

Reimagining Youth Justice Through Sport and Mentorship-Based Diversion

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Abstract

Philadelphia youth of color experience disproportionate risk of traumatic experiences which are linked to poor health outcomes in adulthood and significantly contribute to juvenile delinquency. Arrest and formal processing pull youth into a system that increases their exposure to trauma, reduces educational and employment opportunities, and contributes to subsequent offending that can perpetuate a cycle of system involvement into adulthood. Diverting youth from juvenile court to community-based programs promotes positive relationship-building and identity development while holding youth accountable through restorative interventions. Youth diversion can reduce recidivism without overburdening the courts while supporting youth in the development of social, emotional, and ethical competencies.

Students Run Philly Style (SRPS) transforms lives through mentorship over miles of long-distance running and achievement. MileUp is a diversion program of SRPS in partnership with the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office (PDAO), designed to keep minoritized youth ages 11-17 out of the criminal justice system. MileUp helps youth build a path out and away from the justice system as they meet program milestones (including earning paid restitution, having charges dropped, and receiving expungement of arrest) with support from mentors, youth advocates, and peer mentors. The program has consistently shown an increase in protective factors (resilience, participation in positive community activities, and a positive outlook toward the future). MileUp's collaboration with the PDAO and Drexel University's Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice creates a connection and community for young people in Philadelphia that helps provide positive, healthy habits and relationships they can carry with them throughout their lives.

Introduction

Students Run Philly Style (SRPS) transforms lives through mentorship over miles of long-distance running and achievement. Founded in 2004, SRPS pairs young people with adult mentors to train for a long-distance race, helping increase resilience and create positive community connections. SRPS' MileUp program, an innovative diversion intervention for youth involved with the justice system, promotes resilience in youth as they build a path out and away from the trauma and marginalization of system involvement.

Philadelphia youth, particularly youth of color, have experienced disproportionate risk of traumatic experiences which are linked to poor health outcomes in adulthood. Youth often lack informed social support and the coping skills that are essential when facing such high levels of stress.ⁱ As youth experience higher rates of grief, isolation, depression, and increased risk of suicide due to previous concerns and the overwhelming impact of the COVID-19 pandemicⁱⁱ, SRPS' mentorship model has helped students build critical resilience and healthy coping skills. During the pandemic, SRPS had more requests for mental health resources, support, and training than ever before, and many students turned, and continue to reach out, to their mentors as trusted, caring adults for support.

Youth of color are more than four times as likely to be detained or committed to juvenile facilities than their White peers, and by eighth grade, far more Black youth will be stopped and questioned by police than their White peers.ⁱⁱⁱ The stigmatized race and offender labels often ascribed to youth in the juvenile justice system and the reduced educational and employment opportunities they experience thereafter increase the likelihood of re-offending and initiate a cycle of system involvement that can follow young people into adulthood.^{iv} While keeping youth out of the system remains key in improving outcomes, diversion is still vastly underutilized in the U.S.^v Until the inception of MileUp, youth facing felony-level crimes in Philadelphia were not eligible for diversion. Students would enter placement facilities run by local governments or private companies, and while there, they often face abuse, neglect, and even death.^{vi} Such unethical placement has not been shown to reduce recidivism and leaves families struggling to pay restitution, resulting in reentry risk.^{vii}

Collaboration

In 2020, SRPS partnered with the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office (PDAO) to help youth involved with the juvenile justice system build protective factors and decrease the risk of trauma associated with formal system involvement. SRPS' MileUp program serves Philadelphia youth, ages 11-17, facing misdemeanor and/or felony charges, including those with the highest recidivism rates, such as auto theft/unauthorized use of vehicles. Youth participate in a 12-week program, running three times per week with a team of supportive Mentors and Advocates to train for either the Blue Cross Broad Street 10-miler in May or the Philadelphia Half Marathon in November (13.1 miles).

SRPS has worked with the PDAO to develop a referral system in which the PDAO refers youth to MileUp, provides guidance to families, and monitors any rearrests throughout the program and at 6-month intervals to track recidivism. When youth complete the MileUp program milestones, they have restitution paid to victims, the opportunity to have charges dropped, and they become eligible for expungement of arrest. SRPS provides all programming, including running shoes, shirts, gear, race entries, and transportation (to and from all events) for free to all students enrolled.

In 2021, SRPS increased support for youth by working with Drexel University's Center for Nonviolence and Social Support to offer CYPHER interventions to all MileUp youth. CYPHER is a culturally relevant group intervention based on the evidence-informed S.E.L.F. (Safety,

Emotions, Loss, Future) trauma recovery groups, which have proven effective in mitigating the effects of trauma. Throughout the program, youth participate in a 5-session CYPHER intervention with sessions that are facilitated by trained individuals who have lived experience of violence. The CYPHER sessions also provide opportunities to refer students to individual peer support and/or mental health services, as needed.

In the same year, SRPS also partnered with the PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency to create the MileUp Peer Mentor program. Youths formally involved with the justice system, aged 16-21, join SRPS as part-time paid employees to run with youth and receive trauma-informed training. SRPS trains and supports Peer Mentors and all adults working with youth. SRPS' model uses evidence-based practices and is designed with a critical approach to serve youth facing marginalization better. Working with various partners in the community, staff, and volunteers, they also attend workshops, sessions, and panels to further their knowledge of trauma-informed sports-based mentoring and the youth SRPS serves.

SRPS partners with Temple University's Sport Industry Research Center (SIRC) which evaluates each season of the program. Based on seven seasons of the program, outcome analysis consistently shows that:

- 90% of youth will not experience an arrest/delinquent offense, be committed to a juvenile facility, or be sentenced to adult prison,
- A minimum of 80% of youth will report an increase in protective factors (resilience, participation in positive community activities, positive outlook toward the future) from pre-to post, and
- 92% of youth will complete milestones to reduce the risk of further system involvement (receive paid restitution, have charges cleared, and expungement of arrest).

Innovation

MileUp was the first diversion program in Philadelphia for youth facing felony charges; there are now more than 20 options for youth facing such charges. MileUp is one of two diversion programs in Philadelphia that provides paid restitution. Since inception, 90% of MileUp youth have successfully completed the program, 86% have had their record expunged and/or are eligible for expungement, and youth have earned over \$40,000 in paid restitution to victims. As of writing this, 15 former MileUp youth have returned to work as paid Peer Mentors.

MileUp offers support for the trauma experienced by youth involved with the justice system via healing-based, restorative practices. The majority of youth involved with the justice system are youth of color, living in low-income communities who due to inequitable practices and systemic racism face inordinate adversity. As system involvement increases these risks, MileUp offers youth the chance to avoid negative outcomes and build resilience through equitable practices.

Discussion

The MileUp program builds on SRPS' 20-year history of serving Philadelphia youth through its sports-based mentoring model. SRPS helps youth build resilience, confidence, and the tools for a

healthy lifestyle. Evaluations of SRPS consistently demonstrate that youth develop strong self-regulatory skills through running, which successfully transfer to challenges met outside of the program (such as those in school or within communities). SRPS serves over 1000 students annually and has partnered with over 100 Philadelphia schools and community organizations to offer its evidence-based programming.

As SRPS has evolved, the program is exploring opportunities to further advance equity in delivering its services based on its experience developing and implementing MileUp. As the program grows, it will examine how to proactively bring elements of MileUp's restorative intervention strategies to its larger program, further supporting its core model to increase protective factors, primarily for young people facing high levels of marginalization. SRPS believes young people in marginalized communities want and need coping skills to develop resilience, confidence, and connection but can lack resources that help build those skills. Strengthening the current volunteer-based model with intentional staff support and further collaboration with partners can have a significant impact on SRPS' ability to foster the positive health outcomes associated with completion.

Recommendations

SRPS' MileUp program was developed with collaboration in mind, first working with NorthEast Treatment Centers to pilot a version of the program, then developing a more formal program with the PDAO based on the learnings from the original pilot. The first season of MileUp was scheduled for March 2020, at the very onset of the pandemic, a time during which youth facing charges involved with the juvenile justice system were left with fewer resources and greater risk. With a commitment to serve the youth enrolled in that first season, SRPS was successfully able to adapt through the creation of virtual options, and as running is an activity that can be done with ample opportunity for social distancing, MileUp youth and Mentors successfully met their milestones of the program.

Since then, SRPS has increased MileUp staff to better support the growth and development of the program. Students are supported by volunteer, adult Mentors, paid Youth Advocates (part-time staff who run with youth, provide case management, and help youth and families navigate the justice system and meet milestones set with the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office), Paid Mentor/Drivers (who run with youth and provide transportation to and from practices and events) and Peer Mentors. Peer Mentors work closely with staff and receive training on peer mentoring best practices. Peer Mentors help to set the tone of the program, ensuring youth can continue to engage with and have a voice within the program.

Conclusion

Trauma-informed sport is an accessible, positive intervention for youth with a history of trauma. According to a meta-analysis published in the *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, sports can help transform stress from "toxic to tolerable." Along with coping skills and resilience built in SRPS, one cannot dismiss the joy of accomplishment, especially when it is experienced within a trusted community. As one MileUp student shared his experience, "*I learned about myself that*

there's a side that comes out with joy instead of being angry like how I usually be." Other youth diversion programs across the city, while utilizing different activities in addition to running and sports, have created spaces that allow young people to develop resilience in many different settings while remaining outside of the juvenile justice system. SRPS' collaboration with the PDAO and Drexel University's Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice has created a connection and community for young people in Philadelphia that helps provide positive, healthy habits and relationships they can carry with them throughout their lives.

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