



POLICY BRIEF

Soccer, safety and science: why evidence is key

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Sports-based violence prevention programmes have broad appeal, including among police, policy makers and politicians. This policy brief presents a case study of the Eyethu Soccer League, a behavioural intervention that was carefully planned, implemented and evaluated – and yet did not achieve its aims. Findings caution against ‘easy wins’ and suggest that short-term skills-building programmes may struggle to solve structural challenges.

Key findings

- ▶ Eyethu was designed as a gender-tailored intervention targeting young men at risk for violence, HIV and the use of substances.
- ▶ Participants were either part of the Eyethu programme (confronting norms around conflict resolution, sexual risk and substance use), or a control arm for comparison that did not receive any intervention.
- ▶ After six months, researchers found few effects on participants' risk behaviour. Men who were part of the programme did not show a reduction in their use of alcohol, marijuana, or tik, although there was a very small reduction in mandrax use. There were no reported changes in perpetrating violence, HIV testing, risky sexual behaviours or mental health.
- ▶ At least 16 participants were murdered over the course of the study.
- ▶ Short-term gains observed during the programme disappeared after the December holidays when participants were likelier to enter risky situations.
- ▶ Even the best planned, well-resourced interventions may not work. Spending time, resources and expertise on this programme did not achieve its aims of preventing violence and reducing risky substance use and HIV risk behaviours among participants.
- ▶ Negative findings still offer important lessons. For example, social skills-based programmes are often unable to disrupt many of the factors that shape negative outcomes.
- ▶ Better tailoring programmes to target specific groups may be the best way to allocate limited resources.

Recommendations

- ▶ Resource-intensive social programmes should be informed by the best available evidence. They should be planned and implemented in ways that generate evidence.
- ▶ When designing and adapting programmes for at-risk groups, negative findings can assist with a 'process of elimination' – where shortcomings and challenges can be documented to explore why the programmes were not effective. These kinds of disappointing outcomes can reveal most about how to improve programmes.
- ▶ Social skills-based programmes are often unable to disrupt the factors that shape negative outcomes. However, structural interventions may be able to safeguard some of these programmes' positive impacts. For example, ensuring that public services such as policing are connected to social development and employment interventions may help deal with these challenges in a unified way.
- ▶ Implementing programmes like Eyethu with younger populations may lead to more promising results. However, this approach cannot be seen as a standalone solution.
- ▶ Place, community, and context are important. A programme that does not work in one area may work well in another. Identifying the reason for success or failure is crucial to building evidence for effective intervention and applying it where it is most needed.

Introduction

Community-based programmes intended to improve livelihoods and reduce violence have gained popularity in policy circles. They are of particular interest in South Africa, given the country's high rates of interpersonal and community violence, and include 'sport-for-development' programmes that aim to achieve human development goals (such as sustainable livelihoods, reduced violence, and enhanced health and wellbeing) through sport.

These programmes have been implemented widely and are often seen as acceptable, feasible, and suitable for communities in both urban and rural settings. Most have focused on children and adolescents. In many ways, they are seen as 'easy wins' – channelling strategies for empowering communities, fostering social cohesion, and creating opportunities for structured activities.

However, they are often resource-intensive and therefore should not be pursued simply because common sense suggests they will generate positive outcomes. Rather, they should be informed by the best available evidence, and planned and implemented in ways that generate relevant evidence for others.

Programmes using sport as a means to develop individual skills and improve livelihoods need further exploration. Such programmes are often delivered amidst deeply entrenched challenges that they may struggle, or fail, to address.¹ But evidence of failure is still important. It can help steer decisions about how best to allocate financial and human resources, and it can challenge conventional wisdom about how, where, or under which conditions such programmes work.

This policy brief presents a case study of the Eyethu Soccer League programme (known as Eyethu) in Cape Town, South Africa. Eyethu was a well-planned and well-resourced intervention implemented by a team with nearly 20 years of experience in successful evidence-based interventions, and yet it did not achieve its expected aims. It forms part of the ISS's efforts to promote literacy and awareness related to the use and generation of evidence in the promotion of public safety. Lessons gleaned from this brief are relevant to the

application of evidence in policing, violence prevention and other areas of social intervention.

Eyethu Soccer League

Developed and implemented beginning in 2016, Eyethu was designed as a gender-tailored intervention targeting young men at risk of violence, HIV and substance use.

Soccer was used to bring participating men together. Within the context of a competitive soccer league, Eyethu provided a platform to hold group-based discussions and confront norms concerning conflict resolution, sexual risk, and substance use. Discussions were framed around setting goals, identifying ways to solve problems, and drawing on peer support from the team members.

The Eyethu League recruited young men (18-29 years of age) who were, at the time, not engaged in employment, education or training, across neighbourhoods including Khayelitsha, Ndlovini, and Mfuleni, outside Cape Town.

These areas together have some of the highest crime levels in Cape Town and the world, recording over 3 500 murders between 2007 and 2016² and an estimated murder rate of between 81-140 murders per 100 000 residents in 2020.³ (The global average is six murders per 100 000.) Young unemployed men are often most at risk of both perpetrating and falling victim to violence.

In this context, Eyethu provided an opportunity for young men to connect to peer coaches trained to facilitate discussions about conflict, HIV and substance use. The coaches were continually supervised and supported by a senior project management team. As they were from similar backgrounds to participants, they helped share strategies and encouraged open dialogue from which team members could learn.

The expected outcome of this support was that participants would be better equipped to manage challenges in their personal lives, be supported and empowered to seek employment, and reduce their involvement in risky behaviours including violence and substance use.

The programme used a method based on cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), where negative thoughts, emotions, and actions are systematically targeted and positively re-framed. It also relied on contingency management, which includes the use of reward and reinforcement when positive change was achieved.

Consultations with young men with similar backgrounds to the target group and community-based stakeholders were held before and during the model's development. Key themes such as goal setting and non-violent communication were practised by participants between sessions and discussed afterwards. Additionally, incentives were offered to participants, such as cash vouchers for negative drug tests, which were administered at soccer practice. In this way, Eyethu provided opportunities for activation and sharing in a supportive space.

Evaluating the programme

Programmes such as Eyethu are time- and resource-intensive. It is therefore important to honestly explore whether they achieve their intended impact. Drawing on such evaluations, governments and service providers can increasingly do more of what is likely to work and less of what may fail.

A research team from the Institute for Life Course Health Research at Stellenbosch University and the University of California, Los Angeles led a formal evaluation of Eyethu from the outset, using a cluster randomised controlled trial (RCT).

Focusing resources and expertise on Eyethu didn't achieve the aims of preventing violence and reducing substance use and HIV risk behaviours

By comparing a group that received the programme against a similar group that did not, randomised trials are able to set up 'real world' test conditions and examine the effects of a programme as objectively as possible. RCTs are often considered the 'gold standard' for generating evidence due to their precision, relative to other evaluation methods. The evaluation sought to understand if, and to what degree, participating in Eyethu reduced risks related to perpetrating violence, use of substances (alcohol, dagga, tik and mandrax), and HIV.

Participants were grouped into teams by their neighbourhood of residence and divided to receive Eyethu, or be part of a 'control' or comparison arm that did not receive any intervention. In total, 1 200 young men were recruited for the study, with 800 given the option to engage in Eyethu. All participants completed standardised questionnaires with male, isiXhosa-speaking research staff before Eyethu began (a baseline survey) and six months later (follow-up survey). During each interview, participants were asked to consent to taking drug and HIV tests, which added to the data about the effect of the programme.⁴

Eyethu's impact was limited

After the six-month follow-up, few effects on participants' risk behaviour were found. Men who received the soccer programme did not show reductions in alcohol, marijuana, or tik use; they showed a very small reduction in mandrax

1 200

YOUNG MEN WERE
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use. There were no reported changes in violence perpetration, HIV testing, risky sexual behaviours, or mental health.⁵

The success of the programme was also tempered by certain events. For example, short-term gains observed during the programme's implementation disappeared following the December holidays, when participants were likelier to socialise and enter risky situations.

Findings from interviews with participants, their coaches, and families showed how slow the process of shifting certain norms and behaviours can be. Positive changes – to reduce violence perpetration, as well as substance use, and sexual risk-taking – did not always 'stick'⁶ despite new knowledge and repeated opportunities for practice.

Unfortunately, by the time of the final data collection point in 2019, the research team identified at least 16 men of the 1 200 enrolled in the study and across both intervention and control groups who had been murdered over the course of the programme.

Lessons from Eyethu

Evaluations allow for evidence to be generated, revealing what works and what doesn't. The evaluation of Eyethu was able to produce important findings regarding the value of sport-for-development programmes, and how social programmes should be designed and run. More importantly for the purposes of this brief, these findings demonstrate that even the best planned and most well-resourced interventions may not achieve what they intend.

In research and programme implementation, while we hope that our hypotheses are correct, it is important to look at the evidence that does not meet our expectations, too – even 'no evidence' is still evidence that is worth reviewing more closely. When we look at the lessons from Eyethu, it is clear that focusing time, resources, and expertise on this programme did not achieve the aims of preventing violence and reducing substance use and HIV risk behaviours among participating young men.

These outcomes raise important questions that need to be asked in responding to complex policy questions about community safety initiatives. While such focused interventions are usually assumed to

be helpful, it is critical for policy makers, researchers, community stakeholders, and community members themselves to look closely at the evidence that these evaluations produce. Programme leaders and policy makers need to be aware of the ways in which interventions might be shown to be problematic or less effective than anticipated.

What, then, can be learned from this case?

Negative findings can still produce important lessons

There is no 'magic bullet' for solving problems of community safety or motivating individuals to behave differently; social interventions need to respond to individual and environmental circumstances to maximise their effect. However, when programmes are designed and adapted for at-risk groups, these negative findings can assist with a 'process of elimination', where shortcomings and challenges can be documented to explore why the programme was not effective.

The research team identified at least 16 men enrolled in the study who had been murdered

Society tends to look for 'success stories,' but these kinds of disappointing outcomes can often reveal the most about how to improve programmes. Importantly, in many academic publications, positive outcomes are much more likely to be published than negative outcomes, and this imbalance creates an evidence base that skews towards positive findings.

Both support and social norms matter

While sport-for-development programmes may have some positive effects on individuals, these may be 'washed out' by the complicated life circumstances facing participants. Social, economic, and environmental constraints may pose challenges for young men who want to practise and internalise new skills.

Participants in Eyethu, for example, learned strategies for setting goals and resisting negative peer influences – but many could not avoid certain friends and family members involved in using substances

or engaging in criminal activities. This is clearest in the number of violent deaths of Eyethu participants.

While Eyethu may provide a new set of skills for participants to try out, the programme encountered an environment of factors that are difficult to manage or mitigate. Other social interventions run into these challenges, too, as they seek to change one piece of a puzzle without tackling related issues. Even well-implemented programmes can run into challenges with broader social norms. Social skills-based programmes are often unable to control or disrupt many of the factors that shape negative outcomes.

The findings demonstrate that even the best planned and most well-resourced interventions may not achieve what they intend

However, promisingly, there may be additional structural interventions that can help safeguard some of the positive impacts of these programmes. For example, ensuring that public services such as policing are connected to social development and employment interventions may be an important step in tackling these challenges with a unified approach.

Programmes must be tailored to target groups

Research shows how individual and environmental factors can compound the risks that individuals face over the course of their lives – a phenomenon called ‘cumulative risk’.⁷ When children experience multiple risks to their health, safety, and wellbeing over an extended period of time, their ability to protect themselves against these risks becomes increasingly difficult. For example, patterns of violence may stem from experience of or exposure to violence, and related norms become entrenched if not addressed appropriately.

One of the implications of cumulative risk is that it can be harder to step in and manage behaviours later in life. While these programmes are generally well received by participants of all ages, they may reach older participants at too late a stage to address foundational patterns of risk-taking and violence perpetration.⁸ Early childhood interventions are often promoted to improve later outcomes in children’s physical and mental health; this life stage may also be the most critical time to prevent later habits and behaviours related to violence.

However, this is not uniformly true, as participants with certain characteristics or additional supports may benefit more than others, even at an older age. For example, a closer look at attendance patterns and demographic characteristics for Eyethu participants revealed that young men who were single, had more years of schooling, and lived with their parents were likelier to engage with the programme consistently.⁹ But these differences were not ultimately found to have an impact on the final outcomes – revealing that there is more to the story that needs to be uncovered.



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While the evidence generated through the evaluation of Eyethu should not discourage initiatives targeting underserved or at-risk groups, it is important for policy makers to consider these data when thinking about how to promote cost-effective and impactful programming.

The process of research and evidence building for social programmes often involves replicating programmes in new settings or under new circumstances, to identify the reasons for success or failure. While implementing programmes such as Eyethu with younger populations may lead to more promising results, this approach needs to be considered alongside other strategies to promote community safety. It is important to remember that the effects of early intervention may not always be long-lasting.

We should be cautious of 'easy wins' and use evidence to inform decisions about public safety policy

Place, community, and context are all important; a programme that does not seem to work in one area may work well in another. Identifying the reason for a programme's success or failure is crucial to helping build evidence for effective intervention and applying it where it is most needed. This is also relevant to programmes that attempt to reshape public safety, including everyday policing activities, which may require better targeting of resources and activities, and more integration with social services in lieu of more general, 'common sense' enforcement activities.¹⁰

Conclusion

This brief presents a case study of the Eyethu Soccer League, a programme based on prior understanding of behaviour change strategies – and implemented by an experienced team with a great degree of resources and effort. Nonetheless, it did not achieve its aims. The evidence from this evaluation serves as a reminder that these kinds of programmes cannot operate in a silo and cannot be expected to solve long-standing challenges through the provision of short-term skills-building programmes.

Early intervention – focusing on the first 1 000 days of a child's life,¹¹ or implementing sport-for-development programmes with younger groups of children and adolescents¹² – may be most suitable for programmes seeking to target multiple risk factors.

However, these programmes should take care to be responsive to broader structural needs in the places in which they are implemented. More broadly, the Eyethu case also shows how we should be cautious of 'easy wins' and rely upon evidence to inform decision making around policy solutions for public safety.

Notes

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