Harm reduction, education and boxing skills: addressing the dynamics of violence and drug use in the night life environment within a disadvantaged community.

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Suburb of North Inner City, Dublin, Ireland.
1970’s housing response. Characterised over following decades by crime, drug use and social deprivation.
Since late 1990’s significant regeneration.

Ongoing issues of drug use, low employment, criminal activity and social exclusion.
Range of community supports including BYAP, Young Ballymun and LD&ATF.

Poorly resourced and stressful environment, isolated from wider social norms, limited opportunities for respite likely impact on negative health behaviours (Stead et al., 2001).
Poor infrastructure often leaves these areas socially and physically disconnected from wider urban areas.
“IT IS AS IF YOU’RE LOCKED IN” (Stead et al., 2001: 338).
Norms and risky behaviour (Davey-Rothwell et al., 2015; Stead et al., 2001).
Young people exposed to unprecedented level of community violence (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998).
Nightlife can be limited and destructive, or “a zone of transgression where the state is powerless to intervene” (Talbot, 2004).

Night life tends to be seasonal.
Congregations of young people in public park areas & house parties.
High levels of substance use.
Community norms of street drinking.
Open drug dealing shifted inside with demolition of flats and increase in mobile technology.
Night life centres on substance use rather than entertainment (where substances may be used).

Public health interventions often seek to change norms at the social level – but neighbourhood disorder can preclude or inhibit this process.
Interventions should address both norms and neighbourhoods factors (Davey-Rothwell et al., 2015).
Requirement to foster positive shared identity to address the 'social curse' of stigmatisation (Stevenson et al., 2014).
A twenty week educational, fitness and substance use recovery program.

Supports participants to develop more resilient identities, encourages educational achievement, physical wellness and reduction in harmful or risky behaviors.

Mix of substance use status and histories within any given group.

Inter-agency and community based response to entrenched impacts of social exclusion and disadvantage.

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**Boxing Clever**

- Boxing is the fitness and clever is the education. People say 'I have that boxed off'.” (program participant)

**The study**

- Considering the efficacy and impact of Boxing Clever, for participants and the community.
- Mixed methods approach – programme participant focus groups, practitioner inquiry groups, outcome process data.

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**Boxing as a contested concept**

- Boxing gym has been constructed as a site of protection within disadvantaged communities (Wacquant, 2004) or a space where the problems of the community spill over (Timbur, 2011).
- Boxing training often reinforces gender norms (Timbur, 2011; Woodward, 2007).
- Beset by contradictions; exclusions and opportunity; discipline and excess; resilience and injury; violence and control (Woodward, 2004).

**Boxing as a contested concept**

- Boxing gym is “both in between and definitive of the individual and society.” (Timbur, 2011: 351).
- Wright (2008) argues boxing with young people in disadvantaged areas “takes the familiar experience of fighting they already identify with and sanction it, control it, structure it, refine it, harness it, give ownership of it, and turn it into an art form to be valued and respected.” (150).

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**Boxing skills approach**

- Coaching utilising affirmation, peer encouragement, respect and development of self-care – encouraging participant ability to define and set own limits.
- Challenging gender norms, developing self-determination
- Metaphor of boxing language; intimacy of coaching relationship; containment/negotiation of violence and risk.

- “He (lead coach) will challenge you but tells you not to push yourself too hard, to get overall healthy, he was encouraging and had an understanding of where we were all coming from.” (program participant)

**Impact on participants**

- “With some, you see a huge improvement, they keep going to classes and it is like they have been training all their lives. They have started to take care of themselves and their bodies, they have pushed past their feelings of fear – fear of using the machines, of being judged, of meeting people they don’t want to meet.” (program coach)

- “They came to us at our level, they met us where we were at, he would have a laugh and a joke, it was enjoyable. He (lead coach) would bring us into the gym and we used to enjoy that – using the bike and the circuit and he taught about toning with weights. Then we were getting some chance to do a little bit of boxing. It was nice to let us go into the gym, some women were sparring. Whoever wanted to do gym work could.” (program participant).
Impacting a community from within

- Majority of participants achieved educational awards – participants saw these as a vehicle for further education - progression pathways.
- Recognition of the impact of their substance use on the community - a motivator for sustaining positive change & a driver to becoming positively involved in the community.

"The combination of boxing and education should be in every community. It works, it is brilliant."

"It is not just education in terms of what you are going to get from it, it is what you are going to bring home with you, the impact its going to have with you and anyone who is related to you."

Impacting a community from within

- Boxing skills - enabled social re-integration into the community, a community that they were typically isolated or excluded from as a result of their drug use.
- Where personal and community violence are everyday risks (Wright, 2008) - discipline and skills involved in the boxing provide both a way for participants to defend themselves from violence and a contained way to express anger and other emotions. Understanding and managing physical threat and community violence, development of ‘honour’ and defence responses.
- The valuing and respect of each participant - modelling by practitioners and mentors of how to develop leadership and peer support.

Considering the nightlife environment

- Nightlife environment in disadvantaged areas are by their nature high risk underpinned by systemically ingrained substance use and crime - 'lock down areas'.
- Davey-Rothwell et al., 2015 call for interventions that integrate both social and structural elements, seek to increase cohesion, social control and empowerment – plus seek to reduce disorder, promote healthy norms and increase health behaviours.
- Boxing Clever programme potential to impact on the nightlife environment in such areas by changing the social norms, individual identities, inter-generational patterns.
- Challenge and change individual’s engagement with night-time economy.

Practice and research implications

- Addressing risk and harm night life environment in disadvantaged areas requires a different approach.
- Economy that is largely out of the control of the state.
- Health focused harm reduction approaches limited impact due to social norms and stigma.
- How can we start to think about change from within in such communities and support people to deal with everyday (night) risks of violence, substance use and crime?

References


Ward, D., MacKintosh, A. M., Reece, J., & MacAskill, M. A. (2015). Call for interventions that integrate both social and structural elements, seek to increase cohesion, social control and empowerment – plus seek to reduce disorder, promote healthy norms and increase health behaviours. Health & place, 35, 3-12.