Delinquency and Athletics: Review and Reformulation

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As one of the most integral and venerated aspects of the educational system, interscholastic athletics have long been defended as serving in some way to prevent the occurrence of delinquent behavior. As Coleman (1965) observed: “If it were not for interscholastic athletics, or something like it, the rebellion against the school, the rate of drop-out, and the delinquency of boys might be worse than they presently are” (p. 45). Other unsubstantiated statements attesting to the validity of athletics as a deterrent to delinquency have been based on the assumption that athletics imparts certain positive values, attitudes, and social skills (e.g., Educational Policies Commission, 1954); acts as an effective means for directing the interests and loyalties of the athletes and other students into the school (e.g., Ferdinand, 1966); and serves as a social control mechanism (e.g., Matza, 1964). In short, athletics were merely assumed to exert a positive influence on the overall socialization of the individual.

It was not until Schafer’s (1969) research that the relationship between participation in interscholastic athletics and delinquency was formally subjected to systematic empirical evaluation. Since Schafer’s pioneering effort, several other studies have indicated a negative association between participation in athletics and delinquency (Buhrman, 1977; Landers & Landers, 1977; Schafer & Polk, 1967; Segrave & Chu, 1978; Segrave, Note 1). These studies report that on the whole athletes tend to be less delinquent than comparable nonathletes.

However, although the relationship between athletics and delinquency has proven to be a fruitful and worthwhile avenue of research, scholars have been slow both to verify the relationship and extend this line of inquiry in order to develop a more definitive and precise statement about this association. The studies which have provided evidence consistent with the deterrent hypothesis have remained largely descriptive in nature and based on a social organization perspective. Yet like all social phenomenon, delinquency may be studied from two aspects. It has both an epidemiological or sociological aspect and an individual or social psychological aspect. The studies on athletics and delin-
quency represent an example of research within a specific area of inquiry which has restricted itself to the epidemiological approach and failed to take account of the social psychological processes underlying the relationship. There are numerous questions raised by the accumulated research on athletics and delinquency which, if answered, stand to offer a significant contribution to the literature on the etiology of delinquent behavior.

The Epidemiological Aspect

The epidemiological or sociological aspect of the relationship between participation in athletics and delinquency raises common sense questions such as the following. How widespread is the problem of delinquency among athletes? Are athletes less delinquent than individuals involved in other kinds of extracurricular activities? Are there delinquencies which are characteristic of athletes? Is delinquency more widespread among white athletes or black athletes; among male athletes or female athletes? Do athletes of various age groups differ in their patterns of delinquent behavior?

The compiled research on athletics and delinquency provides only partial answers to many of these questions. Convergent validation for the finding that athletes tend to be less delinquent than nonathletes is provided by Buhrman (1977), Landers and Landers (1977), Schafer (1969), Segrave and Chu (1978), and Segrave (Note 1). Similarly, several studies (Buhrman, 1977; Schafer, 1969; Segrave & Chu, 1978; Segrave, Note 1) suggest that the overall relationship between participation in athletics and delinquency would appear to be a function of an association among lower socioeconomic groups. Other than these findings, research into the epidemiological aspects of the relationship between athletics and delinquency has produced data which are inconsistent and often contradictory. For example, whereas Landers and Landers (1977) found no difference in rates of delinquency between athletes and individuals involved in other kinds of school extracurricular programs, Segrave and Chu's (1978) data suggest that participation in athletics may be a more effective deterrent against delinquency than involvement in other conventional extracurricular activities. Likewise, Schafer (1969) reported an almost identical rate of delinquency both among boys who completed three or more and one or two seasons, and also among boys in major (football and basketball) and minor sports. Buhrman (1977), on the other hand, found that girls participating in a high popularity sport (basketball) had significantly less “trouble with the law” than girls who went out for low popularity sports (softball, track and field, and golf). Buhrman's data also indicated that girls who participated in two or more sports had significantly less “trouble with the police and the law” than girls who participated in only one sport. In a further study, Buhrman and Bratton (1978) reported that among girls in grades 11 and 12, those who participated in two or more sports had more “trouble with the law” than those who competed in only one sport.

The composite picture to be drawn from the research into the epidemiological aspect of the relationship between athletic participation and delinquent behavior