






# Sports programmes designed to prevent crime and reduce reoffending

Targeted sports programmes for the general population, people at risk of offending, and people who have already committed crime.

First published  
3 August 2023

Effect scale	Quality of evidence				
	Effect Impact on crime	Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
 Overall reduction	 Very strong	 Low	 Very strong	 Low	No information

## Focus of the intervention

Sports programmes can be targeted to prevent crime at three levels.

1. Primary prevention is aimed at the general population to promote positive outcomes.
2. Secondary prevention focuses on diverting individuals identified as being at risk of offending.
3. Tertiary preventions focus on reducing reoffending by individuals who have already committed crime.

Sports participation in local clubs or school settings that were not specifically designed to prevent offending were not included in the review.

The review included 24 primary studies. Of these 24 studies, nine were conducted in the UK, three in the USA, and two each in Australia and Israel. The remaining studies were conducted in Brazil,

the Netherlands, Italy, France, Uruguay, and Germany – with two studies rated twice as they applied different procedures for crime and non-crime related outcomes.

Of the 24 included studies:

- 12 focused on tertiary prevention (reducing reoffending)
- seven focused on secondary (diversion)
- five focused on primary prevention (general population)

A meta-analytic review was conducted using 13 of the 24 studies. Of these 13 studies, 10 discussed crime-related outcomes, including six studies from Europe and four from countries outside Europe.

## Effect – how effective is it?

Overall, the evidence suggests that sports programmes can reduce crime and reoffending.

The crime outcomes covered by the review were reconviction and re-arrest rates, as well as self-reported behaviour and attitudes connected to crime. Psychological outcomes were also measured. These included self-esteem, stress and depression.

The meta-analysis found that sports programmes:

- led to a reduction in reoffending, drug use and aggressiveness
- improved attitudes towards offending and anger control when compared to individuals who did not take part in the intervention

Overall, the meta-analysis found that 14% of participants in sports programmes showed more positive outcomes and less reconviction than those in the control group. A positive effect was also found on psychological outcomes. Of those who participated in sports programmes, 31% more people reported improved psychological wellbeing compared to those in the control group.

## How strong is the evidence?

The review was sufficiently systematic that most forms of bias that could influence the study conclusions can be ruled out.

The evidence is taken from a systematic review covering 24 studies. The review demonstrated a high-quality design in terms of a transparent and well-designed search strategy, consideration of risk of bias and attention to the validity of outcome constructs.

However, the review authors acknowledged several areas where there were risks of bias within the primary studies. These included the self-reporting of behaviour and psychological factors, and some studies missing data due to attrition and dropouts.

The review authors also noted that the small number of studies included in the meta-analysis may have influenced the results of the review.

The review also did not sufficiently consider the influence of statistical outliers. The review also did not assess the influence of unanticipated outcomes on the effect size.

## **Mechanism – how does it work?**

Sports programmes were assumed by the review authors to reduce crime because sport can:

- be a protective factor against criminal development, or influence other protective factors against criminal development
- have a positive impact on hormones, which can in turn reduce aggression
- be a physical diversion from crime
- satisfy sensation-seeking tendencies
- provide social learning and good role models in the form of coaches

Although the review authors presented the various mechanisms possibly underpinning the preventive impact of sports programmes, the meta-analysis was not able to successfully test these mechanisms.

## **Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?**

When it came to crime related outcomes, no moderator effects were found for:

- study characteristics
- participant age or sex

- type of sports
- type of prevention (primary, secondary or tertiary)
- programme setting (prison, school or community)

The meta-analysis found a statistically significant effect for age on psychological outcomes, with older participants in sports programmes showing larger effects than younger participants.

No other significant moderator effects were found. However, the review authors noted that the moderators used in the meta-analysis were aggregated to generate broader categories. This was due to the small number of studies eligible for the meta-analysis.

## Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

The review described sports programmes being implemented in a variety of ways. These included:

- being aimed at a primary, secondary, or tertiary level of prevention – most sports programmes included in the review focused on tertiary prevention
- being set in prisons, schools or communities
- different types of sport (team or individual-based)
- varying emphasis on competition or winning
- role of the coach

The systematic review did not discuss implementation challenges.

## Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

The systematic review did not mention costs associated with implementing sports programmes. No formal economic analysis was provided.

## General considerations

- The primary studies included in this systematic review come from a variety of countries.
- The primary study samples were either all-male or mixed, with no programme designed for women only.

## Summary

The meta-analysis conducted within this systematic review found that sports programmes significantly protect against criminal behaviour and related attitudes. The review found that sports programs can prevent crime and reduce reoffending.

The review also found that sports programmes had a significant effect on psychological outcomes, such as an improvement in self-esteem and mental wellbeing.

A number of mechanisms were discussed for sport programmes, including sport acting as a protective factor or influencing other protective factors.

Older participants had larger positive effects for psychological outcomes than younger participants.

Further studies are needed to conduct additional moderator analysis, examine implementation challenges and understand economic cost benefits.

## Additional resources

Jugl I, Bender D and Lösel F. (2021). [Do sports programmes prevent crime and reduce reoffending? A systematic review and meta-analysis on the effectiveness of sports programmes.](#) Journal of Quantitative Criminology, 1-52.

[Return to the toolkit](#)

## Tags

- [Crime reduction](#)