

RES SPORTIVA
INSIGHTS

NUMBER 1

**GIVING PEOPLE
IN PRISON**
a chance

Promoting re-integration and reducing
recidivism through sport



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Sport programmes in prison settings represent a significant opportunity to improve detention conditions, enhance people in prison’s chances for reintegration, and reduce reoffending. The impacts of sport in prison settings are well documented.

First, participation in sport activities can improve mental health, emotional regulation and social behaviour among incarcerated individuals—contributing to a better prison environment. Second, sport activities can enable incarcerated individuals to forge new social bonds and adopt new, law-abiding social identities, particularly through identification with sport programmes and attachment to coaches. Third, sport activities can enhance the employability of people in prison and contribute to lowering recidivism, with one key study indicating a potential reduction of recidivism up to 14%. This scientific note also paves the way for a better understanding of the economic impact of sport activities and programmes. Empirical studies have shown that the economic impact of sport in prison may be considerable, with recidivism estimated to cost €1 - £18 billion annually, depending on the methodology used. For example, in the UK, a 10% decrease in recidivism is associated with an estimated cost saving of £490 million. By reviewing these social and economic arguments, this scientific note stresses that many sport activities are grouped under the broad and undifferentiated label of «sport», which blurs the understanding of how sport truly makes a difference for people in prison, and identifies the factors underlying sport’s contribution to improving rehabilitation and reducing recidivism.

Introduction

Prisons occupy a central place in the justice system, with a goal of fostering public safety through punishment, deterrence, and rehabilitation. However, prison overcrowding undermines these objectives. Three main factors are at play. First, sentences are becoming longer. Second, between 2020 and 2024, the prison population in Europe increase sharply by 11%, with particularly steep rises in France (+37%) and the United Kingdom (+27%) (World Prison Brief, 2024). Finally, prisons face ongoing challenges in supporting reintegration, as evidenced by high rates of recidivism (Monnerey, 2021).

In France, according to the most recent data, 35% of incarcerated individuals reoffend within their first year of release, and 63% within five years (CESE 2019), a trend that has remained consistent over time (Kensey & Benaouda, 2011). Similarly, in England and Wales, on average, 30% of people reoffend within 12 months of release (UK Ministry of Justice 2019).

How can we explain such high recidivism rates? Individuals entering the prison system are often faced with personal, social, educational, and health-related issues that severely limit their chances of staying away from crime upon release. Coupled with these underprivileged backgrounds, many suffer from addiction and do not receive adequate

psychological treatment to cope with mental health challenges while in prison. These issues are exacerbated by prison overcrowding, which leads to increased violence, deterioration of both physical and mental health, diminished access to rehabilitation programmes, and greater exposure to criminal subcultures. Finally, upon release from prison, people face social stigma, including limited access to housing and employment. Prison overcrowding has reached such a level that the United Kingdom introduced a prison population management mechanism in 2024, aimed at reducing sentence lengths. Nonetheless, such solutions only offer a sustainable response if accompanied by effective reintegration measures. As one observer in France noted:

“Prison is becoming a vast psychiatric asylum”¹

In this context, European countries have agreed, since 1987, on the fundamental principle that detention should “equip prisoners with skills that will help them reintegrate into society, live within the law, and support themselves after release from prison” (Council of Europe 2017). In line with this statement, since the 1980s, sport associations and prison authorities have used sports activities to facilitate the reintegration of people in prison in multiple ways.

Though over a decade old, the most comprehensive European study to date on prison sport still highlights which activities are commonly practised (Sempé, 2013). Football was by far the most prevalent (51%), followed by physical conditioning—including fitness and bodybuilding (31%), table tennis (9.63%), basketball and table football (6%). Supervised or structured activities are most common (49.62%), ahead of self-directed or informal participation (32.33%), and internal or external competitive events (8.27%). One-third of the activities specifically target vulnerable groups, such as young people, women, or older prisoners. More research is needed to update these trends.

Sport in prison settings serves many functions. It may act as an entry point to engage incarcerated individuals in broader educational or employability programmes. It can also take the form of socio-educational activities, which tend to focus on physical and mental health, improving behaviours between people in prison, and reintegration goals. Focusing on Europe, this scientific note synthesises robust evidence concerning the social and economic impact of sport on prison-based rehabilitation, the way

in which sport can reduce recidivism and, ultimately, its societal cost savings. The first section explores the types of outcomes sport can yield, the second discusses how such impacts can be achieved, and the third section evokes the potential economic impact of sport in prison settings. Findings presented here are largely derived from longitudinal studies (pre/post comparisons) or studies with control groups (see definition section), to ensure reliable and generalisable conclusions.

¹ Dominique Simmonot, Chief Inspector of Places of Deprivation of Liberty, Ministry of Justice, during her hearing and presentation of the annual report before the Senate, 2022.

Sport in prison settings: a promising tool with strong *social impacts*

The scientific literature largely demonstrates that sport activities contribute to improving the physical and mental health of people in prison, as well as encouraging the development of new and positive law-abiding social identities. They also provide evidence that sports programmes help reduce recidivism by supporting reintegration—potentially alleviating prison overcrowding in the long term.

At the individual level, prison-based sport programmes yield significant benefits for the physical and mental health of people in prison, with associated behavioural improvements. A landmark meta-analysis conducted by Jugl (2023), encompassing 24 studies from 11 countries—including the United Kingdom and France—provides strong empirical support for these effects. Of these, 13 studies employed control group methodologies, comparing outcomes between participants of sport-based interventions and non-participants. The meta-analysis found that such programmes are associated with measurable improvements in self-esteem and notable reductions in depression, anxiety, stress, and substance use. These findings are further substantiated by a growing body of literature, including systematic reviews by Woods et al. (2017) and Libbrecht et al. (2024), confirming the psychosocial and behavioural benefits of sport in correctional settings.

Sport-based programmes in prison appear to play a valuable role in enhancing employability more generally. While extensive evidence indicates that incarceration reduces the likelihood of securing stable employment opportunities (Monnerey, 2021), a pioneering study by Meek and Lewis (2014) demonstrated that participation in sport can foster optimism, improve attitudes towards society, reduce antisocial behaviour, facilitate learning and acquisition of skills relevant to the labour market. Furthermore, recent findings suggest that such programmes can positively influence how prospective employers perceive individuals with a history of incarceration. Recent research shows that sport-based experience and demonstrable skill acquisition can partially mitigate the negative stereotypes and stigma often associated with formerly incarcerated people, thus improving reintegration outcomes in the employment sector (Newson et al. 2024; Peitz, Whitehouse, Newson 2025).

However, there are still questions around the extent to which sport-based programmes in prisons can reduce recidivism. For instance, one study showed that programmes centred on leisure, sport, or art, do not have clear causal effects on reducing recidivism for people in prison (Arbour and Lacroix 2023). However, this research failed to clearly define what constitutes a «sport programme» and treated sports and educational programmes as mutually exclusive, overlooking

the fact that many sports initiatives incorporate a pedagogical component. Case studies from the UK report larger effects. For instance, Meek (2012) observed an 18% recidivism rate for young people involved in football and rugby academies, significantly lower than the national average recidivism rate for young people. Sampson (2015) also reported decreases in recidivism of up to 70% for a programme that combined sport with educational qualifications, personal development, mentoring, and employability sessions. Williams (2015) illustrated how a rugby programme, with a focus on life skills useful for job-seeking, entailed reduced aggression and a recidivism rate of 15%. However, most of these studies suffer from small sample sizes and do not employ control group methodologies making causation difficult to establish. With a more comparative approach of 10 different studies, Jugl et al.'s meta-analysis (2023) demonstrated that participation in prison sport programmes is associated with an estimated more moderate rate of 14% decrease in recidivism and positive outcomes, such as attitudes connected to crime. Given the state of the literature on the topic, this trend can be considered a standard outcome for the future impact measurement of sport programmes in prison settings.

In light of current scientific findings, sports programmes can reduce recidivism by up to 14%

Despite a growing body of research on the different forms and specific effects sport has on people in prison, such effects remain insufficiently understood by decision-makers and the public. **Critically, many activities are grouped together under the broad and undifferentiated label of «sport».** First, this generalisation obscures the diversity of purposes and methods employed in different prison settings and national contexts. Second, it blurs the understanding of how sport activities and programmes really make a difference,

especially for decision makers and new investors unfamiliar with the idea of sport for social change. In other words, sport might be perceived as purely recreational or competitive, while the transformative power of sport activities can yield far greater social and behavioural impacts for people in prison. For this reason, sport cannot be poorly defined: it is also important to look at its objectives, the content, and the context of sports programmes in prison settings to better understand their potential social and economic impacts.

Practicalities to maximise the social impact of *sport in prison*

The effects of sport-based programmes in prison settings vary significantly, depending on multiple factors. Research primarily tends to investigate the importance of sports infrastructure, the socio-demographics of incarcerated people (particularly age and gender), programme duration, and frequency of participation. Such proxies tend to be descriptive in nature. We elaborate below on two other factors that may influence the impact of sport activities in prison: sport type and the pedagogical approaches employed by programme educators. This is important for two reasons. First, such proxies help to target more directly what is at stake during sport activities, returning agency to people in prison. Second, these factors shed light on how to adapt and expand sport programmes in prison.

Research is increasingly examining the effects of specific sports based on their inherent characteristics—such as movement patterns, rules of the games, and required motor and cognitive skills. For instance, studies with control groups have shown that yoga can lead to notable improvements in key individual traits, including emotional regulation and stress reduction (Bilderbeck et al., 2013; Kovalski, 2021). By comparison, a recent German study investigating a programme combining five sports—including running and team-based games—suggests that while these interventions promote group cooperation and adherence to group rules, they have no specific effects on emotional self-regulation (Müller et al., 2023). Overall, recent research indicates that **the promotion of sport yields primarily individual psychological benefits, such as increased relaxation, emotional relief, or empathy, and, to some extent, specific social skills.**

IMPACTS	INDIVIDUAL SPORTS	TEAM SPORTS
HEALTH AND WELLBEING	Reduced stress (Bilderbeck et al. 2013), anxiety or depression (Battaglia 2015)	Improved well-being, more efficacy (Peitz & Newson, 2024)
EMPLOYABILITY	Emotional intelligence, resilience and self-control (Laborde et al. 2016).	Learning to cooperate in a group and adherence to collective rules of play (Müller et al. 2023)

Despite these clear benefits, the characteristics of sport alone may be insufficient to actually reduce recidivism. Many studies show that sport itself is not a sufficient vessel for transmitting values and positive behaviour: sport interventions that place excessive emphasis on competition among incarcerated individuals may risk undermining group cohesion (Rioux et al. 2017). In fact, many programmes suffer from poorly defined or unrealistic educational objectives (McCormack, 2001). For example, as Müller et al., (2023) explain, desired sport outcomes are not always well defined and conveyed in educational objectives. As stated by the authors, “a majority of those in charge seem to assume that sport will have a positive effect on prisoners quite incidentally and automatically”, and that it would be worth designing programmes focused on developing transferable skills. As such, although the characteristics of sports may have some specific benefits, the kind of social bonding that people in prison are able to develop matters more than the intrinsic qualities of sport itself.

In line with this argument, the **scientific literature increasingly supports the view that the social impact of sport in prison settings is closely linked to the training, pedagogy and practices of educators** (Andrews & Andrews, 2003; Coalter, 2012; Rioux et al. 2017; Meek & Lewis, 2024; Jugl, 2023). Furthermore, educators may serve as positive role models and attachment figures for incarcerated individuals (Nichols, 2007; Newson, 2024). Research conducted in the UK on the Twinning Project, involving more than 70 football

clubs providing coaching skills to people in prison, demonstrated improved behaviours and the emergence of law-abiding social identities for incarcerated individuals, as well as greater optimism about re-employment and confidence in staying out of trouble upon release (Newson et al. 2024). In the Twinning Project research, social bonding to law-abiding groups resulted in decreased adjudications during incarceration, indicating a broader impact on improved behaviours and safety (Newson 2024). Social bonding generates attachment with a community that promotes healthy lifestyles and pro-social values, and is generated through feelings of personal transformation that can be garnered via educational sports programmes (Newson 2024, Newson, Peitz, Cunliffe, Whitehouse 2025). Consequently, sport programmes and coaches can lead people in prison to rebuild social relationships and, critically, a positive social identity that supports people to stay away from crime.

These elements contribute to ensuring that sport in prison is not merely recreational, but a structured intervention aligned with broader rehabilitation goals. The definition of clear social and educational objectives, the duration and frequency of programmes, and facilitators’ training and qualifications, all play significant roles in supporting the reintegration process and reducing the risk of reoffending. Sports programmes can also have substantial economic impacts, as outlined in the next section.

The potential *economic impacts of sports* programmes on the prevention of crime and recidivism

Economic analyses examining the relationship between sport and the prison system have primarily focused on estimating the avoided social costs associated with reductions in delinquency and crime, rather than specifically addressing recidivism reduction. We believe, however, that it is essential to elucidate the potential of sport programmes in both areas.

One main obstacle in measuring the economic impact of sport programmes on recidivism is that the analysis of the economic costs of recidivism can vary depending on the methodology used (Monnerey, 2021). In France, selected direct costs of recidivism—including victimisation, policing, healthcare, and cost of failed reintegration into the labour market—have an estimated annual economic impact of €1.4 billion, or €16 208 per person, based on the assumption that 31% of people in prison reoffend and have been convicted for it (ATIGIP, 2022). Comparatively, in the UK, estimates include direct victim costs, criminal justice expenditures, and avoidance behaviours. Based on data from 2016, this places the social cost of recidivism at £18.1 billion annually (UK Ministry of Justice 2019). The overall costs of reoffending might be higher in the UK than France because people tend to reoffend more (Monnerey, 2021) and due to the

differences in scope and methodological approaches, as well as differences in governmental reporting (Wemmers, 2003). Despite such methodological differences, **these figures highlight the potential for considerable public savings through more effective rehabilitation strategies—such as sport-based interventions—that can reduce reoffending and support sustainable reintegration.**

In light of current statistical findings, a 10% decrease in recidivism in the UK could result in savings of more than €500 million.

Despite methodological differences, **trends regarding the economic costs of recidivism nonetheless underscore the substantial potential of reintegration strategies—such as those based on sport programmes—to reduce recidivism and, ultimately, public policy costs.** For instance, in the United Kingdom, the total estimated cost of reoffending over a 12-month follow-up period among individuals released after serving a custodial sentence of less than 12 months is £4.9 billion. Within this context, a 10% reduction in recidivism would represent an estimated economic benefit of £490 million [€ 563 million], assuming the successful large-scale implementation of an effective intervention (UK Ministry of Justice, 2019). This assumption of avoided costs appears credible in the case of sport programmes, particularly when considering previous estimates indicating a reduction in recidivism of approximately 14% (Jugl, 2023).

The case of sport and the prevention of *delinquency and crime*

So far, however, most studies focus on community-based programmes rather than prison programmes.

- A recent UK-based study (Davies et al., 2024) using 2017–2018 data estimates that if the sports sector were to reduce delinquency by just 1% among individuals aged 18 to 24 over the course of one year, the resulting savings would amount to approximately £38.62 million. A hypothetical 10% reduction in crime through the expansion of sport-based initiatives could thus yield up to €400 million in avoided costs (Davies et al., 2024).
- Similarly, a study commissioned by UEFA (2020) found that football-related activities in Germany generate an estimated €33.85 million in savings attributable to reduced criminal activity.
- A similar study from 2024 estimating savings for France hypothesised that sport participation, through its potential to reduce delinquency, could generate national savings estimated between €10.4 and €31 billion (Cosmo 2024).
- Three case studies conducted in Germany, Spain, and the UK, supported by the Laureus Foundation (Ecorys, 2012) offer more concrete and context-sensitive insights. These findings demonstrate that achieving a social impact on delinquency among just a hundred individuals can result in several hundred thousand euros in avoided costs. Moreover, for every euro invested in prison-based sport programmes, an estimated €3 to €5 can be saved in costs related to reoffending.

This last outcome highlights that sport interventions with concrete local strategies can have an important economic impact

Conclusion

This scientific note suggests that even modest public investments in sport within correctional settings can yield significant returns, particularly in terms of recidivism prevention. Intervening with a small cohort (e.g. 100 individuals) can generate better behaviour and targeted cost savings. At the national level, demonstrating a 10% reduction in reoffending through sport-based interventions would represent a highly valuable public policy lever. These potential benefits are particularly relevant given that most individuals leave prison at a relatively young age.

In this respect, scientific evidence clearly supports the idea that sport-based programmes can enhance the physical and mental well-being of incarcerated individuals, while also fostering socialisation through the development of new, prosocial identities, employability and ultimately, in certain contexts, contribute to a reduction in recidivism with associated economic savings. However, to enhance the

credibility of sports programmes, further studies regarding the avoided costs of recidivism deserve more support from public authorities and the philanthropic sector.

To strengthen such arguments, the academic agenda could take two directions. First, as highlighted in earlier evaluations (e.g., Coalter, 1996), the causal relationship between participation in sport and reduced reoffending requires further evidence. Second, while existing research demonstrates that sports programmes can strengthen social bonds in prison, there is still limited evidence regarding how these social connections are sustained over time. Consequently, sufficient data made available by justice authorities are required to conduct more rigorous, longitudinal studies with appropriate control groups to establish a clearer, causal link between sport-based interventions and recidivism reduction.

DEFINITIONS

Recidivism:	This can be measured by the proportion of formerly incarcerated people who, after their release, are re-arrested by the police (re-arrest rate), convicted by the courts (re-conviction rate) or incarcerated (re-incarceration rate).
Delinquency and crime:	The definition of delinquency and crime can vary greatly in the literature depending on the assumptions being made. For further details, see the academic references mentioned in this scientific note.
Cost of recidivism:	Court and prison overcrowding have high social costs: victims (direct costs), public spending on police and justice (costs of the penal response, including investment in new prison places), but also private spending on protection and insurance by households and businesses (avoidance costs).
Control group	Research method by which a group of people receiving an intervention are compared with an otherwise comparable group of people who do not receive the intervention. The equivalence of their socio-demographic characteristics and their relationship to a given problem (here imprisonment or recidivism rate) is a criteria of this methodology. The control group may be selected either randomly or through a non-randomised method.

Recommendations for the sector

INTRODUCTION – The prevailing European response to rising prison populations has been the construction of new correctional facilities. This creates more of the same, and an alternative is urgently required. A more impactful approach lies in strengthening the training and professional support of those engaged in reintegration and recidivism prevention—particularly through organised and educational sport programmes. Given the proven potential of educational sport to support reintegration and reduce recidivism, **this Res Sportiva insight highlights the necessity for public policy makers to consider sport as a strategic investment in social cohesion and public safety, rather than merely as a recreational activity.** It also invites national and local authorities to systematically combine organised sport with vocational training and pathways to employment. To support these two overarching recommendations, we propose below four practical measures aimed at strengthening the role of sport as a tool for reintegration and the reduction of recidivism, as well as enhancing the involvement of stakeholders within the sports ecosystem accordingly.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Improve Access to Public Data for Measuring the Impact of Sports-Based Interventions on Recidivism

Why - Programmes using sport as a tool for reintegration must be subject to rigorous evaluation to assess their efficacy and scalability. However, access to reliable data regarding people in prison and prison leavers remains a major barrier for researchers seeking to evaluate the impact of sport-based programmes in correctional settings on recidivism.

How - First, public authorities must allow researchers to access reoffending databases, so that they can trace back the trajectories of people after sport programmes. Database access provided by public authorities is an essential prerequisite for conducting robust research and producing reliable impact assessments of programmes. Second, authorities could adopt a directive enabling swift progress for approval or disapproval of sport programmes, access to data, and securing research funding and

the public dissemination of the findings regardless of their content. A promising example comes from the «Pour le Sourire d’un Enfant» (Make a Child Smile) association in Senegal, where the Ministry of Justice granted controlled access to justice system records under a specific agreement.

Expected outcome - Access to data would enable the conduct of more longitudinal studies and comparative analyses of those participating in sport programmes versus those who do not (control groups). It would also allow for more in-depth examination of the variables influencing the impact of sport in prison, such as the national penal context, the quality of facilities, and the pedagogical approaches employed. Developing more robust research programmes would improve our understanding of people in prison’s post-release trajectories, assess whether participation in sport remains accessible outside of prison, and determine which social environments beyond incarceration best support reintegration and the reduction of recidivism (Wimberly & Engstrom, 2018). Finally, access to data would facilitate better comparisons of the effectiveness of interventions both within and between countries, thereby helping to identify best practices.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Establish and train a network of locally appointed coordinators to support grassroots initiatives

Why - The sports sector encompasses vast numbers of clubs and educators capable of delivering sporting activities to vulnerable populations, including people in prison. However, these local actors do not always have experience of the specificities of prison settings or incarcerated individuals’ unique needs.

How - In France, sport-based public policy for prison settings is coordinated at the national level. It relies on local ‘sports coordinators’, overseen nationally by a designated official responsible for sports programmes within the prison administration. The development of a joint roadmap between the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Sports could further strengthen the involvement of amateur sports organisations.

Expected outcome - Local prison staff would be better equipped to assist and prepare sports associations, the sport movement or the professional sport sector to operate effectively within the penitentiary context.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Mobilise and coordinate the grassroots and professional sport sector around common prison sports programmes

Why - Professional sports, including football, basketball, and rugby, often engage with prison populations via club-level foundations or endowment funds. Moreover, these clubs are deeply rooted in their local communities and play a significant role in shaping territorial identity. Local populations often feel a strong attachment to these brands, which can, in turn, enhance the reintegration prospects of individuals leaving prison (Newson, 2019). These efforts could be better coordinated to amplify their effect on prison-related issues and crime reduction.

How - In the United Kingdom, the professional sports sector has mobilised around a shared initiative known as the Twinning Project, involving over 73 professional clubs (out of 93). The ongoing transformation of France’s professional football league, inspired by the English Premier League model, offers a significant opportunity for French football clubs to align their engagement policies and harmonise support for specific programmes, thereby strengthening the impact of sport in prisons. The Twinning Project offers an example of a secure and flexible framework, which has helped many clubs to engage if they did not already. The role of grass-root sport organisations should also be better recognised, as they have strong ties with local communities and can help the rehabilitation of people after release.

Expected outcome - Focusing on various sport programmes supported by different clubs can help to scale the impact of local initiatives on more beneficiaries and shared resources. Research strands can also look at multi-club programmes to gain better insights, and policymakers can deal more efficiently with coordinating bodies.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Invest in prison-based sport programmes with a socio-educational focus by anticipating the avoided costs of reoffending

Why - Short-term objectives, such as expanding prison capacity, often overshadow the long-term goals of reintegration and recidivism prevention. Moreover, support for sport-based prison programmes is frequently hindered by limited resources and staff shortages. In this context, developing local sport programmes funded by projected societal savings (e.g., judicial and policing expenses) could enable the allocation of new investment budgets based on the social impacts matching economic outcomes.

How - The development of locally-based sports programmes financed through anticipated cost savings for the territory (such as justice and policing expenses) could generate an investment budget for these initiatives. These investment funds could bring together public and private funders through the formation of local coalitions involving prison authorities, employment sectors, and the sports community. Several models exist. In France, evaluations of a national experiment aimed at reintegrating long-term unemployed individuals (the Zero Long-Term Unemployed Territories initiative) have demonstrated that this type of economic model and partnership approach enables the design of experiments adapted to local contexts, provided certain conditions are met (political commitment from elected officials; a bottom-up approach to defining objectives and resources; active mobilisation of associations and businesses). In both France and the United Kingdom, the implementation of social impact bonds is another mechanism that facilitates the long-term collaboration and contractualisation between associations, private investors, and governments. In such contacts, payments are linked to project performance based on predetermined outcome hypotheses and rely on impact evaluations measuring robust and reliable effects. Such programmes have already been implemented to reduce recidivism (Nicholls and Tomkinson, 2013) and could be extended to sports-based initiatives aiming at improving reintegration and reducing recidivism, given the identified economic potential.

Expected outcome - Prison-based sport programmes could bring together public and private funders through the formation of local coalitions involving prison authorities, employment sectors, and the sports community.

Best practices from the field



Build clear and progressive social and educational objectives so that sports sessions and performance come second to the achievement of psychological and social objectives.



Implement projects and programmes for people in prison with sufficient duration (ideally at least several months), and sufficient regularity (ideally weekly) to ensure that people in prison bond with the project.



Identify, through observation, at the start of sessions or workshops, the individual and collective needs of incarcerated people, in order to adjust session objectives and content.



Offer incarcerated people some collective time outside sports sessions, and provide tools to build an inclusive group identity, during which loyalty bonds can be redefined.



Train facilitators who have links with local communities, and good role-modelling skills to motivate and facilitate the integration of people in prison in sport programmes and their rehabilitation.



Extend social and educational activities during the post-release period, to support social bonding and secure law-abiding identities, accompanied with clear information about job opportunities to help people find employment.

Case study 1:

The Twinning Project (UK)

Crédit photo:
Twinning Project.

The project

Launched in 2018 in the UK, the Twinning Project is a rehabilitation programme to support the integration of incarcerated individuals through structured training and skills development in football coaching. The programme has a dual objective: to enhance participants' physical and mental well-being and to improve their employability by enabling them to acquire recognised coaching qualifications.

Target groups

Upon entering prison, approximately 30% of participants in the programme have not obtained any formal qualifications, and nearly half (48.5%) have never held regular employment. Participation in the programme is voluntary. In principle, eligible inmates must have no more than 18 months remaining on their sentence. Individuals convicted of sexual offences are not admitted to the programme.

Ecosystem

The Twinning Project is supported by 73 of the 92 professional football clubs in the UK and Wales. The club-level foundations establish partnerships with local prisons and probation services. The UK programmes follow a Football Association accreditation.

Activities

Football clubs deliver a football-based mentoring programme in local prisons consisting of two main components:

- Practical sessions on coaching techniques, delivered through a combination of classroom-based instruction and practical field exercises (including coaching of peers).
- Class-based workshops focusing on transferable skills, such as communication, emotional regulation, and health literacy.

The 36-hour program typically runs for six weeks, or in some cases up to 12 weeks, delivered in half-day sessions attended on average by groups of 13 participants.



Innovation

In addition to providing people in prison with skills and formal qualifications, sports educators act as mentors and role models, encouraging participants to adopt prosocial behaviours and align with lawful conduct. The coaches are associated with football clubs' Community Club Organisations, many with experience of outreach work in prisons.

Results

Since its inception, the programme has benefited 3,800 prisoners. The average age of participants is 30, with the cohort comprising approximately 91.7% men and 8.3% women. Research shows that the dropout rate of the programme stands at 9% for women and 6% for men (Newson, 2024). According to calculations by the Twinning Project association itself, the social cost savings generated by the programme, through its impact on reintegration, are estimated at £78,000 per prisoner per year — amounting to a total of £24 million annually.

Outcomes

The programme is being evaluated by researchers from the University of Oxford between 2021 and 2027. A recent study indicates that programme participants are less likely to be subject to disciplinary sanctions while in custody, suggesting an improvement in institutional behaviour (Newson et al., 2024). Twinning Project participants also experienced increased optimism about their chances of re-employment. Social bonding with coaches and feelings of personal transformation are posited to facilitate the integration of prisoners into local communities through improved attitudes and behaviours (Newson, 2019; Whitehouse & Fitzgerald, 2020; Newson et al., 2024; Newson et al., 2025).

Evaluation Methods

The Twinning Project has been evaluated through a series of complementary studies. The first compared behavioural changes in a treatment group of incarcerated individuals (n=676) against a well-matched control group (n=1,874) in the United Kingdom, finding that behavioural improvements were associated with bonding to the Twinning Project. A second study assessed impacts in the community finding a role of both role-modelling coaches and emergent group identities. A third study evidenced improvements in well-being, and a fourth found that attachment to coaches and feelings of transformation following the programme led to bonding with the Twinning Project.

Scaling up

Initially launched in England and Wales, the Twinning Project has since expanded internationally, with programmes underway in the United States, Italy, Romania, Australia, and South Africa.



Case study 2:

Pour le sourire d'un enfant (Senegal)

Crédit photo:
Nelson Rosier Coulhon

The project

Based in Thiès, Senegal, the Association Pour le Sourire d'un Enfant has developed an innovative psychotherapeutic programme entitled Fencing & Restorative Justice, which draws on pedagogical principles from the discipline of fencing. Targeted at young detainees, both girls and boys, the initiative seeks to improve mental health, develop life skills to reduce the risk of reoffending, support sustainable reintegration, and promote a juvenile justice system that is more respectful of children's rights.

Target groups

In Senegal, juvenile delinquency must be understood in the context of broader societal challenges. The incarceration of minors presents a major issue for youth policy, with detention often lasting months or even years in cases involving serious offences. Many young people experience disrupted life paths; 34% are school dropouts and a significant number are involved in organised gangs. Girls are frequently charged with abortion or infanticide following early, unwanted pregnancies and solitary, often traumatic, births. Traditional punitive and educational responses frequently fail to address the needs of these young people, and the period of incarceration has profound effects on the physical and mental health of minors. Yet dedicated initiatives to address these issues remain rare. The Fencing & Restorative Justice method seeks to address this gap. Participation is voluntary and subject to joint approval by the social worker of the civil society organisation (CSO) and prison staff. Priority is given to minors accused of serious crimes, who often face long pre-trial detention periods. Participants' behavioural progress is taken into account by magistrates when considering sentence adjustments (such as supervised release or sentence reduction).

Ecosystem

Implementation relies on a longstanding partnership—spanning over 30 years—with Senegal's Ministry of Justice, and more specifically, with the prison administration and the juvenile justice and social protection system.

Activities

The association implements a structured learning framework that uses the foil discipline of fencing to work on five key psychological areas:

- **Identity:** Fostering self-esteem, self-confidence, and life decision-making.
- **Socialisation:** Developing interpersonal skills and adaptability essential for reintegration, such as respect for authority, others, and oneself.
- **Self-control:** Strengthening emotional regulation, frustration tolerance, and commitment.
- **Responsibility:** Encouraging accountability and the ability to justify one's actions.
- Motor, technical, and cognitive skill acquisition

The method comprises three sequential cycles of 3, 5, and 13 months respectively. Participants attend two 90-minute fencing sessions per week in mixed-gender groups of eight. Regular participation is essential for success.



Innovation

This approach is unique in its integration of five psychological constructs, with eight pedagogical principles specific to foil fencing, and both direct and indirect restorative justice frameworks. It aims to enhance young people's resilience and autonomy, facilitating healing from trauma and fostering individual capabilities. The innovation was recognised by UNESCO at the World Congress on Child Justice (Paris, 2028) and validated by the European Congress of Sport Psychology. Copyright for the method was registered with WIPO in 2021, and the brand Escrime & Justice réparatrice was trademarked in 2024.

Results

Over 700 minors have participated in the programme between 2015 and 2025, over 25% of whom were girls. The average age of participants is 17, and the dropout rate is close to zero.

Outcomes

Since 2015, the association has observed a reduction in recidivism from 20% to 0% among direct participants. Among their fellow detainees, recidivism fell from 20% to 4%, indicating a positive spillover effect. In total, more than 1,500 minors have benefited.

Evaluation Methods

The project is being studied as part of the Juvenile Justice and Youth Mental Health in Senegal research programme (2022–2025), in collaboration with the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD), the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), and Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD). The evaluation involves innovative uses of AI and access to judicial and penitentiary data to monitor recidivism. A psychiatric observation protocol evaluates behavioural progress based on the five psychological dimensions targeted by the method. Initial and final sessions incorporate the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Locus of Control assessment. During sessions, one educator facilitates fencing practice while another tracks each participant's progression. AI tools—based on social choice theory—have been developed to support pedagogical monitoring and academic research.



Scaling-Up

Scaling the Fencing & Restorative Justice method is structured around several pillars. First, the association has trained educators from the Senegalese Directorate for Juvenile Justice and Social Protection to implement the method in four regional centres. Second, follow-up programmes such as Jiggen'Art (focusing on artistic craftsmanship) and BioJemm (agroecology) have been developed for former participants to foster sustainable reintegration. Third, the association offers programme graduates the opportunity to train as facilitators for vulnerable children, thus turning the method into a vehicle for employability and social inclusion. Finally, the creation of the E&JR Academy opens pathways for international dissemination in countries including Côte d'Ivoire, France, and Sierra Leone.

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Author: Emmanuel Rivat (PhD),
Co-founder of Res Sportiva and Director of publications.

Reviewer: Martha Newson (PhD),
Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Greenwich, London,
and Leader of the Changing Lives Lab Group at the University of Oxford.

Bibliography available on our website res-sportiva.org

