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Community projects with vulnerable children and adolescents: sports, health, and violence prevention.

Community projects with vulnerable children and adolescents: sports, health, and violence prevention

Katia Gomes Araújo

Summary

This article analyzes the contribution of community-based projects focused on sports and physical activities to the social protection of vulnerable children and adolescents, with an emphasis on health promotion and violence prevention. Based on a narrative literature review encompassing Brazilian and international studies published since the 2000s, experiences of sports and leisure programs in peripheral territories are examined. The literature indicates that social sports projects can act as protective factors by offering regular physical activity, community ties, opportunities for youth participation, and health education initiatives. Positive impacts on physical well-being, mental health, self-esteem, socio-emotional skills, school engagement, and reduced exposure to risk situations are observed. However, challenges persist, such as unstable funding, lack of systematic evaluation, and the risk of using sport as a control mechanism, reinforcing the need for articulation with intersectoral public policies.

Keywords: social sport; social protection; health promotion; violence prevention.

Abstract

This article examines how community-based sport and physical activity programs contribute to the social protection of vulnerable children and adolescents, with an emphasis on health promotion and violence prevention. Drawing on a narrative literature review of Brazilian and international studies published since the 2000s, it analyzes sport and leisure initiatives implemented in low-income neighborhoods. The evidence suggests that social sport projects can function as protective factors by providing regular physical activity, fostering community obligations, creating opportunities for youth participation and offering health education. Reported outcomes include improvements in physical well-being, mental health, self-esteem, socio-emotional skills, school engagement and reduced exposure to risk situations. Recurrent challenges include unstable funding, limited evaluation and the risk of sport being instrumentalized as a form of control over poor youth. The article argues that these initiatives are most effective when embedded in intersectoral, rights-based public policies rather than treated as isolated responses to structural inequalities.

Keywords: social sport; social protection; health promotion; violence prevention.

1. Introduction: youth, vulnerability and violence

Adolescence is a transitional period marked by biological, emotional, and social contexts, in which the tension between socialization processes and structural inequalities intensifies. Studies in public health and social psychology indicate that adolescents residing in territories Those living on the periphery tend to experience a "cumulative vulnerability": they coexist simultaneously with poverty, structural racism, precarious housing, low supply of public facilities, armed violence and the presence of drug trafficking.

In this context, violence is not limited to episodic events, but is integrated into daily life. through homicides, threats, interpersonal conflicts, and institutional violence. Reports National and international studies on youth violence highlight that poor children and adolescents, Black people and residents of the outskirts and favelas are disproportionately represented among the main

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victims of homicide, as well as those most exposed to the selectivity of the justice system.
criminal.

Given this situation, public responses cannot be limited to repressive strategies or focused exclusively on the penal system. Organizations such as the UN, UNFPA, WHO and UNICEF have been emphasizing the importance of preventive policies based on education, culture, sport, leisure and Strengthening community networks as a key pathway to reducing violence and expanding Protective factors in youth.

In Brazil, in recent decades, community projects that utilize the [missing word - likely "tool" or "tool"] have multiplied. Sport and physical activities as a central focus of intervention with children and adolescents in situations of vulnerability. These projects take on various forms: university extension programs in partnerships with schools and health services; initiatives of non-governmental organizations; actions promoted by clubs, neighborhood associations, churches and local collectives; or even projects Governmental initiatives developed in public sports and leisure facilities. Studies indicate that Such experiences can yield significant benefits, provided they are structured on pedagogical principles. consistent, with explicit educational intent and coordination with the social protection network.

The aim of this article is to analyze, based on a narrative literature review, how Community projects that combine sports, physical activities, and socio-educational initiatives contribute for the promotion of health and the prevention of violence among children and adolescents in contexts of social vulnerability. Specifically, the focus is on:

a) to discuss the place of sport in the agenda for social protection and prevention of youth violence;
b) synthesize evidence on the impacts of social sports projects in physical, psychological, and social dimensions;
c) to problematize the limits and challenges to its consolidation as a public policy.

2. Methodological procedures

This is a narrative literature review, of a qualitative and descriptive-analytical nature. The narrative review was chosen because it allows for the articulation of different types of studies (reports of experience, qualitative research, literature reviews, and quantitative studies) and from different areas (physical education, social work, public health, psychology), producing a comprehensive view on the topic.

The databases SciELO, LILACS, Google Scholar, and specialized journals were consulted. using combinations of descriptors in Portuguese, English and Spanish, such as: “social projects sports”, “sports and social vulnerability”, “adolescents and violence”, “mental health and sports”, “community-based sport programs” and “youth violence prevention”.

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The inclusion criteria prioritized:

- studies published from 2000 onwards;
- research that addressed sports or leisure projects aimed at children and adolescents in vulnerability;
- articles that analyzed the effects of these projects on health, well-being, educational trajectories, and relationships Family support, violence prevention, and/or drug use prevention.

Studies focused exclusively on athletic performance, high performance or contexts of elite clubs, as well as works that dealt only with activity. Physical education in schools without a community component.

In addition to scientific articles, technical reports from organizations were also considered. international, government program evaluation documents and dissertations/theses that They describe experiences from community-based sports projects. Among the productions Among those analyzed, the following stand out: a review of social sports projects for at-risk adolescents and vulnerability; reports from university extension projects that combine sport, leisure and promotion mental health; and studies that investigate the importance of sports activities for the Comprehensive development in peripheral neighborhoods.

The analysis followed stages of exploratory reading, selection of the productions most directly related to the analysis. related to the theme and construction of interpretative axes. Three main axes organized the discussion: (1) youth, vulnerability and social determinants of health; (2) sport, integral development and protective factors; (3) challenges and ambivalences of projects Community involvement in violence prevention.

3. Youth, vulnerability and social determinants of health

The notion of social vulnerability refers to historical and structural processes that produce Unequal exposure to risks restricts access to resources and opportunities. In the case of children and adolescents, vulnerability is expressed in the combination of poverty and precariousness. Housing, integration into territories with low coverage of public policies, multiple forms of violence. (domestic, community, institutional) and discriminations associated with race, gender and disability.

Public health research on the mental health of children and adolescents in countries of Middle-income countries, such as Brazil, show significant prevalence rates of mental disorders and symptoms of anxiety and depression, behavioral difficulties, and problematic substance use among adolescents from vulnerable backgrounds. In many cases, there is a concomitance between difficulties of Learning difficulties, school dropout, early work, and experiences of violence.

The literature highlights that continuous exposure to violence – whether as a victim, witness, or

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The author strongly impacts the construction of subjectivity, self-esteem, and expectations for the future. At the same time, evidence shows that the presence of protective factors, such as bonds stable families, access to safe living spaces, social support from adult role models. and opportunities to participate in structured activities can reduce the deleterious effects of vulnerability.

It is within this context that the discussion about community-based sports projects takes place. and leisure. Such projects can be understood as devices that seek to expand the repertoire of positive experiences, strengthening support networks and creating organized routines for children and adolescents, contributing to the production of well-being and to the prevention of marked trajectories due to violence, exclusion, and involvement with crime. However, its potential is not automatic: It depends on the pedagogical and political concepts that guide them, and on the quality of the relationships. established and capable of articulation with the system of guaranteeing rights.

4. Sport, holistic development and protective factors

4.1. Sport as an educational and health resource

Several studies indicate that the regular practice of physical activities and sports in childhood And in adolescence, it is associated with benefits that span different dimensions of life: improved Cardiorespiratory conditioning, better weight control, improved development. motor skills; increased attention span, discipline, and planning ability; in addition to gains Psychosocial benefits, such as strengthening self-esteem, cooperation, and communication skills.

In outlying neighborhoods, where access to public sports and leisure facilities is scarce. Whether or not they exist, community projects take on particular relevance by creating opportunities for practice. Sports activities should take place in minimally safe environments and be supervised by qualified adults. Reviews literature on social sports projects with children and adolescents at risk. They frequently highlight effects such as: development of motor skills and of Coordination; development of social skills, including teamwork and respect for rules. shared; reinforcement of self-esteem and a sense of belonging to a group; and encouragement of school attendance, with the consequent reorganization of daily routines.

Beyond individual outcomes, public health studies indicate that the existence of Community spaces designed for sports and leisure are related to improving the perception of safety among residents, due to increased circulation in areas previously monopolized by illicit activities and the enhancement of squares, courts and fields as collective assets of territory.

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4.2. Social sports projects: arrangements and modalities

The projects described in the literature take on diverse institutional designs. Some of them are developed by universities, within the scope of outreach programs, articulating community intervention, student training and knowledge production. Others are conducted by non-profit organizations. governmental, often in partnership with public schools, social assistance services or health units. There are also initiatives directly linked to public sports policies, Culture and leisure activities, funded by municipal, state, or federal budgets.

Regarding the sports, football remains predominant, but there are experiments. relevant to martial arts, athletics, dance, gymnastics, cooperative games and leisure activities. In a broader sense, this includes traditional games, movement workshops, trails, and... aquatic activities. The literature tends to converge on one point: more than the modality itself, the What differentiates the projects is the pedagogical intent that underpins them.

Three main orientations can be identified, in summary:

- Projects with a primarily recreational focus, limited to offering physical activities without necessarily problematizing inequalities, violence, or rights;
- Projects with an educational and critical focus, linking sport to discussions on citizenship, gender, race, health, drug use, and life planning, also involving actions with families and the service network;
- projects marked by a welfare-oriented or "rescue" logic, which, by presenting sport as the only On the path of individual "salvation," they run the risk of reproducing stigmas about poor youth and obscuring... the structural dimensions of inequality.

Critical research on sport and citizenship warns of the danger of transforming projects sports as instruments of social control, in which adolescents are kept occupied only so that they “don’t end up on the streets,” without real space for participation, voice, and decision-making. In this sense, it emphasizes- if the importance of community initiatives being conceived and conducted in dialogue with the themselves, young people and their families, recognizing them as subjects of rights and as co-authors of proposals, and not merely as passive recipients of protected actions.

5. Sport, mental health and violence prevention

5.1. Mental health and psychosocial well-being

Reports of experiences in university extension projects that combine sport, leisure and Health education with adolescents at psychosocial risk highlights the contribution of these initiatives for the promotion of mental health. In an outreach project focused on promoting Mental health through sports and leisure activities has been shown to improve quality of life. expanding social interaction, stimulating psychomotor skills, and strengthening bonds.

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among teenagers, families, and professionals involved.

The authors highlight that the presence of a well-coordinated care network – involving school, health services, sports and leisure equipment, religious and community organizations – it is A central element for sports practice to become a protective factor. Instead of acting in isolation, projects need to engage in dialogue with the Unified Health System (SUS), the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS), and the education system, in order to identify... early detection of situations of psychological distress, domestic violence, or problematic substance use. substances, forwarding them appropriately.

5.2. Routine, belonging and social time

Studies analyzing the routines of teenagers in low-income areas show that, in In the absence of structured activities, "free time" tends to be filled with routines that involve... prolonged stay on the streets, exposure to conflicts between rival groups, contact with drug trafficking and Involvement in risky practices. Participation in social sports projects introduces new Time markers: specific days and times for training, games, social gatherings, workshops and events.

This reorganization of routines, while not eliminating the presence of violence in the territory, It creates regular spaces for protected interaction. Teenagers begin to refer to the project as "my team", "my group", "my place", indicating the emergence of a sense of belonging that, According to the literature, it is directly associated with a reduction in risky behaviors and an increase in risk. of pro-social behaviors.

5.3. Violence, drugs and the limits of preventive potential

It is common for public speeches to attribute an almost absolute expectation to sports projects. "Salvationist": it is believed that sport "takes young people away from drugs" or "prevents them from getting into them." "crime." Critical reviews warn against this simplistic view. Research shows that, even that community sports programs can contribute to reducing violent behavior and While improving well-being indicators generally has modest effects and is conditional on quality of life, its effects are often limited. from implementation to the intensity of activities and the broader social context.

International reports on preventing youth violence through programs Community researchers indicate that sports-based interventions achieve better results when combined with:

- Actions to develop life skills, such as conflict resolution, decision-making decision-making, critical thinking;
- Individual or group psychosocial support;
- Active involvement of families and the community;

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• coordination with social protection, education, and health policies.

When these conditions are not present, there is a risk that the positive effects will be limited.
to the period of active participation in activities, with little sustainability over time. In addition
Furthermore, the very continuity of the projects is frequently threatened by budget cuts.
Management changes and institutional precariousness.

6. Institutional challenges and lessons for public policy

The literature reviewed points to a set of challenges that affect community projects.
Sports programs aimed at vulnerable children and teenagers:

Unstable funding and discontinuity

Many projects depend on short-term grants, one-off donations, or weak partnerships.
which makes long-term planning, maintaining qualified teams, and evaluation difficult.
systematic analysis of the results.

Team formation

Working in vulnerable areas requires professionals who are proficient not only in content...
Physical education technicians, but also benchmarks for human rights, comprehensive protection, and relationships.
Ethnic-racial issues, gender, mental health, and public policies. Studies indicate that qualification
The continuous presence of social educators, physical education teachers, and other professionals is a condition.
This is essential for the sport to be approached critically and not in a way that perpetuates stigmas.

Network articulation

The most impactful social sports projects are those embedded in intersectoral networks.
involving CRAS, CREAS, schools, health units, guardianship councils and organizations
community-based initiatives. The absence of this coordination tends to isolate these initiatives, reinforcing the perception of
that these are "isolated projects" and not components of a structured public policy.

Youth participation and leadership

A recurring criticism refers to the limited participation of children and adolescents in the decision-making process.
of rules, activities and priorities of the projects. Initiatives that create space for assemblies,
Youth committees, collective definition of championships, and interventions in the territory tend to...
to produce greater engagement and strengthen youth leadership as a dimension of prevention.
violence.

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Evaluation and monitoring

Reviews highlight the scarcity of studies that utilize pre- and post-assessment designs. intervention, with consistent indicators of impact in dimensions such as school performance, mental health, involvement in situations of violence, and social inclusion. There is a consensus that the field It lacks more systematic evaluation tools and methodologies capable of supporting decisions. public policy and financing.

From a public policy perspective, the findings point to the need for to incorporate community sports projects into stable regulatory and financial frameworks, linking them to municipal and state sports and leisure plans, as well as sectoral plans of Violence prevention, guarantee of rights, and health promotion.

7. Final considerations

The review conducted allows us to affirm that community projects that combine sport, Physical activities and socio-educational actions can function as important tools for protection for children and adolescents in contexts of social vulnerability, especially when... They are framed within an intersectoral perspective and focused on guaranteeing rights. The studies analyzed describe recurring effects, such as improved indicators of physical health and well-being, strengthening of self-esteem and socio-emotional skills focused on cooperation and coexistence, creation of routines and minimally safe spaces in territories marked by violence, expansion of Links between peers, families, educators, and institutions, and the opening of possible career paths that... They distance themselves, albeit in a non-linear and not always lasting way, from involvement with activities. illicit activities and other forms of exposure to risk. These elements suggest that, when properly managed, Well-structured social sports projects can broaden opportunities for choice and produce experiences. positive feelings of belonging and contribute to reorganizing the daily lives of boys and girls who live in situations of intense hardship.

At the same time, the literature insists on warning that this potential should not be exploited. In a romantic way, or detached from the structural conditions that produce vulnerability. Projects Community sports programs are not a substitute for policies to combat poverty and structural racism. institutional violence and the deterioration of public services; nor can they, on their own, cope with Reversing historical patterns of exclusion. Its effects depend on the quality of the pedagogical design. from the consistency of implementation, institutional stability, and the availability of funding. continuous and capable dialogue with protection networks and sectoral sports policies, social assistance, health, and education. When these conditions are not present, there is a risk that...

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well-intentioned initiatives can turn into isolated, short-term actions, or even into...
Control strategies over poor youth, centered on the idea of "occupying their time" without effective...
participation of the subjects.

For social work and other professions involved, studies indicate that the need to invest in the construction of political-pedagogical projects that articulate sport and rights. and participation, avoiding both purely recreational approaches and moralizing discourses of "Individual rescue"; to strengthen networking, recognizing sports projects as part of of social protection policy and not as parallel arrangements that compensate for the lack of adequate support. absence of the State; and to produce records, systematizations and research that make visible processes, tensions and results, fueling public debate and advocacy for policies. structured sports and leisure activities for children and adolescents. From the point of view of the agenda of Research highlights the importance of studies that delve into gender intersectionalities. race, territory, and disability in the participation and outcomes of these projects, which utilize mixed methodologies for monitoring medium- and long-term impacts and comparing different intervention models – governmental, community-based, university-based – in diverse contexts country. While sport may not be a magic solution to structural problems, the literature suggests that, when appropriate Critically analyzed by communities, public policies, and professionals, it can form a framework of experiences of care, coexistence, and participation that, in everyday life, compete for the place that is today occupied by violence, stigmatization, and exclusion in the lives of many boys and girls.

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