

Article 3

What Works for Male Persons in Custody: Rehabilitation through Sports



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Are Sports Programmes Rehabilitative?

Based on the Risk-Needs-Responsivity model of offender rehabilitation, the responsivity principle suggests that the mode of intervention should maximise an individual's ability to learn from a rehabilitation intervention, taking into consideration of one's attributes such as age, gender, ability, etc. As intervention with a goal-focused and action-oriented structure is one of the important male-specific elements in providing engaging treatment for men (Seidler et al., 2018), sports can be considered a male-friendly strategy to enhance positive changes in male individuals (Tsai et al., 2015).



Can Sports Improve Our Psychological Well-Being?

While there are various long-known benefits of sports on physical well-being, an updated systematic review (Eather et al., 2023) showed that sports participation is beneficial to overall mental health and social outcomes among adults, and is also predictive of better psychological well-being and lower psychological ill-being over time.



Figure 1. The benefits of sports on mental and psychological well-being

Can Sports Improve the Adjustment of Persons in Custody (PICs) and Penal Management?

The importance of sports in improving the well-being of prisoners is increasingly recognised by the correctional system. The latest findings (Penado Abilleira et al., 2023) which align with previous studies demonstrated that physical activities are advantageous in improving both physical and mental health indicators.

1. Improving Mood and Mental Health

Higher levels of physical well-being ($p < .001$) & mental health ($p < .001$)

- The prisoners who actively engaged in sports demonstrated significantly higher levels of physical well-being and mental health compared to those who did not.

Lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms ($p < .01$)

- The participating inmates experienced lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms in comparison to non-participating inmates.

Figure 2. The effectiveness of sports on physical and mental health

Another experimental study (Obadiora and Adebayo, 2019) examined how active participation in sports affected the perceived psychological health of inmates in Ilesa Prison Yard in Nigeria, where 140 inmates were selected to participate in a 10-week Prison-based Sports Programme.

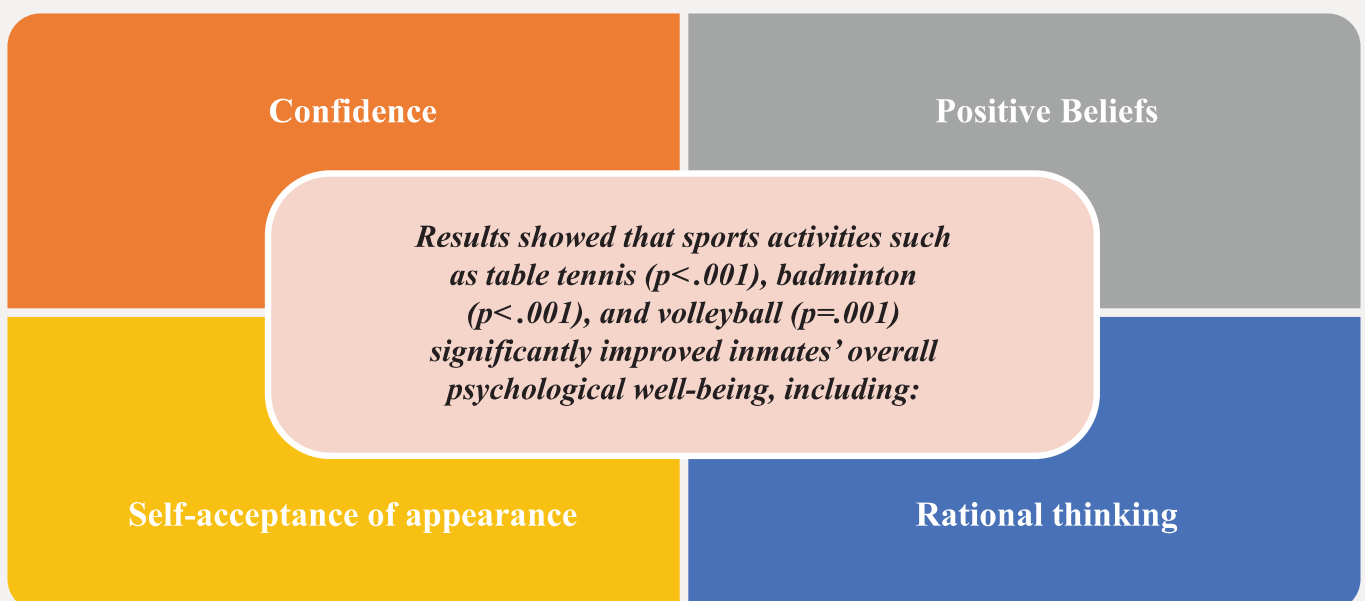


Figure 3. The effectiveness of sport activities on psychological well-being

A study compared the daily activities in prison between PICs with insomnia and without insomnia. It found that PICs without insomnia have an average higher number of sports activities.

PICs without insomnia reported significantly more often exercise on muscle building ($p < .001$) and walking ($p < .001$). (Elger, 2009)

2. Reducing Violence in Prison

Different studies have demonstrated the effects of sports activities on reducing violence in prison, which have meaningful implications for penal management. Some of the underlying reasons are as follows:

Diverting attention from stressful circumstances (Psychou et al., 2019).

Serving as a solution to channel aggression and temporarily alleviate fears towards the penal environment (Mutz and Müller, 2023).

Fostering conflict resolution and improving relationship among prisoners as well as that between prisoners and staff members (Meek and Ramsbotham, 2013).

Enhancing emotion regulation by venting anger and frustration effectively (Obadiora and Adebayo, 2019)

What Have We Done?

Various sports programmes with therapeutic purposes have been implemented as an intervention for enhancing the psychological well-being and facilitating the rehabilitation of PICs in correctional institutions. With the establishment of the first specialised treatment centre for males “LIFE GYM: Positive Living Centre for Men” in Stanley Prison in 2018, therapeutic sports facilities such as smart bikes, cordless jumping ropes and medicine balls have been introduced. These sports activities serve as a kind of psychological treatment strategy to enhance the participants’ self-esteem and their motivation to change.





In recent years, therapeutic sports programmes of newly emerged sports and high-intensity interval training have been introduced to PICs with mental illness and those with a sex offending history in Siu Lam Psychiatric Centre. To be in line with the Good Lives Model (GLM) of offender rehabilitation (Ward et al., 2006), the participants are motivated to set their own goals and exercise plans.

As a pilot study on the efficacy of sports on the participants, several variables including psychological resilience, self-efficacy, and sleep condition were measured to determine if there was any positive impact of sports on psychological well-being. Duration of participation in the sports programme ranged from six months to one year, according to the participants' length of sentence. An improvement trend in the three variables was shown in Figure 4, with a significant positive change in psychological resilience ($p < .01$) and self-efficacy ($p < .01$). Despite being a preliminary study, the positive results are encouraging for the continuous implementation of therapeutic sports programmes in prisons.

The Effects of Sports on Psychological Well-being

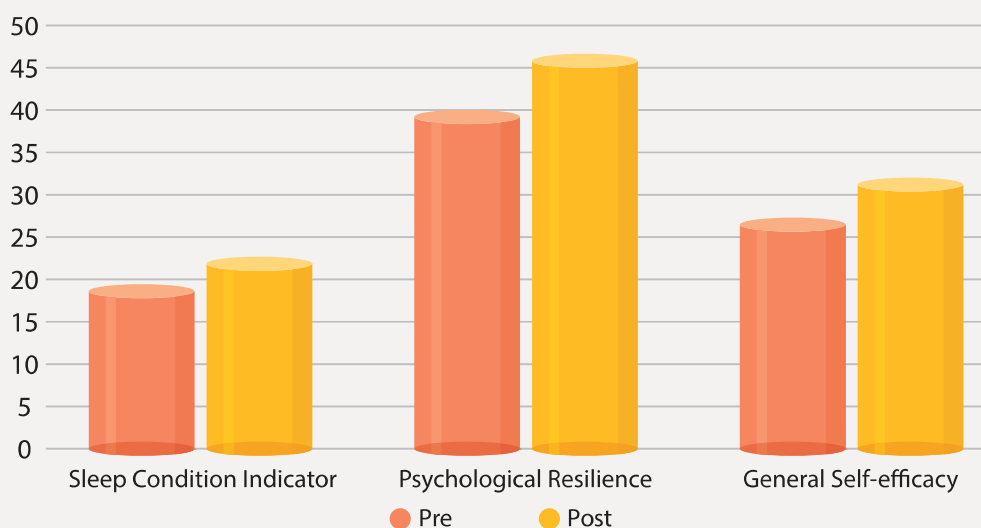


Figure 4. The effects of sports on psychological well-being

Insights

1. Sports improve mood, adjustment and penal management

Scientific researches evidently showed sports programmes would not only enhance physical health, but also improve mood, reduce violence and improve sleep and overall psychological well-being of male PICs.

2. Positive findings in our correctional institutions

In recent years, sports programmes have been introduced in various institutions for male PICs for rehabilitation purposes. Preliminary data demonstrated that there was improvement in psychological resilience and self confidence among PICs.

3. Future direction

There is room for more integration of sports and rehabilitation in penal settings. Incorporation of the rehabilitative element into the current sport activities for the benefit of both PICs and effective penal management can be considered.

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