

## **Charly Says.... Don't believe the hype**

**By Dr Deborah Jump**

The highly anticipated Charlie Taylor report

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-the-youth-justice-system>

published this week, outlined recommendations for the improvement of the Youth Justice System in England and Wales. The report considers the importance of meaningful activity for those at risk, or those in contact with the criminal justice system. The recommendations therefore highlight that schools and colleges are crucial in preventing offending.

Additionally, the review also suggests that playing sport can have an ameliorative impact on offending. For criminologists and criminal justice practitioners, this is widely known.

However, more attention needs to be paid to the nuances of sporting activity and its relationship to desistance, rather than just presuming that meaningful activity will immediately change attitudes and thus, prevent recidivism.

When applying criminological theory to desistance from crime, Travis Hirschi's work on social bonds is frequently quoted. Hirschi outlines the concepts of 'attachment', 'involvement', 'commitment', and 'belief', as deterrents to offending behaviour. He believes that a young person needs to be attached and committed to a meaningful activity, as well as believing that their involvement holds some meaning for them. Conventional sites such as schools, gyms, and youth centres are seen as important places for adolescent integration into conventional societal norms. Accordingly, adolescents who are tightly bonded to such sites and their peers are more likely to refrain from violent behaviour than other less bonded youths. Because school sports and extra-curricular activities are institutionally sanctioned activities governed by schools, youth centres and conventional gyms, social control perspectives predict that sports participation should increase the bonds that adolescents feel towards society and thus reduce antisocial behaviour

All this considered it is fair to say that recidivism is possible. However, we have to be cautious here, what if the meaningful activity does not hold pro-social values, nor encourage young

people to effectively disengage from crime. If we take sport as an example, we can see that sportsmen and women while effectively engaged in employment and meaningful activity; can and do commit crime. As Lois Trimbur (2009) states: “one can be an accomplished drug dealer and a Golden Gloves champion”. It is not uncommon to read newspaper reports of sportsmen being arrested for antisocial behaviour, and in some cases rape <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/27/law-for-rape-victims-could-be-amended-after-ched-evans-case-atto/> therefore, we have to question what messages are inherent in the activities being promoted, and how do we ensure that young people are receiving the appropriate kind. For desistance and sport scholars, it begins with questioning the presumption that engagement in activities will immediately lead to desistance, as well as being mindful of those who are delivering the activity. Indeed, there is some evidence that young people’s attachments to negative role models can be negatively influenced by the coach’s value system, as Collinson’s (1996) analysis of young males’ search for self-identities through drugs and crime attested. It may be possible that the bond that athletes develop with their coach could negatively impact upon their behaviour, and therefore *increase* their propensity for crime and delinquency.

Worryingly, the main aim for policy makers, and indeed community leaders, is that the meaningful activity attracts the largest amount of the target group, as it is often assumed that diversionary activities that attract large numbers, are satisfactory enough to combat crime. This is all too familiar, and many governmental reports have been written on the subject of meaningful activity and recidivism. Yet, poor research design and measurement cannot truly evidence desistance. As Fred Coalter (2007) has suggested “Vague and unexamined claims surrounding sport’s efficacy in addressing issues of anti-social behaviour and crime have always underpinned public investment in sport. Therefore, we need to seriously consider how we measure sporting success in terms of crime reduction, and indeed, any other meaningful activity that claims to reduce criminal involvement.

Putnam’s concept of social capital has always taken precedence when arguing in favour of sport and meaningful activities for those classified as marginalised. In short, social capital refers to various social and moral relations that bind communities together. Indeed, communities deemed to be high in social capital are ones with strong community links and

civic infrastructure, those with an active sense of local identity and solidarity in terms of mutual support. Broadly speaking, communities high in social capital tend to have a number of positive aspects, such as lower crime rates, better health and lower rates of child abuse/neglect (Kearns 2004). This is reassuring, yet, accompanying this newer more systematic emphasis on the social role of sport, there became an increased general concern with evidence for its effectiveness. In the UK especially, there is emphasis on what is generally termed 'evidence based policy making' and 'value for money' (Coalter 2007), therefore, focusing on 'welfare effectiveness' as a key outcome for further public expenditure. In other words, sport has to prove itself. Can it really be effective in accumulating social capital? More importantly, can it be effective in the reduction of crime and disorder?

These are impossible questions to answer right now, and by no means are they pessimistic. They merely need careful consideration, particularly after 2016 post- Olympic fever, when sport becomes a popular medium by which many claims are made. Having said that, Charlie Taylor's report is welcomed, and I believe, will make positive waves in the youth justice sector. However, just as the 80's cartoon suggests, don't believe everything Charly Says...

If this is something you wish to study further consider a PhD scholarship with MCYS-  
<http://www2.mmu.ac.uk/research/research-study/scholarships/detail/vc-artshum-dj-2017-3-championing-change.php>

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