

Original Research

Have your Game Plan': Sport Program Implementation in Juvenile Justice

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ABSTRACT

Sport has the potential to play a valuable role within justice systems where the influences of institutionalized inequities are witnessed on a concentrated scale. Despite potential benefits, there has been found to be limited and varied access to sport programming across youth justice systems, and gaps exist in our understanding of how programs are implemented, including the factors that affect implementation in secure settings. Utilizing a theoretical framework from implementation sciences, this study identified important characteristics of implementation among a sample of exemplar sport programs in juvenile facilities. Findings highlight the value of using an ecological approach to understanding sport program implementation in a unique and non-traditional setting, such as the correctional system. Further, our findings reveal promising practices for the implementation of sport in juvenile justice to promote positive youth development and wellbeing and have implications for efforts to address inequitable access to sport and its related benefits among youth who are incarcerated.

INTRODUCTION

Within the Sport for Development (SfD) literature, sport has been recognized for its ability to serve as a vehicle in achieving non-sport developmental goals (Schulenkorf et al., 2016), re-engage young people who have disconnected from formal institutions (Sandford et al., 2008), and support healing among youth who have experienced trauma (Massey & Whitley, 2018). Further, sport participation can help build cross-cultural appreciation (LeCrom & Dwyer, 2013) and promote positive youth development benefits (Holt et al.,

2017). Recognizing these qualities, sport has the potential to play a valuable role within justice systems where the influences of institutionalized inequities are witnessed on a concentrated scale.

Although there has been a significant and relatively consistent decline in the number of youth who are incarcerated in the United States (U.S.) over the past twenty years (Hockenberry, 2024), the U.S. continues to detain more young people than any other country in the world with approximately 113,000 detention admissions (Puzzanchera et al., 2023a) and 27,600 commitments of youth to juvenile facilities annually (Hockenberry, 2024). The impact of these numbers are disproportionately felt by communities who have experienced the ongoing effects of structural racism and colonization (Rucker & Richeson, 2022), including Native American youth who are 3.7 times more likely to be detained or committed to a juvenile facility than their White counterparts (Puzzanchera et al., 2023b) and Black youth who are 2.3 times more likely to be arrested than their White peers and 63% more likely to be committed to a facility than White youth (Rovner, 2024). Furthermore, justice-involved youth have been found to come from communities with more limited educational and economic opportunities (Baglivio et al., 2014; Shader, 2015), report higher rates of traumatic experiences (Abram et al., 2004), and have unmet health needs when entering facilities (Braverman & Murray, 2011).

Compounding these existing inequities, justice systems have been found to perpetuate poor social, health, and economic outcomes among young people returning to communities (Desai, 2019). This includes higher rates of homelessness, school failure, and recidivism (Terry & Abrams, 2017), and

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decreased health status (Barnert et al., 2017) and employment (Aizer & Doyle, 2015). This realization of institutional inequities both contribute to youths' involvement in the justice system and place them at greater risk to vulnerabilities generated through justice-involvement. Acknowledging these challenges and opportunities, there is continued consideration for the thoughtful role that sport and physical activity could play with young people alongside other social and systemic interventions for equity-deserving communities (McDonough & Knight, 2024).

Dependent on a number of key contextual and programmatic factors, the benefits of sport participation for young people have been well-established in the literature, including broad social and health benefits (Holt et al., 2017; Pharr & Lough, 2016). Explicitly focused on the justice system, a growing body of literature underscores the efficacy of sport programming for young people in justice settings including benefits to their overall health (Brusseau et al., 2019), well-being (Woods et al., 2020), development (McDonough & Knight, 2024), and community reentry (Meek, 2014). Despite these benefits, there continues to be limited and varied access to sport programming across youth justice systems (McDonough & Knight, 2023a; Lewis & Meek, 2013), and gaps in understanding how to best support and implement programs in secure juvenile settings.

METHODS

Context of Study

This study was part of a large, mixed methods project aimed to better understand the landscape of sport in juvenile justice facilities across the U.S. As little is known about sport in juvenile justice facilities in the U.S. context, our overarching research questions generally probed “who,” “what,” “where,” “why,” and “how” of sport program implementation nationally. In the initial stage of the project, we conducted a national survey that mapped the landscape of sport programs across the juvenile justice system in the U.S., documenting the *who*, *what* and *where* of program implementation (McDonough & Knight, 2023a). This first comprehensive and systematic assessment of sport programs in U.S. juvenile justice facilities found, among other things, that just over half (55.1%) of facilities in the U.S. were operating sport programs (McDonough & Knight, 2023a). Among those facilities that were not operating sport programming, 62% responded they were interested in implementing programming (McDonough & Knight, 2023a).

Considering the growing understanding of the valuable role of sport in youth justice (McDonough & Knight, 2024), the strong literature base of the broad health benefits of sport participation among youth (Holt et al., 2017), and decreased levels of physical activity (Brusseau et al., 2019) and poorer general health (Massoglia, 2008) among youth who are incarcerated; this variation in sport programming, including absence of programming, signals a gap between research and practice to promote health equity and a missed opportunity for program diffusion among physical activity programs in real-world settings (Cassar et al., 2019). Critical gaps remain in understanding how sport and physical activity programs are implemented in real-world settings, including rich descriptions of what affects implementation (Cassar et al., 2019).

Thus, in the second stage of our project, we used qualitative methods, namely key informant interviews, to explore two interrelated but uniquely independent sets of findings, including *why* facilities implement programs with an emphasis on the perceived benefits (McDonough & Knight, 2024) and the more logistical aspects of *how* programs operate in secure justice settings. This paper focuses on the “how” of program implementation by seeking to identify environmental characteristics and facility factors perceived to be important from the perspective of practitioners. Our purpose was to identify key elements of program implementation and disseminate promising practices for effective implementation of sport in juvenile justice facilities to promote positive youth development and wellbeing. In so doing, we seek to inform efforts to address inequitable access to sport and its related benefits among youth who are incarcerated.

Theoretical Framework

As this study represented the second stage of an explanatory, sequential mixed methods project, two theoretical frameworks were used to inform the research at its varying stages and are worth detailing for theoretical clarity. First, the initial survey was underpinned by Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory. PYD is a strengths-based theory of adolescent development, which maintains that positive relationships across different contexts and supportive environments will lead to healthy development among young people and allow them to contribute to their self, family, community, and society (Lerner et al., 2005). Although sport is often seen as a natural environment for promoting PYD, research has shown that programs must be intentionally designed with this goal in mind to realize the greatest benefits (Holt et al., 2017). For this reason, the national survey included a series of closed-ended questions related to the purpose of the sport program within facilities. Respondents were prompted to select among a list of

various purposes for operating a sport program that aligned with PYD constructs, such as “building character among players,” and “building connections between players and coaches,” (McDonough & Knight, 2023a).

As mentioned previously, the second stage of the project involved qualitative interviews to provide in-depth understanding of program implementation from the perspective of key informants at exemplar facilities. Given the focus on the more practical aspects of program implementation in this stage of the project, a theoretical framework from implementation sciences was needed. Durlak and DuPre (2008) constructed an Ecological Framework for Effective Implementation through a systematic review of factors affecting the implementation process of youth development and health promotion programs (see Appendix). The framework highlights that program implementation occurs in the real-world and thus is influenced and impacted by a variety of individual, organizational and community-level factors (Durlak & DuPre, 2008, p. 340). These factors can range from an organization’s own capacity to implement programming to the influence of community-level factors such as funding, politics and policy. Considering the sociopolitical environment surrounding juvenile facilities, it becomes especially important to acknowledge the historical and modern-day influence of punitive ideologies and policies towards juvenile rehabilitation which may impact sport programming implementation. Therefore, the Durlak and DuPre (2008) framework offers a useful lens for exploring sport program implementation in the context of the juvenile justice system, and informed data collection and analysis, as outlined below.

Study Design

This study utilized key informant interviews to build knowledge on sport program implementation in a sample of exemplar juvenile facilities. The study was guided by the research question: *how* are sport programs being implemented in long-term, secure juvenile correctional facilities in the U.S? Qualitative methods were well-positioned to document the nuances of the environment and process of implementation (Hamilton & Finley, 2019), which is particularly relevant for the youth justice setting where it is critical to recognize the larger ecological environment in which the sport program is housed and influenced (Coakley, 2011) and be able to promote a deep understanding of a program within its natural setting (Patton, 2015).

Data Collection and Analysis

The study sample consisted of fifteen key informants from exemplar facilities identified through responses to the national survey. Concept sampling was used to identify cases which serve as rich examples of the construct of study (Patton, 2015). Exemplar cases in concept sampling were defined as those that identified a purpose of PYD in their sport program. More specifically, the national survey asked respondents about their purpose for having a sport program in their facility and exemplar cases were those that identified at least four of six PYD constructs in response to this question (McDonough & Knight, 2023a).

Key informants were individuals who held administrative and/or recreation positions within the exemplar facility and/or the state’s division that oversaw the facility. These individuals held positions such as Division or Facility Director, Superintendent, Recreation Specialist and Athletic Director. Thus, key informants had specialized knowledge of program implementation across various levels of the sport program, facility, and division. The facilities from where key informants were drawn were all long-term, secure juvenile correctional facilities, which was classified as facilities where youth were committed for four months or more and the institution was either staff or hardware secured.

An interview guide for the semi-structured interviews was designed to broadly explore the factors of implementation deemed necessary for effective sport program implementation with young people in the justice setting. The creation of the guide was informed by contextual factors from Durlak and DuPre’s (2008) Ecological Framework for Understanding Effective Implementation. Emphasizing the importance of a multilevel ecological perspective in understanding successful implementation, Durlak and DuPre (2008) identified five categories including: I. Community Level Factors; II. Provider Characteristics; III. Characteristics of the Innovation, IV. Factors Relevant to the Prevention Delivery System (organizational capacity), and V. Factors Related to the Prevention Support System. A flexible interview guide was constructed to probe these five categories, but also supported respondents in identifying additional factors that may be unique to the juvenile justice environment and sport program. Examples of interview questions include: How did the sport program come to be at your facility? (Probe: Why did your facility want a sport program? Who was involved in that decision?); What has the experience been like of implementing the sport program within a secure facility? (Probe: Success? Barriers? Adaptations?); What has supported the implementation of the program? What has

made implementation challenging? (Probe: Organizational Culture, Policy, Funding?); Are there written policies/procedures for the sport program at the facility? Interviews were conducted between December 2020 and January 2021 and took place over the university's secured Zoom Conference software. Interviews were recorded via Zoom software and transcribed manually by the lead author for analysis.

In addition to informing the construction of the interview guide, the Durlak and DuPre Framework served as an analytical tool for coding and helped to interpret findings. Initially, deductive coding helped to organize the data by the categories identified through the framework, and then inductive coding supported identification of patterns and themes related to supportive factors for sport program implementation (Patton, 2015). Towards the conclusion of analysis, the framework was revisited, and appropriate connections were made to the five categories. The lead author coded all of the interviews. Several strategies were used to promote the trustworthiness and quality of the analysis, including constant comparison, searching for alternative explanations and negative cases, and a detailed record of steps in the construction and revisions to the codebook in the form of an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). Further, the lead author maintained detailed memos and met regularly during the analysis phase with the co-author for peer debriefing as a way to further enhance credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 12.6.0, was used to organize and help facilitate the analysis. The study was reviewed and approved by the University's Institutional Review Board #1686725-1.

RESULTS

The following themes were highlighted by respondents as program elements which facilitated sport program implementation within a sample of secure, juvenile correctional facilities. The overwhelming majority of program elements identified by the sample were factors at the facility-level, specifically factors associated with 'organizational capacity' (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). This included a program champion, leadership and administrative support, a facility philosophy of innovation and culture of problem-solving, staff as coaches, strategic planning, adapting the sport program for a better fit within the justice system, and partnerships. The organization of these themes at the facility-level was informed by the Durlak and DuPre Framework, but revisions were needed to be relevant to the juvenile justice setting, which will be elaborated upon in the discussion section. Notably absent from the findings was the role of policy, a community-level

factor, in facilitating implementation. Resulting themes are presented below with heavy reliance on direct quotations from key informants to highlight their perception of the most relevant factors associated with effective implementation.

Program Champion: "You need a champion."

The majority of respondents discussed that having a program champion, or internal advocate, was critical to their sport program implementation. They talked about the role of the program champion as a central person to handle logistics of the program and identify and overcome barriers, build relationships with other staff to garner buy-in for the program, and, in a few cases, champions contributed to the original adoption of the program. These individuals were often described as being passionate about sport and its potential benefits for young people. One respondent stated:

Look at a guy like [Mr. E]...he hits the door everyday trying to figure out 'okay how are we going to get this, how am I going to do this.' Whereas everybody else is hitting the door thinking about other things. So phys. ed. [physical education] is number one on that person's agenda every day and that's the difference... And that's where I think a lot of the sports stuff that we have done it's faded as the champion left... Whereas if you have a guy like [Mr. E], who is hitting the door every day, he is able to scramble the resources and make sure that 'no, no we are going to make this happen.' It's like the little engine that goes up the hill that can, you need that person that is going to do that... You need a champion. (#9)

Underlying this sentiment is the recognition that implementing the program is a large undertaking, and there are barriers especially related to other competing treatment programs in the facility. Thus, respondents shared that it was important to have someone that coordinates all the pieces. In addition to managing the program, key informants frequently shared that this person needs to build relationships with staff and youth to execute their job successfully. One respondent, who was a program champion at their facility, described this dynamic:

So in the beginning I would spend hours on my first day of the week, I would come in and create a schedule...whenever I saw any type of gap in any type of programming, I would create a schedule like 'here are some recommended things that you could do for this timeframe'... And I would go to the units, post that very centrally for both youth and staff to see. And I'm only on one floor at a time, there is only one of me. So when I'm on the floor that stuff's happening, and then I would go to the other floors and nothing was

happening so the obstacle again was buy-in. Creating the relationships with staff, having them understand how important that it actually is that this stuff happens. And that takes time. (#11)

Many of these program champions were also described as people who had a passion for sport and believed in its benefits for young people, and this passion became contagious. One respondent explained:

I think that you have to have that passion... we can talk about all of the success that we've had in [Western Region State A], but you have to be able, you have to create and you have to invest to create that level of passion...that's really the secret sauce in this thing is being passionate...you have to put in your own passion and desires and that's when the real magic happens... the component that you're going to have to add to whatever we share is just that passion, drive, and personality that you put to it for it to be successful. (#12d)

In a few cases, the program champion was the individual that contributed to the original adoption of the sport program at the facility. Respondents described how either themselves or another individual brought the idea of starting a sport program to the administration, created a plan for implementation, and were resilient in making the plan come to fruition. One interviewee described:

I'm the recreation and athletic director here, and I've been working here for 27 years (laughs) and before that I was an athlete, and thus my reason for wanting to start a program like this for kids here at [Northeast Region Facility A]. So I pitched my idea to the administration and they were like 'nope, no way, these kids are going to be put on display' and they just couldn't fathom doing it. And I'm like 'well that's not going to stop me.' I went to the main principals' association, which is the organization that sanctions all of our sport programs in [Northeast Region State A]. I went to them and I said 'What do I have to do to be a new athletic director?' And they explained it to me... and then I went back to the administration, and I told them 'I will do all the leg work, I will make it happen, you won't have to do anything and when it's done I will let you know. You can give me your answer then'...So there was a lot of people that were like 'nope we aren't going to do that' and I didn't give up because I knew it was important. Thank God I didn't. If it was that easy to give up on, it would never have happened. So it took me about 10 years to get the programs up and running because it took that long for the current administration back then to wrap their arms around it and say yes. (#2)

Many of these individuals discussed doing work outside of their job responsibilities and volunteering their time to get the program off the ground. One respondent (#10) reminisced:

...so at that time it was literally something I did and everybody did on the side. I mean I had a full caseload, everybody had a full-time job. We were allowed to do it but we were doing it on the side...we just threw together. I mean we like begged, steeled, and borrowed for uniforms and we refereed the games.

Leadership and Administration: “With everything, it starts with administration.”

The role of leadership and administration in supporting programs was discussed by respondents in a variety of ways. Respondents described the importance of leadership and administrators prioritizing and valuing the program. This prioritization came in the form of allocation of financial resources, staffing, and space in the schedule to run the program. In addition, administrators valuing the program not only contributed to better programming but also permeated to staff and helped garner more staff buy-in. One respondent (#3) stated, “Having our facility administrator, and our Deputy Chief and Chief see the value in that and really encourage programming is really what helps drive it and helps it feel safe as well as enjoyable.” Other respondents explained:

With everything, it starts with administration. You set the tone for your staff. Everything trickles down. If you are excited about it, if you have passion about it, if you support it, if you make sure you're there for those games and you're doing everything you can to set things up and plan and prepare and get your staff excited about things, that's key in my mind too. (#4)

What is really important is a strong indication from leadership that they believe in this program, that they support this program and if nothing else, be there so people can see you there and if you can interact better yet...But I think there has to be a strong indication of commitment and that it's not a whim or half-way effort, there has to be passion...So that's what I would say, strong commitment from the top. (#1)

Respondents further explained that it was important for administrators to have open communication with their staff, listen and work to address concerns around the sport program, and encourage everyone to get involved in the effort. Respondents shared how administrators can serve a vital role in not only supporting this open dialogue, but

modeling a problem-solving attitude, which is a concept closely aligned with facility philosophy discussed below. One respondent shared:

One thing that I saw that was really cool... I saw the program administrators being involved, meaning the guys that are in the front offices that have the interactions with the kids, they were there at the games, and they were helping with the safety and security piece and so it wasn't 'hey supervisors and staff you're on your own'; it was the whole facility is really focusing on this event and making sure it's safe for everyone. So I think everyone's got to be involved and everyone's got to be participating and working through, troubleshooting through those logistical things. (#12a)

Facility Philosophy: "You just have to try some things out."

The majority of respondents shared an overarching philosophy of learning and innovation at the facility, which was aligned with general organizational factors related to change, integration of new programming, and an overall treatment approach to programming with youth in the facility. Respondents described a culture of innovative thinking, problem-solving, and calculated risk-taking. They frequently referenced how they worked to identify 'creative' and 'bold' programming strategies to work with this population of young people and recognized the need to try different approaches when something was not working. Often this overarching philosophy was championed and reinforced by leadership and administration. One key informant shared:

I think seeing some of the issues that I was having in the building, I knew I had to do something different because obviously what I thought was gonna work wasn't the answer, and with any intervention I came up with it didn't fix the issues that I was trying to fix. I would say be open-minded because I think that's very important. Like I said, if anybody would have told me 10 years ago that this is where I would be I wouldn't have believed it myself, but just being open-minded and not feeling like as an administrator that you have all of the answers. Listen to your team, look around, see what other facilities are doing and I think you just have to try some things out. (#5)

This philosophy of innovation was matched with an attitude or culture of problem-solving and working to identify and overcome barriers. Respondents discussed how a collective effort helped to overcome barriers, avoid territorialism, and make sure that whatever needed to be done to make the program successful was done. One respondent shared:

There is always a few people who are shaking their head and worried because it is outside the norms of what we do or 'what about this and what about that?' with security or other issues. But that voice, that small group of voices, is far overwhelmed by the folks that want to do the problem-solving and know the value of this sort of participation. (#15)

Another respondent detailed this can-do attitude more specifically stating:

I think the problem is trying...don't find so many reasons not to do it, find the reasons, 'yeah we can do this, yeah we can do this, it's no problem!' and I think that's what is good about it and you just find the reasons 'yeah we can make this work...' (#14a)

In addition, respondents displayed an attitude of calculated risk-taking when it came to implementing new programming like the sport program. Multiple respondents expressed that you cannot allow fear to hold you back from providing programming and opportunities for young people. One respondent explained:

From my perspective and the perspective of a lot of the staff is that we shouldn't be afraid to do something because something bad might happen. I just feel like that's a hard way to live your life and a poor expectation that we are putting on youth. Every day we are coming here telling them we are trying to change their lives but we are not providing them with the best opportunities, with ample opportunities to show us what they can do, and to prove to themselves that they can do it as well. (#11)

Staff as Coaches: "It's coaching in a different way."

The overwhelming majority of key informants highlighted the important role of facility staff in day-to-day implementation of the sport program, especially serving as coaches. Utilizing staff in this manner increased capacity to offer the program, upheld safety measures, and helped to adapt and improve the staff-youth relationship. One respondent explained:

The way that we do it is we just do it with in-house staff just for confidentiality reasons and for safety and security, and for policy and procedures we need to have our own staff. As well as knowing these kids, having that trust with them, building that relationship and being able to work with them, and support them, and encourage them, but at the same time making sure that safety and security is followed and also kind of knowing some of those traumatic past histories so we are not triggering anything... (#4)

Several respondents noted that many of their staff had a background and passion in sports, and this ability to step into a coaching role came very naturally to them. One respondent shared:

And for the staff we obviously have some staff that really have that sports background, it's a passion for them, they love to coach they love to mentor, they love the sport, and it's really exciting for them to be part of that and it gives them something more to improve their morale as a staff member they look forward to these events... (#4)

Respondents were emphatic that staff who served as coaches built a strong rapport with their players and served as role models for the youth. They described that the interactions within the sport program facilitated a positive change in the staff-youth relationship and supported an evolution to establish greater trust and depth in the working relationship. Respondents likened a healthy staff-youth relationship to one that a good sport coach will have with their players, which can include encouragement, structure, and care. This change in the dynamics of the staff-youth relationship was enhanced by the training staff received in varying evidence-based practices (e.g., cognitive-behavioral therapy and dialectical behavior therapy) and information on trauma-informed programming. According to respondents, training provided staff with skills and new insights which provided them a “compass” for their work. One key informant (#12d) shared that having staff “in-tune and skilled enough to be able to have those conversations and recognize and see those things” empowered staff to have more meaningful work with youth in the sport program, which supported overall alignment with the facility’s mission. Another respondent explained:

... its coaching in a different way but being able to really show them that we don't just do sports for fun; that its purposeful and that everything we do is a part of the kids' treatment including running a basketball game. (#3)

Respondents even shared that this evidence-based training had helped their staff/coaches to change their own coaching techniques. One (#5) explained:

Coaches are gonna coach how they coach, but now that they have a better understanding of trauma and how that impacts the kids that we have, I see that they have been able to change some of their techniques, their style, and their way.

This re-training in evidence-informed practices and techniques seemed important, as some respondents described that a lot of their staff have athletic backgrounds,

so they have an innate buy-in to the program, but training supports them in helping to use the sport program for a treatment purpose versus an overly competitive focus.

Lastly, a few respondents emphasized the importance of thoughtfully selecting the “right” staff to be involved with the sport program. These individuals were described as people that the youth could look up to, who were positive, and who used the sport program to support youth development. One respondent (#10) said, “I wanted to start with the people. That’s my point. The people are imperative. Choosing the right people, having the right people...” Another respondent (#2) stated, “You have to have the right coaches and the right people heading the program. The kids have to respect and get along with the people in the program...having the right adults in the positions are key.”

Strategic Planning: “Have your game plan.”

The majority of respondents described the importance of strategic planning, as well as developing specific practices and processes needed for program implementation. This included a clear articulation of procedures, and identification of tasks and decisions needed to accommodate the sport program. Included in general logistics and procedures, respondents specified that the plan should include things like the student-to-staff ratio, clearly defined protocols, and any emergency actions should something happen. One respondent (#2) stated, “I think the most important things is to have your game plan on everything you want to do all upfront with all scenarios taken care of.” Another respondent further detailed:

I think you've got to have a plan. You've really got to, whether it's the administrative team or whoever, you have to figure out...The most important thing we can do for these kids is make them feel safe so they can flourish, and they can risk and have that opportunity to stretch and grow. That can't be done without a certain amount of planning, so it's not just shooting from the hip like, 'hey let's go play this team or let's do that.'...In my mind, those things are kind of pre-planned in advance and again you are being thoughtful, deliberate. (#4)

The majority of respondents outlined specific procedures that they undertook to ensure successful implementation, which often centered around ensuring safety and security and adapting what was going on in the building to accommodate the sport program. Many of these logistics were put into place through a process of strategic planning, which was done to address challenges unique to the correctional setting. Several respondents shared that they

established committees that worked within their facility, and at times coordinated with other facilities. These committees were tasked with several responsibilities including: selecting their head and assistant coaches, restructuring the coaches work schedules to allow them time to work with the players, evaluating each player that was on the team to identify any additional security needs or supports, and ensuring that they would not be competing against co-defendants. One respondent whose facility competed against other juvenile facilities described:

[We had] monthly meetings that included a supervisor from [Western Region Facility A], and then you had one of the coach or a staff member with that supervisor, and then each facility replicated that same thing, and then on a monthly basis they would get together and they would have the discussions about: 'Okay what are we seeing? What's going well? What are areas do we need to tighten up going into the next sport? What adjustments do we need to make?' There was that logistical meeting on a monthly basis. (#12d)

Further demonstrating the importance of ongoing planning, key informants shared that they often had shift de-briefings or meetings after sporting events to learn and grow from the experience. One individual shared:

Every time we did a sporting event we would come together as a team afterwards and process it. What were the strengths? What were the weaknesses? What can we do better? What did we like that we can maximize on? Let's talk about that. And we would let the kids be a part of that too. We would have the coaches be a part of that. (#4)

The procedures that respondents discussed were almost always related to the context of implementing the sport program inside of a secure facility, and thus these efforts were focused on maintaining safety and security. One respondent (#14b) described this relationship:

We should never say we are not going to do something because of safety and security. We should be looking at developing a strategic plan on how we are going to address the safety and security issues for a particular unit

Several respondents expressed this message that despite being in a secure facility, it did not impede their ability to offer the sport program. Rather, they addressed that challenge by thoughtfully setting up the program. One respondent emphatically asserted:

The one thing that I would just say, underline, circle it, put it in bold, italicize it, is the whole idea that you can't do this

because it's not safe, because of the bats and that kind of stuff, is just BS, it's just BS. And [you] should never not do it because of that, because if you can't do it because of that you aren't doing it right...I would just say, it's all about how you set it up... and you want it to feel like a fun sports event like it was your kid going to a fun sports event. People should really, really do this. (#8)

Within the context of the juvenile facility, respondents also shared the importance of developing strategies to ensure the coordination of the sport program with other facility programming. This was expressed as a very important, and sometimes challenging endeavor, as the facilities run a very tight schedule with school and other treatment programming. One respondent (#3) shared just how important this logistical consideration was in not only executing the program but in sending a positive message to youth:

So we don't have other programming that conflicts with that so there isn't anything else that the kids would get pulled from, because we know that that's important to them and it's just as important for their treatment as anything else is.

Adapting Traditional Sport for a Better Fit: “The sport part is 10%, and the sportsmanship, and the comradery, and the teamwork, and the learning skills is 90%.”

In describing the sport program, the majority of key informants shared how they adapted various components of traditional sport programs to fit their population and their needs. The interpretation of adaptation was kept quite broad and included adapting the philosophy of the sport program to one that valued youth development over competition, changing structures in the sport program as a result of this philosophy, activities to “prep” youth for participation in the sport program especially when competition was involved, and concrete changes to the sport structure to help accommodate challenges their youth population faced. In addition, key informants discussed how they explicitly incorporated treatment principles into the sport program.

According to respondents, they intentionally worked to integrate a youth development philosophy in their sport programs, which they described as a better fit for their purpose, compared to their counterparts in mainstream high schools, for instance, whose programs likely emphasize a more competitive model. This youth development philosophy in the sport program mirrored the youth development approach of the facility. One respondent stated:

For me, it's the same thing as the tenth kid on your bench in basketball in 3rd grade. You want to teach him, and you want him to be part of the process, get the physical benefit of participating in a sport, get the social benefit of participating in the sport... So I think the juvenile justice phys. ed. sports thing is probably more akin to youth sports than it is to high school sports. (#9)

This youth development approach was often discussed with an emphasis on sportsmanship and helping youth to develop positive social skills. One respondent (#8) shared, “I know for [Coach A]... the sport part is 10%, and the sportsmanship, and the comradery, and the teamwork, and the learning skills is 90%. It's really about sports as kind of symbol of life.” This value on sportsmanship translated into specific structures and actions that were integrated into the sport program. A few respondents shared how they would have a ‘sportsmanship talk’ before every competition. One interviewee described:

So during the basketball season, for example, after they are done warming up I go out to the center of the court and I bring out both teams, all the coaches, the scorekeepers, everyone, and we have a little talk... It's just a reminder of like ‘we are not going to use foul language, we are not going to disrespect the referees, we are not going to disrespect each other, our coaches, we are going to be respectful and we are going to have fun, because this is about fun.’ (#10)

This emphasis on sportsmanship even adapted how some facilities celebrated their players. One respondent explained this relationship:

So what's the ultimate goal here? The ultimate goal that we felt like was be competitive, compete, do all those things that are natural and healthy, but at the end of the day we decided [to give] a sportsmanship trophy to the winner of the tournament. Not necessarily the team with the best record... As a coaching staff from all of the facilities, we would vote on a sportsmanship winner and if it happened to be the team with the best record then so be it and if it happened to be the team with the worst record then so be it. (#13)

Focusing on youth behaviors more specifically, respondents shared how they prepared young people to participate in the sport program. This preparation took on a range of casual to more formal activities that were focused on supporting young peoples’ success and safety during the sporting event. Informal activities involved conversations with players about what might go on at practice and in games and coaching them on how they could productively respond. One key informant shared:

We have adapted in ways like the daily communication with the players to make sure that they are mentally prepared for whatever they might see, whatever might happen to them. So that's an adaptation that we have to have, that other people wouldn't consider. Like we have to run through scenarios with these kids and tell them you are going to have somebody who is going to try and make you angry, they are going to say stuff on the field just to bait you because you are from [Northeast Region Facility A]. What are you going to do? What's your plan? And that's what we have to do every day for every season which is not a bad thing, its good practice for them. (#2)

In a more formal manner, respondents utilized staff specialized in conflict resolution to help young people work out their differences, or at least come to an agreement of non-violence, before their participation. One respondent explained:

On the front end of that, there was a lot of work that was done with conflict resolution... some of our youth have some issues with other youth inside of our system. We had to develop a process where we would outline if a youth had a conflict with another youth that was severe enough...one, would we even allow those youth to come together, and two, if we did allow that, what work were we going to do ahead of time to make sure they were prepared to be there? So our Conflict Resolution Coordinator, who is a very big part of this program that we run, she would do some mediations. So, we would get youth a and youth b in, say, ‘You guys have a pretty substantial issue. Are you willing to talk and basically commit to no problems while you participate in this event?’ And 99% of the youth choose to do that... So the front end of these tournaments that's a really big part of it, outlining what youth from what teams and what issues could occur when we bring these youth together.... And I think the work ahead of time is really key. (#13)

Several respondents explained that they also created a Code of Conduct that they required their players to sign before participating in the sport program. The Code of Conduct was described as a behavioral contract which clearly laid out expectations for appropriate behavior and consequences if the contract was not upheld.

Facilitating Partnerships: “We have developed some pretty good relationships.”

Finally, although staff were described as the core of most programs, the majority of respondents shared how capacity to run the program was enhanced through collaborations and partnerships they established with outside organizations. These partnerships included formal and

informal agreements with sport-based youth development organizations, youth programs, volunteers from the community, police departments, professional sport teams, university athletic programs, and neighboring high school teams. The utility and benefits of these partnerships were discussed in varying ways including additional funding, mentorship for youth, curriculum-development, as well as filling unmet needs of the sport program in the facility such as volunteer coaches and referees. In highlighting several of these roles, one respondent shared the multi-purpose partnership they developed with a group of volunteers on an ultimate frisbee team:

For my ultimate team, all of my coaches are volunteers, and they are unbelievable. They are passionate about their sport and passionate about helping others, so that was like a natural fit... They have a whole community of people in the ultimate world and they spread the word and we've had some tournaments where people pay to play and they come to [Northeast Region Facility A] and pay \$5 to play in this tournament, and so we will get money so we can boost the budget up. So if we need tournament fees, if we went out and joined a tournament, it would pay those fees and pay for all that. (#2)

Another respondent shared how they used a partnership with university women's sport teams to address the challenges of operating a sport program with the low number of young women in the facility, stating:

With having 50 girls there, obviously the numbers are low in regards to athletic tournaments, and so...we have developed some pretty good relationships with some of the local colleges. Before the pandemic [Western Region University A's] women's basketball team came into [Western Region Facility B] to run a clinic. I've had [Western Region University B's] soccer team go in and do clinics... So athletically speaking, we try and supplement the tournaments that the guys have access to with more of these clinics that we bring in outside sources for. (#13)

DISCUSSION

The Durlak and DuPre (2008) Framework served as a helpful guide for the study, specifically the utility of the ecological model which facilitated our understanding of implementation of sport programs within the larger juvenile facility and correctional system. Findings of the study support the use of a multi-level ecological approach to studying implementation and reinforced several of the constructs in the framework, specifically factors associated with 'organizational capacity' (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). The discussion will focus on the findings situated within the

relevant cross-disciplinary literature and draw connections to the Durlak & DuPre Framework where appropriate.

Findings revealed an emphasis on organizational capacity within facilities to operate sport programming which is consistent with the existing implementation literature highlighting the integral role of an organization's capacity in program implementation (Cassar et al., 2019). Prior literature deconstructs the connection between organizational capacity and program implementation in that a strong organizational culture facilitates a number of valuable organizational factors (e.g., shared vision/philosophy, adaptability), practices and processes (e.g., strategic planning, facilitating partnerships), and staffing (e.g., program champion, leadership), which galvanize implementation (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Notably absent from our data was the mention of the role of policy in implementation, which is likely due to the lack of policy in this area, so key informants had no context for discussing it. Along with inadequate diffusion of evaluation research and advocacy for physical activity programs (Owen et al., 2006), there continues to be limited policy on recreation, physical activity and sport in the justice system at both the federal and state-level (Léon et al. 2020). The absence of the role of policy in implementation, coupled with the lack of policy to promote sports programs in juvenile justice, may highlight a missed opportunity in the potentially important role policy can play in effective and equitable implementation. This is especially important when considering the contribution policy has been found to play in institutionalizing new procedures and practices and supporting both administrative and financial infrastructure in implementation (Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

The importance key informants placed on both strategic and operational planning is also consistent with implementation literature (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Naylor et al., 2015). Morrison and Misener (2021) explored strategic planning by community sport organizations and found it was used by organizations to navigate complex pressures, resources and establish action plans to meet goals and mandates. The strategic planning process was found to be influenced by environmental factors as well as the existing organizational capacity (Morrison & Misener, 2021). Aligning these findings with those from the existing study, it further underscores the importance of supporting facilities with knowledge, tools, and resources to execute strategic planning processes for their own sport program implementation (McDonough & Knight, 2023b).

A recent case study on sport program implementation in a juvenile justice facility identified the usefulness of logic models to facilitate planning and implementation

(McDonough & Knight, 2023b). Logic models are tools that result in a relatively comprehensive picture of a program, including resources needed, planned activities, and intended outcomes, as well as any underlying assumptions and potential challenges (McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999). The process of creating a logic model can help build consensus and buy-in about important elements of the program from staff and encourage the review of best practices for implementation (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004). Given the need to adapt traditional sport programs for the population and setting of juvenile justice facilities, logic models may be particularly useful for helping practitioners identify those attributes specific to a correctional facility that may need to be adapted for effective implementation (McDonough & Knight, 2023b).

Our findings related to program champions, leadership support, and staff as coaches also align closely with category IV of the Durlak and DuPre (2008) framework: Factors Relevant to the Prevention Delivery System (organizational capacity). The framework specifically identifies "Specific Staffing Considerations" including leadership and program champions (see Appendix). These findings are also consistent with research on sport and physical activity program implementation in other settings. For instance, in one study utilizing a panel of experts on factors of implementation of physical activity programs in youth-serving settings, Lau and colleagues (2016) also identified the importance of program champions, engaging staff in implementation, and leadership motivation and engagement. Within SfD literature more specifically, Brake and Misener (2020) found the importance of 'champions of youth development' within an inner-city Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) soccer program. These 'champions' were described as going above and beyond their role, having a trusting relationship with young people to support program engagement, a passion for the role of sport in youth development, and helped to contribute to the program's overall 'ripple effect,' or the program's ability to permeate to wider social circles and arenas (Brake & Misener, 2020). Within our study, program champions as well as sport program staff were found to play a similar role in facilitating implementation as well as working to structure the sport program with a focus on youth development. Considering the nature of these staff-youth interactions, and the reported use of sport participation to practice treatment and life skills, these facets could contribute to a 'ripple effect' in regards to youth development and outcomes with implications for larger social arenas but additional research is needed to explore this connection.

Within juvenile justice literature more specifically, the role

of staff as sport coaches is of particular importance when considering the significant role of staff in the treatment process (Taxman et al., 2014). Respondents shared that staff's involvement in the program changed the relationship between staff and youth from one built on directives to one grounded in mentorship and youth development. This could potentially have an impact on the overarching philosophy of treatment at the facility and continue to encourage a movement towards youth development rather than retribution and punishment within the justice system. Future research should explore the role of staff in the implementation of sport programs within juvenile justice settings to more closely evaluate the staff-youth relationship and implications for youth development and juvenile justice reform.

Lastly, adapting the sport program to fit the youth population and setting was highlighted as critical to implementation, and without such adaptations, it may restrict program feasibility. Similar insights were reported among a sport-based life skills program with youth who are incarcerated, which noted that refining and adjusting content delivery was integral (Jacobs et al., 2022). Recognizing that implementation occurs in the real-world supports the opinion that some level of adaptation is necessary (Ringwalt, 2003). Furthermore, acknowledging the unique expertise of practitioners, adaptations to fit the organization and population's needs could help support improvements in implementation and potential effectiveness (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). More research is needed on what aspects of implementation are required for fidelity in sport programs, which could be adapted to fit organizational needs, and the role of practitioners in decisions to adapt.

Limitations

Although we worked to design a rigorous study, there are a few limitations that need to be considered. First, a weakness of qualitative interviews includes a reliance on respondents' ability to accurately recall pertinent information (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Second, due to pandemic restrictions the study was limited to virtual interviews in which key informants described their sport program implementation and what helped to support effectiveness. More research is needed, including multiple methods (i.e. observation) and sources (i.e. youth voice), to identify outcomes and establish a connection between organizational factors and effective implementation of sport programs in the juvenile justice system.

Conclusion

When structured in a positive manner, sport has been found

to have implications for youth development (Holt et al., 2017) and in achieving non-sport development outcomes (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). Yet, there continues to be limited and varied access to sport across youth justice systems (McDonough & Knight, 2023a), and considerable gaps in implementation literature specific to sport programming in secure settings. Considering the increased interest of facilities in operating sport programming, our study's findings have implications for supporting implementation with a focus on youth development, particularly as the findings represent perceptions of practitioners directly engaged in this work. However, findings also highlight the absence of policy in supporting implementation, potentially signaling the need for policy development and revisions in order to support more equitable sport program implementation across youth justice systems. Future research should work to understand connections between organizational factors and effective implementation and would benefit from implementation frameworks which position the program within its larger environment, facilitating an understanding of both internal and external influences within the correctional setting. Paramount to this work is a deep and genuine recognition of the role of structural inequities that continue to perpetuate the disproportionate representation of youth of color in justice systems, and how this recognition can inform program implementation and support the adoption of larger social justice approaches.

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Appendix

Factors Affecting the Implementation Process

Factors Affecting the Implementation Process (Durlak & DuPre, 2008)

I. Community Level Factors

A. Prevention Theory and Research^c

B. Politics^{a,b}

C. Funding^{a,b,c}

D. Policy^{a,b}

II. Provider Characteristics

A. Perceived Need for Innovation^{b,c}

Extent to which the proposed innovation is relevant to local needs

B. Perceived Benefits of Innovation^b

Extent to which the innovation will achieve benefits desired at the local level

C. Self-efficacy

Extent to which providers feel they are will be able to do what is expected

D. Skill Proficiency^{a,b,c}

Possession of the skills necessary for implementation

III. Characteristics of the Innovation

A. Compatibility (contextual appropriateness, fit, congruence, match)^{b,c}

Extent to which the intervention fits with an organization's mission, priorities, and values.

B. Adaptability (program modification, reinvention)^b

The extent to which the proposed program can be modified to fit provider preferences, organizational practices, and community needs, values, and cultural norms

IV. Factors Relevant to the Prevention Delivery System: Organizational Capacity

A. General Organizational Factors

1. Positive Work Climate^{a,b,c}

Climate may be assessed by sampling employees' views about morale, trust, collegiality, and methods of resolving disagreements

2. Organizational norms regarding change (openness to change, innovativeness, risk-taking)^b

This refers to the collective reputation and norms held by an organization in relation to its willingness to try new approaches as opposed to maintaining the status quo

3. Integration of new programming^{b,c}

This refers to the extent to which an organization can incorporate an innovation into its existing practices and routines

4. Shared vision (shared mission, consensus, commitment, staff buy-in)^b

This refers to the extent to which organizational members are united regarding the value and purpose of the innovation

B. Specific Practices and Processes

1. Shared decision-making (local input, community participation or involvement, local ownership, collaboration)^{a,b,c}

The extent to which relevant parties (e.g., providers, administrators, researchers, and community members) collaborate in determining what will be implemented and how

2. Coordination with other agencies (partnerships, networking, intersector alliances, multidisciplinary linkages)^{a,b,c}

The extent to which there is cooperation and collaboration among local agencies that can bring different perspectives, skills, and resources to bear on program implementation

3. Communication^b

Effective mechanisms encouraging frequent and open communication

4. Formulation of tasks (workgroups, teams, formalization, internal functioning, effective human resource management)^{a,b,c}

Procedures that enhance strategic planning and contain clear roles and responsibilities relative to task accomplishments

C. Specific Staffing Considerations

1. Leadership^{a,b,c}

Leadership is important in many respects, for example, in terms of setting priorities, establishing consensus, offering incentives, and managing the overall process of implementation

2. Program champion (internal advocate)^{a,b,c}

An individual who is trusted and respected by staff and administrators, and who can rally and maintain support for the innovation, and negotiate solutions to problems that develop

3. Managerial/supervisory/administrative support^{a,b,c}

Extent to which top management and immediate supervisors clearly support and encourage providers during implementation

V. Factors Related to the Prevention Support System

A. Training^{a,b,c}

Approaches to insure provider proficiencies in the skills necessary to conduct the intervention and to enhance providers' sense of self-efficacy

B. Technical Assistance^{a, b, c}

This refers to the combination of resources offered to providers once implementation begins, and may include retraining in certain skills, training of new staff, emotional support, and mechanisms to promote local problem solving efforts

a. Factors also identified by Fixsen et al. (2005)

b. Factors also identified by Greenhalgh et al. (2005)

c. Factors also identified by Stith et al. (2006)

Note. A detailed listing of the studies supporting the importance of each factor is available from the first author on request