

Developing a Rural Youth Sport Program: A Case Study of a Grassroots Baseball League

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Aim

This study's purpose is to examine the creation of a grassroots youth baseball league in the rural Southern United States to understand the facilitators and constraints to developing sustainable youth sport programs in rural communities.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Rural youth in the United States have higher risk of poorer health outcomes, including higher rates of obesity, substance use, and suicide (Edwards et al., 2011). Community-based youth sport may be a mechanism to promote physical, psychological, and social health benefits, and reduce health disparities (Eime et al., 2013). However, research suggests rural youth are less likely to have access to sport programs and the availability of programs is declining. Rural restructuring (the process by which economic and social changes have rapidly occurred) has led to out-migration and other changes within community structures (e.g., schools, faith communities, large employers) who traditionally sponsored and organized community sports (Oncescu, 2015; Tonts, 2005). Thus, rural communities have become more limited in human, social, and financial capital needed to sustain youth sport programs (Edwards et al., 2014). The decline of youth sports is additionally problematic in rural areas, as they are critical sources of social capital, local identity, and capacity building (Edwards, 2015; Tonts, 2005). Some rural communities have identified the need to address a lack of sport programs. Edwards et al. (2014) suggested using trusted local residents to lead initiatives, along with leveraging informal networks, cross-sectoral partnerships, and technical assistance from relevant agencies are essential characteristics for rural communities to sustain youth sport programs. However, little research has focused on rural youth sport to understand how this process may develop or the challenges that must be addressed for sustainability.

Methodology

Meadowview, North Carolina served as the study setting. Located in northeastern North Carolina, Meadowview has a population of 2,352 (declining from a peak of 3,272 in 1970). The primary racial demographics are 79.25% African-American and 19.4% White. Meadowview is economically distressed, with a poverty rate of 38.7%. A generation ago, youth could participate in sport activities provided by local churches or schools, but these programs ceased in recent years. In 2008, Meadowview received grant funds to develop a town park. With no programs, the park was underutilized and became subject to vandalism and crime. Meadowview then funded a part-time recreation director position to aid in program development and created a recreation advisory board to support program initiatives. A local family perceived a need for a sport program and partnered with the advisory board to start an informal baseball program (the Meadowview Baseball League [MBL]) at the park. The program completed its initial season with 45 youth ranging in age from approximately 5-15 years old.

Using case study methodology and key informant interviews with MBL program stakeholders, this study explores the development and implementation process of the program

in its initial year. The primary purpose is to understand perspectives of opportunities and challenges and how resources were mobilized to overcome challenges.

Results

Initial results are presented below. Full results will be available at the time of the conference. Rural youth may have lower physical literacy and sport knowledge. League organizers expected to form teams and play a league season right away. However, only 5 of the 45 players knew how to play baseball at a basic level. Many players did not own baseball equipment, nor were there proximate outlets to purchase equipment. Transportation and cost was also a problem for interested youth. Fear of crime led to some initial barriers for recruiting participants and volunteers. The MBL adapted the program plan from league play to a 4-night-a-week basic training camp teaching youth fundamental skills. The program culminated in a single baseball exhibition game. Carpools were organized so participants who could not walk were able to participate. Partnerships were important. A high school provided baseball equipment and the police department had representatives present at MBL activities. Technical assistance was also provided through a non-profit health partnership and Cooperative Extension via university experts. MBL organizers leveraged their networks to recruit volunteer coaches to assist with program implementation. The donated equipment, field, and use of volunteers allowed the MBL to offer the program at no cost.

Discussion and Implications

Initial success of the MBL helped the community build capacity for additional youth sport opportunities. Enfield secured funding for equipment and storage space for youth sports. Volunteers emerged with interest in organizing (American) football and basketball programs. Social capital created may help the community pursue additional funding to redevelop areas near the park and create community activities along with sport programs. Initial results suggest specific challenges may be unique to developing sport programs in rural communities. However, leveraging local resources and adapting program models may provide creative solutions. The implementation of youth sport programs in a rural community may also support local capacity building.

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