

The benefits of prison chess clubs

September 11 2018, by Rosie Meek



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Chess is a cheap and tactical game, and is claimed to develop the part of the brain responsible for planning, judgement and self control, and even [to help prevent](#) dementia. So it's no wonder that thousands of prisoners in the UK are now part of [chess clubs](#).

Working with people in [prison](#) and tackling reoffending is one of the biggest challenges society faces and I've [long argued](#) that [physical](#)

[activity](#), sport and games have a unique and important role to play.

In prisons, just as in wider society, the impact of sport and games can be far reaching. Participation can not only improve health and behaviour but can [directly contribute](#) to efforts to reduce reoffending. It can provide a route for offenders into education and employment but also reduce violence and conflict, develop communication and other skills, and promote positive use of leisure time.

Recognising this, organisations and clubs are increasingly collaborating with prisons to develop programmes that promote activity and tackle reoffending in a range of ways. These include football clubs such as [Chelsea](#) and [Everton](#), rugby clubs including Saracens and Northampton, and other groups such as [parkrun](#), [Brighton Table Tennis Club](#) and the [English Chess Federation](#).

Evidence suggests that some less mainstream sports and games have a positive impact in prison settings, particularly for those who are otherwise sedentary or simply reluctant to engage. Positive outcomes have been demonstrated and documented in prison populations by offering [adventure activities](#), [animal assisted therapy](#), [yoga](#) and [chess](#).

Sporting principles

In mid-August 2018, I published a [review](#) commissioned by the Ministry of Justice into the use of sport and physical activity in youth and adult prisons. I visited and audited the provision of prisons, young offender institutions and secure children's homes throughout England and Wales, speaking with staff and those in their care. I invited responses to a public consultation and met with community groups and dozens of people whose lives have been changed through sport in prison.

Although much still needs to be done, I also reported some of the

positive sporting achievements which have already taken place in prisons and which have provided the motivation and skills for people to turn their lives around. These achievements are all the more remarkable given the levels of despair and brutality often encountered within the prison system. One example of good practice involved the use of chess in prisons.

Aside from the social and cognitive benefits of promoting chess in our prisons, in one of the secure children's homes I visited as part of my review, the clinical team told me about their use of a programme, informed by support given to people who had suffered trauma, to work with some of the most challenging children in their care. As part of this, the psychology team developed a series of tools using examples and principles from sports and games to develop behaviour management plans.

I learnt about how one staff member was using chess as both an analogy and a practical example in his one-to-one clinical work with one of the most challenging young people in the centre. I was told about how the rules of chess were used to inform therapeutic sessions, and how the game itself was a calming influence. The child had responded positively and aside from the direct therapeutic benefits of the sessions had also taken up chess as a hobby.

Because prisoners are a diverse group with diverse needs, the sports and games offered in prisons also need to be diverse. Older prisoners are the fastest growing population within English and Welsh prisons, and there are now [more over 60-year-olds](#) in prison than there are under-21s. This means that "meaningful activity" in prisons should constitute physically active as well as less active team and individual sports and games.

At a time when staff shortages and regime restrictions mean that efforts to escort prisoners from their residential wings to a gym or sports area

are regularly thwarted, a readily available, purposeful activity such as [chess](#) should be a welcome addition to – but certainly not a replacement of – the limited existing activities available within prisons.

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