

# Sport and poverty

**Living in a disadvantaged area hampers young people's development: area-based deprivation is strongly related to higher crime, poorer educational achievement, health problems and high levels of disability. These factors have a knock-on effect on the local environment and community spirit, with residents in poor areas experiencing roughly four times more social and environmental problems than residents in more affluent areas. Sport and outdoor physical activity can have a positive impact on young people's lives, yet youngsters living in disadvantaged areas face many barriers to participation. Anne Power and her team talked to young people and their parents to find out more.**

## Our study

Sixty-five young people aged between 14 and 25 and 40 parents living in five areas with high levels of poverty helped us uncover why young people play sport or do not. We also talked to teachers and youth leaders, local councillors, leisure organisers, youth workers and local charities to gain their insights into local conditions, needs, hopes and worries. All five areas are among the poorest 10 per cent on national deprivation measures, with several in the poorest 1 per cent, for example, on income, education and health.

## Lache, Chester

Lache is a housing estate of approximately 2,500 homes. It has a poor reputation in Chester, despite its being an attractive area. Thirty per cent of the houses are socially rented, with 19 per cent of residents claiming housing benefit. Thirty per cent of pupils are eligible for free school meals, and 29 per cent have special educational needs. Sixty-nine per cent of households are deprived on at least one measure of employment, education, health and disability or household overcrowding.

The youth club in Lache is popular, but the work is challenging:

*'Anyone could probably be a youth worker or a volunteer in more affluent areas, but having youth workers who can work in places like the Lache... it's a whole different ball game.'*  
Youth worker

Lache Football Club is big success. Dale Gilmartin, who moved to Lache in May 2010, started a team after local boys kept asking him to set one up. The team has been incredibly successful, and the club has helped change the lives of several young men:

*'Football has given the lads fantastic opportunities. They're networking... finding out about jobs... getting jobs... it's improved their wellbeing too. People lay off the drink because they want to get fit and qualify for the team. I know that domestic violence is less of a problem with some of them once they've found purpose. They've found something they're good at, and it gives them some hope.'*  
Chairman of Lache FC

But many feel frustrated about their future in Lache, and several had not participated in

## Why focus on sport?

Sport makes a significant difference to young lives: it contributes to young people's health and, therefore, their development; it involves engaging with other young people in a positive way, thereby helping to avoid trouble; and it encourages concentration, motivation and other learning skills that help their education, as well as their working and social lives. However, young people living in disadvantaged areas face many barriers to participating in sport.

- Poor health among low-income households inhibits exercise, with parental ill health impacting directly on children's levels of physical activity.
- Few free sporting opportunities exist outside school, and charges are often unaffordable.
- Only a limited range of sports is available and some sports are expensive.
- Lack of safe spaces in which to play deters parents and children, so street play becomes less safe and attractive.
- Poorer local environments have fewer open spaces and lower controls over conditions.

sports since leaving school, thinking they were not good enough:

*'I know that it would probably be good for me to do some sports. Since I don't have a job now... it would get me out of the house. But I don't really think there's much for guys my age if you're not good enough for the football club. There's no casual stuff.'* Shaun, 23

Low and unreliable income is a big problem:

*'I enjoy going to the gym, but now that I don't have a job, I can't do that as often. It's really annoying that it costs so much more to do it pay as you go. Direct debit is cheaper... but I can't do that... because I have no idea whether or not I'll have a job next month.'* Alpa, 18

Parents see a considerable cost barrier once their children are out of school:

*'My son used to be quite active in sports when he was at school. It would cost him a fortune to keep up all those activities he used to do for free. People round Lache don't have that kind of money.'* Robin, 45

### Gurnos, Merthyr Tydfil

Gurnos in Merthyr Tydfil is a former coal-mining town in the South Wales valleys. The ward comprises mostly the Gurnos housing estate, with over 2,000 homes, and ranks within the 10 per cent most deprived areas in Wales. Forty-nine per cent of the homes are socially rented, more than double the percentage for Merthyr Tydfil (21 per cent) and Wales (16 per cent).

The estate's school uses sport as a tool to improve literacy. It has a successful rugby and reading project, which aims to narrow the gap between the performance of boys and girls, and to improve literacy and participation in sport among children eligible for free school meals. The school is proud of its early results:

*'It's so important. Yes, it obviously helps with fitness and wellbeing, but that drive and ambition to do well in sports helps the pupils to focus energy into other areas of school life too.'* PE teacher

A youth worker explained how she tries new ways to involve more young people:

*'We do all the normal sports that you'd think of... football tournaments, basketball tournaments... but sometimes that's just not good enough when you're trying to get the young people who won't turn up to this stuff. We*

*take a frisbee out on the streets, get them involved in a game, and then have some sort of added educational element. We usually hand out free condoms. Sport really is a great avenue to do this, but they wouldn't turn up to a football tournament at 7:30pm on a specific date. It has to be extremely informal. We go to them. They don't come to us.'* Youth worker

Many young people participate in free activities, such as football sessions in the youth club, after-school netball or jogging. But a 22-year-old mother explained how extremely low incomes have led some of her friends into depression and affected their involvement:

*'I have some friends who've taken out those payday loans. They're now in massive debt and some of them are really struggling to cope. They get panic attacks and depression. They don't look after themselves... don't eat properly, let alone exercise. They wouldn't turn up to football sessions or anything like that. It would have to be more to do with stress release.'* Bethan, 22

Some parents see sport as a way of keeping their children interested in things other than smoking and drinking, and of building their confidence, for girls in particular:

*'A lot of the girls round here are lacking confidence, and they need someone to push them hard and make them realise that they can do anything they put their mind to.'* Kate, 52

Parents, especially those with younger children, worry about area conditions:

*'I am nervous about letting my daughter play on the streets. I've had to tell her never to touch needles or talk to strangers. They shoot up near the park and no child should have to see that.'* Ruth, 27

### Burngreave, Sheffield

Burngreave is the third most deprived ward in Sheffield. Seventy-nine per cent of residents are deprived in areas of employment, education, health and disability, and household overcrowding. Fifty-three per cent are highly deprived. Few (under 30 per cent) residents own their homes. Overcrowding is a serious problem, with over a quarter of households having over 1.5 person per room – three times higher than in Sheffield or England as a whole. There is a particularly large Pakistani (27 per cent) and African (12 per cent) – mainly Somali – population. Forty-three per cent of residents over 16 years old are economically inactive.

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Due to funding cuts there has been a reduction in provision, and youth provision is said to have been particularly affected:

*'Our biggest barrier is definitely funding. We can't charge £5 for a training session, otherwise we're not targeting the right people. Everything needs to be local and on their doorstep. It's no use having a session somewhere where they'll need to catch a bus to get to it. Keeping it free or very low cost is so important.'* Sheffield Futures Manager

Interviewees in their early twenties felt there was less for them to do than for teenage participants. Six young people said there were not enough youth clubs in that area:

*'You get lots of people hanging around on the streets. We hang around because there's nothing to do... I don't play [any sports]. What you gonna play? There's nowhere to play.'* Jenny, 25

In contrast, the parents were generally happy with after-school clubs:

*'My son did boxing and karate, and my daughter did trampolining – all connected with the school. The schools are good round here.'* Claire, 58

The biggest worry was that young people without jobs and unable to join in positive leisure activities would get drawn into crime.

### St Pauls, Bristol

St Pauls is an area of mixed housing, perhaps best known for its African Caribbean carnival. Over the years, inner-city Bristol has attracted a lot of media attention because of gun violence, drug dealing and gang wars. The residents of St Pauls are acutely aware of how the reputation of the area has been tarnished by such reports.

Local authority cuts have severely impacted on provision for young people, and many involved in youth work are worried about the future of community projects. Residents felt that a lot of work had been done in St Pauls to improve its reputation and the opportunities available for young people and do not want this to go to waste.

Although gang violence has dropped dramatically, young men still associate with gangs and sport could help:

*'Some of these guys have had a tough time growing up. A really tough time. I don't like to use the word 'gang', but these kids join*

*groups that you might call 'gangs' because they want to feel part of something. They want to belong somewhere and to someone. They could have a similar feeling in another kind of setup, such as a sports team. But these kids, some of them are so far away from the mainstream, that you have to do really hard work to reach out to them. They would never turn up to a basketball session by themselves. They just don't have that confidence to do stuff for and by themselves.'* Ex-community worker

One girl felt there was a gap in provision for older teenagers, who also face embarrassment:

*'I used to go to basketball until last year but now I feel like I'm a little bit too old for it. I'm in that in-between stage. Not really a child, but not an adult. So I'm not sure what activities there are for me. I'd go jogging, but I wouldn't want to bump into someone I know and then they'd say something at school the next day.'* Kelly, 16

### East Ham Central, Newham

East Ham Central ward in the London Borough of Newham has a very high deprivation rate: 78 per cent of the 4,700 households are deprived in areas of employment, education, health and disability, and overcrowding. Newham has the highest concentration of ethnic minority communities of any local authority area in the country, with a very large (65 per cent) Asian and British-Asian population. Housing is significantly more overcrowded than elsewhere: over 36 per cent of households have more than 1.5 person per room, compared with 17 per cent in the rest of London and 9 per cent in England. Newham has the fastest growing private rented sector in London and over a third (36 per cent) of residents are economically inactive.

Following London's successful Olympic bid, Newham and the East End received over £9 billion of investment. New sports facilities included new venues for swimming and diving, hockey and cycling, a new park and the Olympic stadium. East Ham itself, however, is a 40-minute bus ride from these facilities and sports participation in Newham and East Ham following the 2012 Olympics has not increased substantially – by only 3 per cent. In 2014, Newham still had the highest rate of physical inactivity in the whole of England, with nearly 40 per cent of its residents not doing any exercise at all.

Cuts to local government budgets have made it increasingly difficult for Newham Council to maintain sports provision in recent years. One

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worker at activeNewham, a charity running the borough's leisure centres, said they had been able to maintain provision with reduced budgets by streamlining services, but further cuts would cause problems. But a local sports charity worker said the problem was not necessarily a lack of provision:

*'I always think that it would be good for the area to get more provision and more funding, but the provision is there at the moment, and do people use it? Not always. There was a big Park Life programme recently, and that was undersubscribed.'* Charity worker

Girls can easily be put off participation by anti-social behaviour from rough boys:

*'I play football down the park with my mates. The parks are alright, but yesterday I went and somebody threw a glass bottle onto the pitch. I don't know if I'll be going back there again.'* Gareema, 15

In London, weak social networks and instability can also be problematic:

*'I used to do five-a-side football, but since I moved to London I feel like it's harder to organise things like that. I don't really know enough people.'* James, 22

## Summary of our findings

We found fairly generous sports provision in all the areas, mainly through schools and colleges. Once young people are out of education, however, their participation falls as sports and leisure centres, football and other clubs are often too expensive. Informal games and outdoor activities are quickly replaced by 'hanging out with friends, drinking and smoking'.

- Sports can 'help keep children and young people out of trouble'. But many parents feel that supervision at youth clubs is not tight enough. The balance between running an informal session for young people and having sufficient control over behaviour is difficult to get right.
- Young men 'hanging out' on the streets deter younger children from spending time outdoors. Inner city areas have weaker controls and ethnic divisions create tensions that prevent young people from participating.
- Local authority cuts have taken a toll on frontline care and affordable activities. In the eyes of parents – and many young people too – public spaces are not sufficiently super-

vised. Projects targeted at young people may not survive.

- Areas with greater poverty need cheaper provision.
- Many staff and volunteers in schools and youth centres have limited training in sport and outdoor physical activity, but those with more training and experience can help more. Sports training for staff, volunteers and young people would be a good investment in young people's futures.
- Disengagement with sport tends to happen when young people leave school. Activities that involve and motivate young people, such as kick-about and ball games, also encourage more positive attitudes to training and work.
- Older teenagers mention drinking alcohol, taking drugs and smoking for fun and to relax. This often replaces sport and has a major impact on their futures. Young adults place higher priority on working, job seeking and spending time with friends than on sport. If they have children, they become tied into childcare.
- Engaging young people directly in shaping the way things happen reinforces their ambition to progress and helps decision makers and activity organisers. Therefore youth organisations, schools, charities and councils need to identify young leaders.

## Conclusion

Our work shows how area inequality and family poverty affect young people and limit participation in sport and other beneficial social activities. Active participation encourages young people to do more training, builds their confidence in accessing jobs, encourages healthy lifestyles, and displaces the need for drinking and other potentially harmful, unhealthy activities. Area-based initiatives that target resources where they are most needed would help reduce inequalities, as the area-based initiatives of 2000 to 2010 did. It is time to look again at how to boost the chances of young people growing up in poor households in poor areas. ■

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This article is drawn from a study undertaken by LSE Housing and Communities for StreetGames, published in *Moving the Goalposts: poverty and access to sports for young people* in November 2015, available at [www.streetgames.org/moving-goal-posts-poverty-and-access-sport-young-people](http://www.streetgames.org/moving-goal-posts-poverty-and-access-sport-young-people)

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