoid creating challenging dynamics by placing young people together who might be rivals. LTOs are likely to have their own local knowledge about young people, including those who are 'under the radar' of statutory agencies which is important for creating a safe environment.



THE ROLE OF SPORTPLUS COACHES AS SPORT PRACTITIONERS FOR CREATING SAFE SPACES

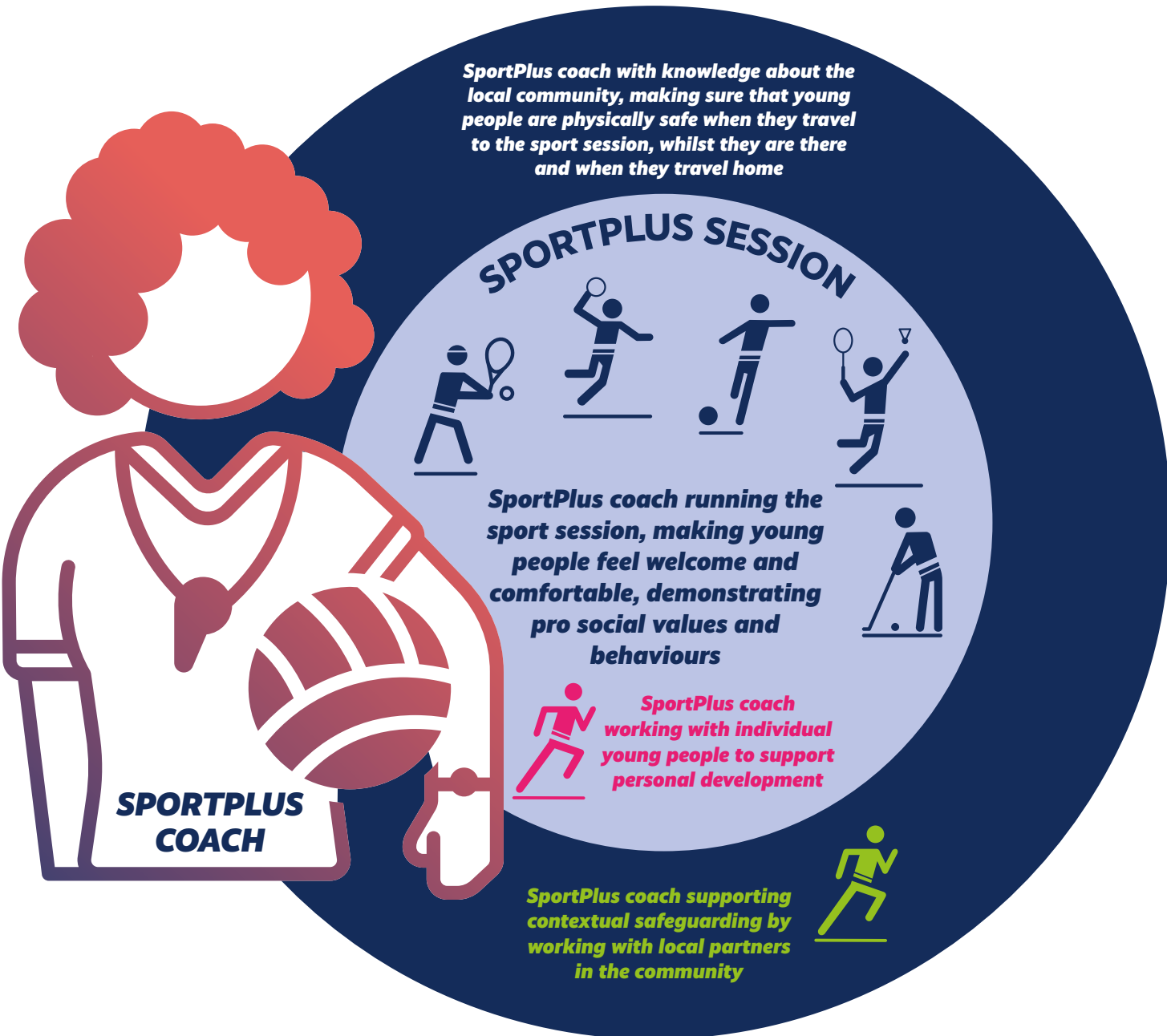
SportPlus coaches with the right competencies and resources to work with young people over time are central to maintaining the relationships that provide safety through friendships and social networks. This is an important foundation for young people to rely upon and to grow from.

- They need to:
- Be community-based role models as this is important for bringing young people together from different backgrounds
  - Be able to modify sports activities in a range of ways. This makes sure that young people who are beginners at playing sport can play alongside others who are more experienced so that everyone feels physically safe and can enjoy being physically active
  - Be able to use the informal nature of team sports to create a feeling of togetherness and belonging. This helps to make a psychological connection between individuals in newly formed groups and provides the foundation for mutual social and emotional support through new friendships and trusted relationships with peers which increases confidence.
  - Provide informal support by helping young people to work through issues and challenges without fear of judgement
  - Identify and use 'teachable' moments
  - Provide new experiences outside routine sports through visits, events, volunteering and social action.

(Solstad and Strandbu, 2019; Spaaij and Schlenker, 2014).



FIGURE 8: ROLE OF SPORT PRACTITIONERS FOR CREATING SAFE SPACES



CHALLENGES FOR CREATING SAFE SPACES THROUGH SPORT

However, some approaches to sport cannot be guaranteed to provide a safe space for young people. This includes:

- Informal sport organised by children and young people themselves in public spaces such as on streets or in parks in local communities where violence might take place
- Sports sessions run by organisations and staff or volunteers based outside the local community who don't have local connections and who don't know what is happening in the local community
- Sports sessions run by organisations that focus primarily on developing sporting talent, competing in leagues and performing in sport at a higher level as they are unlikely to have sufficient local knowledge, skills and training outside formal sports coaching.
- Sports practitioners who don't have the right skills or resources. Practitioners need time to put plans into place to manage violence and to talk to each other when it arises otherwise this can have a negative effect on staff and the young people. Violent and unsafe spaces can remain in place when staff are too exhausted and are unlikely to resolve acute situations so it becomes normalised as staff don't resist violence (Borg and Lager, 2023).
- Sports projects where there is a high staff turnover, temporary staff or where staff don't turn up can increase young people's vulnerability and destabilise the environment, placing relational safety and trust at risk (Lakind et al., 2014; Solstad and Strandbu, 2019)



THE WIDER BENEFITS OF USING SPORT TO PROVIDE SAFE SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Providing purposefully designed sports opportunities in deprived communities where young people live has the potential to provide them with safe spaces which can contribute to protection from violence.

Violence is often seen as 'relational' which means that it takes place between individuals. However, it is also helpful to think about it taking place more broadly in society in terms of 'multi-level' violence including structural, direct and cultural violence (Galtung, 1990). Table 3 shows how sport can help to mitigate these three levels of violence by providing young people with access to safe spaces.



TABLE 3. THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF SPORT TO MITIGATE MULTI-LEVEL VIOLENCE (ADAPTED FROM GALTUNG,1990):

THREE LEVELS OF VIOLENCE	EXPLANATION	IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE	THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF SPORT TO MITIGATE VIOLENCE
1. STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE	This is the background for understanding violence in young people's lives and can include decision-making that allocates resourcing unequally to places and services provided for 'at risk' young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Limited or no access to facilities, services or activities in deprived areas where 'at risk' young people live.</li><li>• This can include lack of access to formal spaces supervised by adults such as youth clubs, sports and arts activities where young people can be safe and protected from violence,</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Working with partners to invest in deprived communities can provide young people with access to regular, supervised sports opportunities in local places where they feel physically and emotionally safe</li><li>• Sport can provide access to additional support services</li></ul>
2. DIRECT VIOLENCE	Acts of direct violence take place between or against individuals which can be physical or psychological, including intentional and unintentional threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Young people can be perpetrators and/ or victims of violence with serious consequences for themselves, their families and their communities.</li><li>• This can include criminalisation, the potential for further involvement in violence and trauma.</li></ul>	Working with young people in groups or on an individual basis using sport can make a contribution towards preventing, diverting and intervening at an early stage to prevent or reduce young people's involvement in serious youth violence
3. CULTURAL VIOLENCE	This is when violence has been embedded to such an extent in everyday life that it is often difficult to recognise violence. This has the potential to make violence feel 'normal' and 'acceptable'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Young people regularly witness acts of violence taking place around them, seeing it as part of everyday life.</li><li>• Consequences can include joining a gang and/ or carrying a knife or weapon for protection, making it more likely that they will be involved in violence.</li><li>• Adults living in the same communities can feel that it is too big a problem and too risky for them to intervene to prevent young people getting involved in violence.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Taking part in regular supervised sport in their local community can provide young people with access to staff as positive adult role models who can demonstrate pro-social values and behaviours which can help to 'de-normalise' violence.</li><li>• Staff can also play a role in listening and talking to young people and helping them to develop critical thinking skills for dealing with challenging circumstances so that they can make positive choices and decisions as an alternative to getting involved in violence.</li></ul>



THE WIDER BENEFITS OF USING SPORT TO PROVIDE SAFE SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE (CONTD)

Sport can also help to play a wider role in contributing to preventing and reducing violence in the community by providing an alternative type of ‘informal positive social control’. Informal social control’ by local residents living in a neighbourhood can be more effective than ‘formal social control’ which is the role of the police (Weisburd et al, 2024). Even though the term, ‘social control’, might have negative connotations, academic insight shows that it is an important feature of any society as it refers to the ability of a group that shares the same values and behaviour to regulate and influence the behaviours of others so that everyday life can take place safely and fully.

There are two types of social control – formal and informal social control (Lombardo and Donner, 2017):

- 1. **Formal social control** is based on written laws and rules enforced by the police.
- 2. **Informal social control** is based on the values and behaviours expected in a society and is ‘enforced’ informally by individuals within groups including local residents within a neighbourhood.

The use of informal social control in a neighbourhood relies on individuals or groups of residents being willing to intervene in ‘negative’ and ‘anti-social’ situations for the common good but this relies on residents sharing trust and supporting each other’s actions. Where this is in place, communities tend to have lower rates of crime and where this is not in place, communities tend to have higher crime rates (Sampson et al., 1997). Although policing is seen as the formal way of reducing risk in public spaces by enforcing laws and regulations, evidence suggests that policing as formal social control might not be as effective as informal social control. This also recognises that police officers cannot always be present within a community when violence takes place (Weisburd et al, 2024).

‘INFORMAL SOCIAL CONTROL’ IN A DEPRIVED COMMUNITY

Living in a deprived neighbourhood can often result in lower levels of informal social control as residents are more likely:

- To have a fear of others in their own community and have lower levels of trust within their community
- To be less likely to get to know each other, to talk to each other and to do things together.
- And/ this can mean that they are less likely to develop shared values and social networks

This can mean that residents are less likely to intervene to prevent crime and violence for the common good as they consider that the problem of crime is too big for them to solve, too risky and it is not safe to intervene

(based on Brunton-Smith et al., 2018; Weisburd et al, 2024)

The lack of a visible police presence (formal social control) and the (understandable) lack of willingness to intervene by local residents (informal social control) in a deprived neighbourhood can create a vacuum which can lead to increased levels of violence as organised crime groups come into a neighbourhood selling drugs and solving grievances through violence, often involving vulnerable young people (Robinson et al., 2018). However, the right type of support from professionals and organisations located in local neighbourhoods can help to build friendships and social networks which can strengthen a sense of community and provide an alternative source of informal guardianship for young people which can, in turn, help to decrease crime rates (Maimon and Browning, 2010). The potential role of sport to provide supervised safe spaces within deprived neighbourhoods with meaningful activities and interactions with trusted peers and adults as informal positive social control is shown in table 4.

TABLE 4. THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF SPORT AS INFORMAL POSITIVE SOCIAL CONTROL

ASPECTS OF ‘INFORMAL POSITIVE SOCIAL CONTROL’ IN A DEPRIVED COMMUNITY	THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF LTOS FOR PROVIDING SPORT AS ‘INFORMAL, POSITIVE SOCIAL CONTROL’
Adults who understand the community and what it is like to live there	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• An LTO based in the community and run by local staff with lived experience including having grown up in the same community as they have a good understanding of young people and their lives</li></ul>
Adults trusted by members of the community, including young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• An LTO with local staff is often already known and trusted within the community and is skilled at building ‘trusted’ relationships with young people</li></ul>
Adults demonstrating pro-social values and behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• LTOs are run by staff who act as positive role models both at the sports sessions and in the community.</li><li>• They have received training to use sport sessions purposefully to develop pro-social behaviours</li></ul>
Adults aware of young people’s situations and their potential or actual involvement in violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Some LTO staff might have been involved in violence themselves in the past as a form of lived, shared experience but have transformed their lives, often through using sport which provides hope for young people</li></ul>
Adults with the willingness to intervene and support young people at risk of or involved in violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• LTO staff with lived experience do this work willingly as they have a personal commitment to supporting young people so that they stay safe and avoid getting involved in violence either as a perpetrator and/or victim. This can involve using sport to work with young people on an individual basis, listening, talking and providing or signposting to support and advice.</li><li>• LTO staff’s work with local young people can remind and encourages other residents to interact with young people in their community to discourage young people’s anti-social behaviours when they arise and to support pro-social behaviours. (Warner and Berg (2020)</li></ul>
Adults with the appropriate skills to intervene and support young people at risk of or involved in violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• LTO staff with lived experience are caring, authentic and non-judgemental. They take part in regular and appropriate training for working in this context.</li><li>• They adopt a young person-centred approach, are trauma aware and often use different types of interventions alongside playing sport including volunteering and mentoring to support young people positively and to have meaningful conversations about staying safe and not getting involved in violence.</li><li>• They will have a focus on working with the young person to develop and work towards personal goals, often based on small steps and recognising and rewarding small achievements</li></ul>
Adults with positive relationships with local police working together to prevent young people from being involved in violence and being criminalised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• LTOs work closely with a range of voluntary and statutory agencies including the police.</li><li>• This can include the use of formal and informal referrals from agencies including the police to prevent and reduce young people’s involvement in violence</li></ul>



CONCLUSION

In summary, sport can play a valuable role in providing young people with access to, firstly, a physically safe space in their own local communities which is particularly important for young people living in areas where crime including serious youth violence takes place.

Secondly, when sport provides a physically safe space, it can then be used to provide an emotionally safe space when supervised by sport practitioners as trusted adults.

For this to be in place, it requires sport practitioners to use a youth work approach and to be positive, role models, often from the local community. This makes sure that young people feel welcome and comfortable and creates a sense of belonging. Once a space is both physically and emotionally safe, young people can then enjoy the benefits of playing sport regularly which include having fun, trying new activities, making new friends and having positive experiences.

Moreover, by providing sport as a purposefully designed secondary sport intervention (SportPlus) or tertiary sport intervention (PlusSport), sport can play an even more significant role by using these safe spaces to provide additional support to vulnerable young people. This can include providing personal development, improved critical thinking and reflection, new pro-social friendships, trying out new roles, making achievements, creating future aspirations and developing a positive self-identity.

The use of sport in this context can provide safe spaces for young people which can then be used to intervene at an early stage and prevent and divert young people from involvement in crime and serious youth violence either as a victim, perpetrator and or witness.



GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ACEs - Adverse Childhood Experiences	ACEs are negative childhood experiences including physical and emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical and emotional neglect, household substance abuse, domestic violence, parental separation or divorce, household mental illness and a member of the household in prison
Deprived community	A deprived community is a local geographical area characterised by a lack of infrastructure and services, low socio-economic household status, low rates of educational attainment, a poor environment and higher crime rates which potentially lead to poorer life outcomes.
Diversion (and diversionary)	Helping individuals to stay away from situations, peer contacts and routines that might lead to involvement in offending behaviour and risky situations. This can also be used in the context of diverting young people away from the court system if they have been involved in offending behaviour
Early intervention	Early intervention within youth offending is based on the belief that young people at risk of offending can firstly, be identified and secondly, provided with services to reduce or eliminate potential offending behaviour
Engagement	Engagement in an intervention is more than just turning up as it needs to include their motivation, commitment to, and participation in, activities offered in programmes of intervention
Intervention	This is a type of programme that aims to bring about change – this could include changing behaviours, attitudes and values
Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs)	Organisations delivering sport opportunities that are locally managed, funded and ‘trusted’ by the local community. They can include community and youth groups, charities, leisure trusts, sports clubs, housing associations, local authorities and colleges and, for some of them, sport is not the primary purpose.
Offending	Committing a crime or unlawful act. This can range from minor offences including some forms of Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) to serious offences.
Pro-social	Positive behaviours, attitudes and values
Pro-social identity	A young person who has a pro-social identity feels empowered, makes positive choices, is engaged in constructive activities and is focused on the future.
Serious Violence	The World Health Organisation (2002) defines serious violence as ‘the intentional use of physical force of power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation’.
Trauma-aware	This approach aims to understand and respond to the effect that trauma has on people’s lives. Trauma is the result of experiencing stressful, frightening and distressing events that are not in our control – it can be a single event or recurring events.
Vulnerable young people	Young people who are at risk or who might need extra support or help, often as a result of multiple ACEs

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<sup>1</sup>Lifestyle sports can include skateboarding, BMX, scootering, rollerblading, surfing and more....

<sup>2</sup>See Chamberlain (2013), Coalter (2007) and Nichols (2007)

<sup>3</sup>Routine activity theory: Cohen L.E. and Felsen M. (1979) Social change and crime rate trends: A routine activity approach. *American Sociological Review* 44, 588-608







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