

Reaching Youth



through Sports

Access to Athletics Improves Outcomes for At-Risk Youth

by Carol Ward

Nearly every weekday after school, hundreds of kids from some of Los Angeles's most disadvantaged neighborhoods make their way to a community park in the Rampart District to play soccer, or they arrive at one of three area gymnasiums for a basketball practice or game. They are not participants in the city's leagues for those sports. Instead, they are taking part in some of the myriad of free or nearly free programs offered to poor and homeless youth by Heart of Los Angeles (HOLA) community center.

HOLA, founded more than 20 years ago on the simple premise that "every child deserves a chance," offers much more than just sports, with after school programs ranging from academic support to cooking to exploration of the arts. But sports are the biggest draw, according to executive director Tony Brown.

Brown says the club initially began as a basketball association geared toward high-school-aged boys who, for whatever reason, could not play on their high school team. "Sometimes it was a lack of parental involvement or transportation issues or even a lack of food," he says. "We felt those kids really needed adult role models, mentors, and coaches for help not just with sports but with life in general. They needed to learn how to be a good sport, to learn teamwork, cooperation, and hard work."

The group soon realized that high school sometimes is too late, Brown adds, and expanded its reach to middle- and elementary-age children. And those youth are clamoring for the opportunity to play. "These kids are craving someone they can work with and work for," Brown says.

Young athletes from Team-Up for Youth learn new soccer skills from their coach, a local university student. Team-Up for Youth's flagship program, Coaching Corps, trains and places college students and community members in youth sports programs.



Disparity of Opportunity

HOLA is just one of several programs nationwide that seeks to reduce the disparity in access to sports for disadvantaged children. A 2006 study entitled “Play Across Boston: A Community Initiative to Reduce Disparities in Access to After-School Physical Activity Programs for Inner-City Youths,” conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health, found that the ratio of youth to facilities in inner-city Boston was twice the ratio found in medium- and high-income suburban comparison communities. Studies in other cities have shown similar results.



A participant of SOS Outreach’s SnowCore program enjoys a day skiing at Snoqualmie Summit in Snoqualmie, Washington. SnowCore is an exposure program that provides underserved youth with one- or two-day ski or snowboard trips.

The economic disparity is most evident when it comes to sports such as skiing and snowboarding, where a day’s activity can easily run into the hundreds of dollars. SOS Outreach, headquartered in Avon, Colorado, but with activities in several mountainous areas nationwide, is seeking to bridge that gap. SOS Outreach provides day or week-long trips.

“We partner with 150 or so youth agencies and schools annually,” says Seth Ehrlich, development director, noting that the groups have direct knowledge of which children are most in need. SOS started as a snowboarding outreach society, then added skiing, and later merged with a summer-based organization and now provides year-round activities, including snow sports such as snowshoeing, skiing, and snowboarding as well as rock climbing, backpacking, and seven-day wilderness trips.

The focus is less on kids becoming masters of the sports and more on the social and emotional benefits, Ehrlich says. “We focus our programs on building positive decision making, and we do that through protective factors, such as recognizing within a group positive adult mentorship,” he says, noting the group defines protective factors as conditions that increase the health and well-being of children. Protective factors serve as buffers, helping youth to find resources, supports, or coping strategies that allow them to lead successful lives.

“What we’ve seen is that our participants have higher protective factors than their peers, using a baseline study of schools in Colorado,” Ehrlich adds. “And they have a higher propensity for graduating high school and going on to college than their peers.”

Getting Girls in the Game

Both HOLA and SOS Outreach serve boys and girls, but studies show that among youth living in poverty, girls are less likely to participate in sports than boys. Reasons include cultures that frown on organized sports for girls, at-home expectations for girls, such as babysitting, cooking, and other chores, and a reluctance to participate among some of the girls themselves.

Team-Up for Youth, an Oakland, California-based organization, is attempting to address not only the economic disparity in sports access, but also the disparity in numbers of low-income girls participating in sports compared to boys. Sheilagh Polk, communications program director, says the group’s key goal is to “address the disparity in physical activity for homeless kids and kids of color.”

Certainly not all the kids fall into one of those categories, but Polk says that 75–80 percent of the youth served by Team-Up for Youth qualify for the free lunch program at their schools. The disparities between rich and poor girls accessing sports are evident, the group says. At the city’s Piedmont High School, in a wealthy area, about 70 percent of enrolled girls participate in sports, compared to just 7 percent of girls enrolled in Oakland High School.

Claude Crudup, regional capacity builder for Team-Up for Youth, says the group’s role is to assist schools, city parks, and recreation divisions as well as others in need of robust sports programming. “We’re trying to make the sports programs better so more kids will want to be involved,”

he says. Sports programs in the city's most impoverished areas often do not include any team or competitive play.

"There are many schools that don't have resources, so we talk to them about setting up leagues so kids can play against other kids, so they can all understand the concept of team sports," Crudup says. Noting benefits such as providing a voice for participants, and allowing them to learn about participation, skill-building, and safety, Crudup says, "We stress that if we improve these areas, those programs will be doing a lot for kids."

Sports Hook Kids In

Many of the sports programs geared toward children living in poverty are, by choice or necessity, much more than sports programs. Take, for example, the Youth Impact Program (YIP), a program started originally in Washington, D.C., by Riki Ellison, a ten-year veteran of the National Football League (NFL) and three-time Super Bowl champion. YIP targets at-risk middle school boys who live in inner cities, leveraging their interest in football to take them off the streets for five weeks in the summer. Boys attend a free day camp on a college campus, where they not only play football but also take part in academic programs.

"I was a kid like those kids, from a single-parent home," says Ellison. The participants, all 9- to 12-year-old African-American and Hispanic boys, need far more than just football instruction.

"Most of our kids are below the poverty line, so we address their food needs," Ellison says, adding YIP quickly realized those needs are most acute during summer when school is not in session. "We address their summer school needs,



A child enjoys a game of lacrosse after school. Team-Up for Youth creates after-school sports opportunities for girls and boys that build their confidence and skills.

because most of these kids are not at the levels they should be. Forty-eight percent of the kids we serve have never read a book, so we're addressing those concerns."

YIP works through universities around the country, which help in hiring staff and utilizing student athletes as mentors. They then scour local schools for eligible participants. "We've never had a problem getting kids," Ellison says, noting that the program serves about 200 boys each year, many of whom would not normally be taking on a rigorous academic schedule during their summer break. "It's a volunteer program so the kids have to want to do it, but the alpha males tend to be attracted to a program that has the sexiness of the NFL behind it."

SOS Outreach also uses sports as an avenue to influence more than 5,000 at-risk youth annually. "The sport is just the hook," admits Ehrlich. "We now offer a program where for every day of activity they're going to do an equal day in the community, focusing on service projects or development classes or resume writing or maybe an internship as they get close to graduating high school and going on to college. We want them to feel they can make a difference and see themselves as part of the community." ■



Young athletes from Team-Up for Youth learn how to dribble and shoot on the basketball court. Team-Up for Youth seeks to increase the number of low-income girls who participate in sports.