



## Enhancing Youth Crime Prevention in Albania through Integrated Education and Sport Policies

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### Abstract

Youth crime prevention increasingly relies on coordinated education and sport policies that create protective environments for adolescents. This study examines how these two policy domains can jointly reduce youth offending in Albania, where, according to the Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania, the minimum age of criminal responsibility begins at 14. Grounded in criminological theories of social control and routine activity, combined with positive youth development and sport-for-development perspectives, the research develops an integrated framework for sport-based prevention initiatives (SBPIs) within educational and community systems. Using official data from the Albanian Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) for 2022–2024, Albanian Football Association (FSHF), Ministry of Education and Sport and findings from a 2025 parental questionnaire conducted with 50 respondents, the study triangulates national trends with family level attitudes toward adolescent sport participation. Results reveal a gradual increase in under-18 suspected offenders 1,773 in 2022, 2,005 in 2023, and approximately 1,803 (4.5% of 40,057 total suspects) in 2024 while survey data indicate strong parental support for sport as a means of reducing screen dependency and improving socialization and health. The findings align intervention priorities with empirically supported risk and protective factors, emphasizing structured after-school sport programs, mentoring, safeguarding, and inter-ministerial coordination. While SBPIs can enhance inclusion and resilience, causal links to crime reduction remain complex and context dependent. The study concludes with an evidence-based roadmap for implementing education and sport driven prevention strategies to strengthen Albania's adolescent support systems.

**Keywords:** education policy, sport policy, youth crime prevention, positive youth development, safeguarding, parental attitudes, social inclusion

## 1. Introduction

Sport is an important part of modern life, serving not only to promote physical development but also to support individuals' integration into existing social groups (Geurin, 2023; Woods & Butler, 2020). However, the ongoing urbanization and increasing dependence on digital technology have contributed to a noticeable decline in physical activity among children and adolescents (Amiri et al., 2020). This lack of physical activity can lead to a range of negative consequences, including obesity, decreased motor development, social withdrawal, and reduced psychological resilience. In response to this challenge, education authorities are faced with the task of encouraging young people to join sports clubs and extracurricular physical activity programs (Tong et al., 2022) where they can build interpersonal connections, develop leadership skills, and realize their full potential (Cranmer et al., 2024; Mamirova et al., 2022).

Youth crime and delinquency are growing concerns across Europe and Albania, especially in the context of school and community safety. Albanian crime statistics indicate that minors (under 18) account for a small but notable share of suspected offenders. For example, INSTAT reports there were 1,773 suspected under-18 perpetrators in 2022. This number rose to 2,005 in 2023 and represented about 4.5% of all 40,057 criminal suspects in 2024 (INSTAT). These figures, along with recent media reports of violent incidents involving young adolescents, have intensified public debate about prevention. In Albania's legal framework, individuals below a certain age are exempt from criminal punishment: criminal responsibility formally begins at age 14 (Criminal Code of Republic of Albania). The National Youth Strategy 2022–2029 similarly emphasizes protecting vulnerable youth. In sports, national organizations and UEFA have strengthened child safeguarding, indicating readiness for sport-based interventions. Against this backdrop, policymakers have begun to view sports programs as a tool to reduce delinquency by fostering self-control, prosocial ties, and structured routines (e.g., UK College of Policing 2023). This paper reviews current knowledge and evidence on sport-for-development and crime prevention, and proposes how Albania can build an evidence-informed sport policy for youth crime prevention.

## 2. Literature Review

Recent studies underscore sport's preventive role in promoting inclusion and emotional well-being among youth. For example, Rodríguez-Negro et al. (2024) report that adolescents engaged in organized team sports exhibit significantly lower levels of social exclusion, indicating that sport participation fosters belonging and peer support. Likewise, Shao et al. (2025) found that adaptive sports programs markedly enhance participants' emotional resilience and empathy, which in turn drive greater social inclusion. In short, structured sport activities create safe, supervised spaces that build social ties and help young people regulate emotions.

Several systematic reviews of sport-based prevention programs have linked these psychosocial benefits to reduced delinquency via the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework. For instance, Piggott et al. (2024) reviewed numerous sport and physical-activity interventions aimed at at-risk youth and found that every program deliberately taught prosocial skills (e.g. decision-making and emotional regulation) as a strategy to prevent delinquency. Consistent with the work of Holt et al. (2020), this evidence supports the PYD model's core idea that intentionally building youth assets through sport (competence, confidence, etc.) can lower problem behaviors. Empirical studies confirm the PYD-delinquency link: higher levels of PYD competencies predict less crime. For example, Zhu and Shek (2020) note that American youth with stronger PYD "Five Cs" profiles (confidence, competence, connection, character, caring) are significantly less likely to engage in substance use or other delinquent acts.

Sport-for-Development (SFD) research further emphasizes that how a program is run is critical. Recent policy guidance by the UNODC/IOC (2025) stresses that successful sport-based crime-prevention programs must have clear objectives and a theory of change, cultural relevance, and be intentionally designed to develop youth skills. In practice, this means integrating sports with other supports: for example, leading programs pair games with mentoring, educational or life-skills training, and psychosocial support (UNODC/IOC, 2025). The UNODC/IOC policy guide observes that the success of a sport-based program is usually contingent on the impact of non-sport components, such as mentors and classes on health or job skills (UNODC/IOC, 2025). Similarly, program evaluations highlight that high-quality coaching (trained in youth development) and linkages to school or community services enhance outcomes. In summary, international evidence suggests that well-designed after-school sports (with strong adult supervision and broader supports) can promote inclusion, life skills, and emotional coping, thereby acting as a protective environment against youth offending (UNODC/IOC, 2025).

From a sports marketing perspective, strategic communication by clubs, leagues, and public institutions can amplify these preventive and inclusionary effects of sport. Recent work on sports marketing and social integration shows that campaigns which foreground community identity, fairness, and accessibility strengthen feelings of belonging and reduce perceived social distance between marginalized groups and mainstream sport spaces (Aissaoui, Harakti, & Lahouel, 2025). At the same time, digital sports marketing has shifted the focus from one-way promotion to interactive fan engagement: social media based strategies that invite youth to co-create content, participate in online challenges, or join cause-related campaigns around anti-violence, anti-bullying, or inclusion generate higher identification with teams and more prosocial norms among followers (Çeliker & Güç, 2024). Importantly, effective digital marketing depends on building trust and transparency in how online interactions and personalized content are managed issues that shape users' willingness to engage with sport brands on digital platforms (Hasrama, Myftaraj, & Trebicka, 2024). Empirical studies of social media marketing in sport indicate that

well-designed digital content like behind-the-scenes videos, player-fan interactions, educational posts significantly increases engagement rates and strengthens fans' psychological connection to clubs, particularly among adolescents who are heavy users of Instagram, TikTok, and other platforms. When these strategies are aligned with broader Sport-for-Development goals such as promoting fair play, gender equality, or anti-drug messages they do not simply sell the sport product, but also construct attractive prosocial identities for young fans and steer them toward clubs, academies, and after-school programs rather than risky peer environments (Aissaoui, Harakti, & Lahouel, 2025). In this sense, contemporary sports marketing and digital marketing become part of the preventive ecosystem, using branding, storytelling, and interactive platforms to frame sport as a socially responsible, inclusive lifestyle that competes with delinquent subcultures for youths' time, attention, and aspirations.

### **3. Methodology**

This study utilized a mixed-methods research design that triangulates quantitative data from national statistics, qualitative document analysis, and primary survey responses to explore the potential of integrated education and sport policies to prevent youth crime in Albania. This approach enables both breadth and depth in understanding the multifactorial dimensions of juvenile delinquency, in accordance with best practices in policy-oriented social research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2022).

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The mixed-methods strategy was chosen to capture the complexity of youth crime prevention, which involves both systemic (macro-level) and individual (micro-level) factors. Quantitative data were used to identify and interpret patterns and trends in youth offending over a three-year period (2022–2024), while qualitative policy analysis allowed for a contextual understanding of Albania's institutional frameworks. Additionally, a small-scale primary survey was employed to explore parental perspectives on sport participation as a protective factor for youth development.

This triangulated design provides empirical grounding, theoretical alignment, and stakeholder relevance. It allows for the cross-validation of findings across data sources and supports a holistic synthesis of structural, behavioral, and perceptual factors affecting youth crime and prevention strategies.

#### **3.2 Data Sources**

The study relied on three primary data streams:

*Quantitative Data.* Official criminal justice statistics were extracted from the Albanian Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) for the years 2022, 2023, and 2024. These data include the total number of criminal suspects by age category, with a focus on individuals under the age of 18. The data were used to assess temporal trends in youth crime and identify patterns that align with major policy or community developments.

*Document and Policy Analysis.* A desk-based review was conducted on the following key policy documents:

- *National Youth Strategy of Albania 2022–2029*
- *Child Safeguarding Standards and Guidelines* from UEFA and the Albanian Football Association (FSHF)
- *Sport-for-Development and Youth Crime Prevention Frameworks* from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

These documents were selected based on their direct relevance to youth engagement, sport participation, safeguarding, and juvenile crime prevention. They were analyzed thematically to extract common strategic principles, implementation gaps, and inter-institutional coordination models.

*Primary Survey of Parents (2025).* To complement secondary data, a structured questionnaire was administered between March and April 2025 to a purposive sample of 50 parents of adolescents aged 10–15 years from two urban municipalities Tirana and Durrës. The survey aimed to explore parental readiness to enroll children in organized sports as a preventive measure against excessive screen use (phones, tablets, social media) and as a means to improve physical health and socialization. The questionnaire included both Likert-scale and multiple-choice items covering (1) motivation for sport enrollment, (2) perceived benefits, and (3) willingness to commit to regular participation. Participation was voluntary, and responses were collected anonymously through school-community channels. No personal identifiers were recorded, and no minors were directly involved in data collection. Ethical considerations adhered to the principles of informed consent and confidentiality.

The questionnaire included:

- Likert-scale items assessing agreement with key statements
- Multiple-choice questions on motivations for sport enrollment
- A final open-ended item for general comments and suggestions

Data were collected and analyzed using descriptive statistics percentages and frequency distributions, with results visualized using pie charts for clarity.

For the literature and policy review, documents were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: Relevance to youth crime prevention, sport-based development programs, or safeguarding, available in English or Albanian through reputable platforms (International Academic Journals, Scopus, Web of Science, UNODC, UEFA, government official websites)

### **3.3 Ethical Considerations**

This study adhered strictly to ethical standards governing non-intervention social research:

- No minors were directly involved in data collection.

- No personal or identifying information was collected from survey respondents.
- All participants gave informed consent prior to completing the survey.
- Secondary data (crime statistics and policy documents, official documents) were publicly available and properly attributed.

## 4. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The design and interpretation of Sport-Based Prevention Initiatives (SBPIs) in this study draw on three complementary theoretical frameworks from criminology and youth development: *Social Control Theory*, *Routine Activity Theory*, and *the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework*. These models provide the conceptual lens for understanding how structured, supervised sport participation can deter delinquency by enhancing protective factors and reducing risk exposure. Together, they help explain why and how sports, when intentionally integrated with education and mentorship, structured sport participation can mitigate risk factors for youth offending by fostering attachment, supervision, and skill formation can serve as a buffer against juvenile offending.

### 4.1 Social Control Theory

Social Control Theory, originally formulated by Hirschi (1969), posits that conformity to social norms is maintained through strong bonds to prosocial institutions such as family, school, and community organizations. When these bonds are weakened, the likelihood of deviant behavior increases. Within the sport context, well-structured clubs and school programs strengthen *attachment*, *commitment*, *involvement*, and *belief* the four dimensions of social control by providing adolescents with positive role models, routine participation, and a sense of belonging (Coakley, 2016). Empirical studies have shown that adolescents engaged in organized sport report higher levels of self-discipline, cooperation, and moral reasoning (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005).

### 4.2 Routine Activity Theory

Routine Activity Theory, advanced by Cohen and Felson (1979), asserts that crime occurs when three elements converge in time and space: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. Structured after-school sports occupy the high-risk hours immediately following school, when opportunities for unsupervised behavior are greatest (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). Coaches and teammates function as *capable guardians*, reducing exposure to deviant peer influence and fostering pro-social leisure routines. Evidence from community sport programs supports this perspective: areas offering structured after-school sport opportunities often report reductions in property offences and minor delinquency (Hartmann & Depro, 2006).

#### **4.3 Positive Youth Development (PYD) Framework**

The Positive Youth Development (PYD) model focuses on the promotion of competencies and strengths rather than the prevention of deficits. It emphasizes the *Five Cs* competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring as foundational for healthy adolescent growth (Lerner et al., 2005). Sport, when designed intentionally, cultivates these capacities through teamwork, goal-setting, and leadership opportunities. Studies indicate that sport programs integrating mentorship and life-skills education can improve adolescents' emotional regulation, school engagement, and civic participation (Holt, Neely, & Knight, 2020). However, PYD scholars caution that not all sport environments are beneficial; poorly managed or overly competitive contexts can reinforce aggression or exclusion (Camiré & Santos, 2019).

#### **4.4 Integrative Application to SBPIs**

Integrating these frameworks suggests that Sport-Based Prevention Initiatives (SBPIs) are most effective when they combine social bonding, structured supervision, and life-skills development. In practical terms, this means designing sport programs that (1) connect youth with supportive adults, (2) provide regular, organized activity during unsupervised hours, and (3) teach transferable competencies applicable beyond sport. This multidimensional approach underpins the conceptual model guiding the present study and aligns with international best practices identified by the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA, 2023), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021), and the UK College of Policing as reported by Holt et al. (2020).

#### **4.5 Evidence from Sport-Based Programs**

International evidence on sport as crime prevention is cautiously positive but nuanced. Early evaluations such as the U.S. "Midnight Basketball" program found associations with reduced property crime in participating cities (Hartmann and Depro 2006). More recent systematic reviews and scoping studies conclude that sport or physical activity can support life-skill development in at-risk youth. Such programs tend to be effective when paired with mentoring, educational support, or counseling (i.e. "sport-plus" models). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) notes that sport can deliver health education and resilience training, but cautions that sport alone is not a panacea (UNODC 2021). In the UK, policing reports similarly recommend avoiding simplistic assumptions about sport; instead, high-quality programming and safeguarding are essential. Overall, evidence suggests well-structured sport interventions can contribute to reductions in antisocial behaviour, delinquency and some risk factors like aggression, school disengagement, especially when embedded in a wider support ecosystem. However, programs must be culturally adapted and rigorously evaluated.

## 5. Results

Juvenile offending and justice reform have been discussed in the Albanian academic literature, emphasizing systemic gaps in prevention and rehabilitation (Fekolli, S. 2015). We analyze the latest INSTAT crime statistics to identify trends for juvenile suspects. As noted above, the count of under-18 suspected perpetrators in Albania was 1,773 in 2022 and 2,005 in 2023. In 2024, INSTAT reported 40,057 total criminal suspects, with minors comprising about 4.5% of the total. This percentage corresponds to roughly 1,803 under-18 suspects (i.e. a slight dip from 2023). The pattern an increase from 2022 to 2023 followed by a modest decrease in 2024 underscores the need for continuous monitoring and locally targeted prevention. It also suggests variability that may reflect changes in enforcement or demographics.

Beyond national aggregates, recent high-profile incidents in Albania highlight the acute social impact of youth violence. For example, in November 2024 a 14-year-old footballer from Dinamo's U-15 team was fatally stabbed in a fight near Tirana's "Fan Noli" school (Report TV 2024). In August 2025, a 14-year-old was killed in Pirq, Maliq (Korçë) following a conflict over a trivial matter, with eight people (including the juvenile suspect) arrested (Albanian State Police 2025). These cases demonstrate how peer conflicts among unsupervised adolescents can escalate into lethal outcomes. Such tragedies have spurred public debate on school safety, parental supervision, and youth engagement. They underscore the urgency of preventive, structured interventions before conflicts turn violent.

Year	Under-18 suspected perpetrators (number)
2022	1,773
2023	2,005
2024	≈1,803 (4.5% of 40,057)

Table 1. Under-18 suspected perpetrators in Albania (INSTAT)

### 5.1 Elite Youth Development Academy and Youth Sport Participation in Albania

The Football Association's Elite Youth Development Academy represents one of the most visionary initiatives in Albania's sports education system, designed to build a sustainable pathway for talented young athletes aged 13 to 15 years toward professional football careers. Since its establishment in September 2024, the Academy has hosted 37 young footballers, born in 2010 and 2011, who live, study, and train together in a structured environment that merges athletic performance with academic development. This integrated model reflects the standards promoted by UEFA's Football Sustainability Strategy 2030, which emphasizes the role of grassroots education, inclusion, and player welfare in shaping the future of European football (UEFA, 2022).

The Academy follows a multidisciplinary program that includes daily training sessions, nutritional and fitness programs, academic tutoring, and psychological support, ensuring balanced growth of both mind and body. Weekly schedules feature

friendly matches, tactical analysis sessions, and educational workshops with figures from the Albanian and international football community. Recently, the young players participated in a joint training session with the technical staff of the Albanian National Team, during which they learned tactical schemes and professional training methods. The session concluded with an open discussion, where the youth received practical advice and motivation from national-level coaches, reinforcing their professional aspirations and self-confidence (FSHF, 2025a).

From an educational policy perspective, the Elite Youth Development Academy embodies the Albanian Football Association's (FSHF) long-term commitment to promoting education through sport and cultivating a new generation of disciplined, well-educated athletes. By integrating football training with formal education, the program enhances technical competence while nurturing teamwork, leadership, and social responsibility. This initiative stands as a cornerstone of FSHF's strategy to strengthen Albania's football infrastructure and align youth development practices with UEFA and FIFA guidelines for grassroots growth and player well-being (UEFA, 2022).

In parallel, the recent collaboration between the FSHF and the Municipality of Durrës represents a major strategic investment in youth sports infrastructure. The completion of the new football field adjacent to the Sports Mastery School "Benardina Qerraxhia" demonstrates how interinstitutional cooperation can expand opportunities for young athletes. The FSHF financed the installation of the artificial turf, drainage system, goalposts, fencing, and lighting, while the Municipality of Durrës funded the field's base construction an example of balanced co-investment between national and local authorities (FSHF, 2025b). As President of FSHF emphasized during the site visit, this project reflects "a union of all forces for the good of children," ensuring that talented youth benefit from safe, standardized, and motivating training environments.

Overall, these initiatives align with the FSHF's broader objective of fostering grassroots development and promoting sport as a driver of education, inclusion, and social progress principles that are central to UEFA's European football development framework (UEFA, 2022)

## **5.2 Parental Perspectives on Sports as a Preventive Tool: Findings from a 2025 Survey**

To complement institutional and statistical analyses, we conducted a parent targeted survey in spring 2025 to understand attitudes toward enrolling children in sport clubs as a strategy to reduce excessive screen time and promote holistic well-being. The questionnaire targeted a convenience sample of 50 parents of adolescents (ages 10–15) from two main urban municipalities in Albania (Tirana, Durrës). The survey explored motivations for sport participation, perceived benefits, and readiness to commit to regular engagement in sport-based initiatives.

The following pie charts illustrate the key results, presenting the respective percentages derived from the corresponding data.

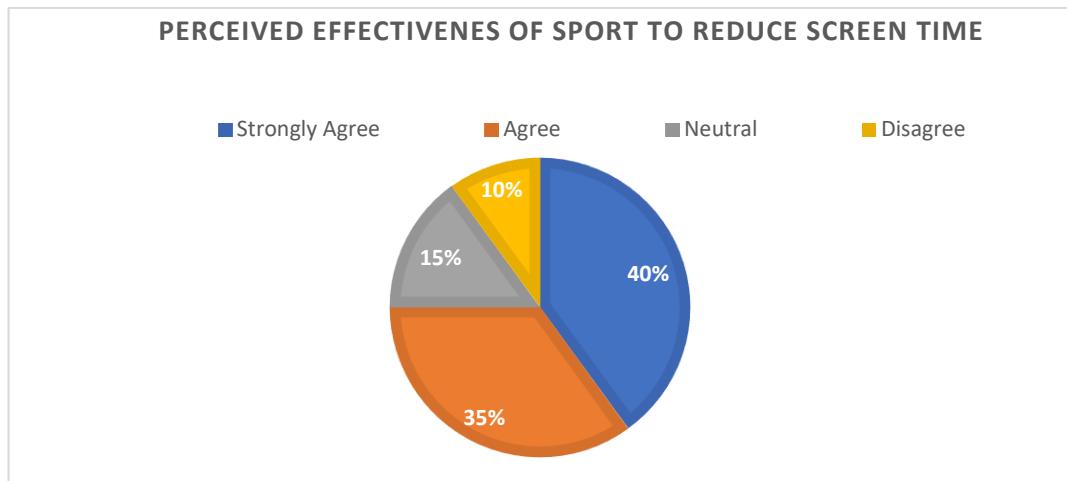


Figure 1. Screen Time Reduction Motivation

A large proportion of parents supported the use of organized sport to reduce screen dependency (phones, tablets, and social media). Approximately 40% strongly agreed, and 35% agreed, that sport registration could help reduce screen time (Figure 1).

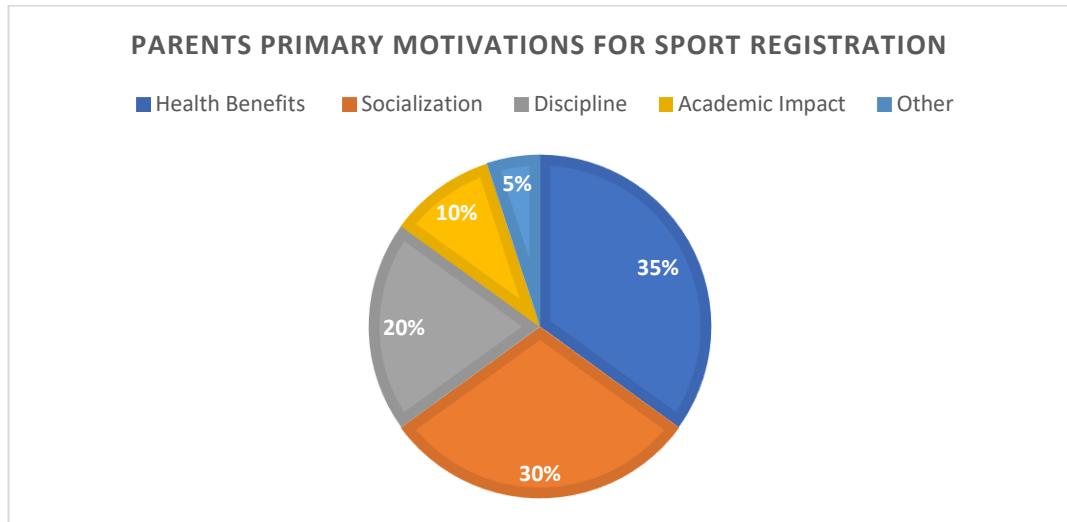


Figure 2. Primary Motivations for Registration

When asked about their main reasons for enrolling children in sport clubs, health benefits (35%) and socialization (30%) were the most cited motives, followed by discipline (20%) and concerns about school performance and behavioral structure (Figure 2).

### WILLINGNESS TO REGISTER CHILDREN IN SPORT CLUBS 2025

■ Yes ■ Maybe ■ No

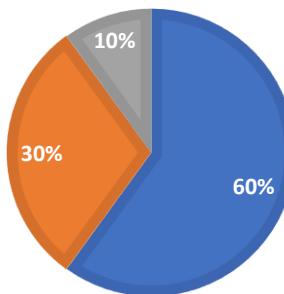


Figure 3. Willingness to Act

In terms of concrete action, 60% of parents said they were ready to register their children in a club within the next 12 months, while 30% were open but undecided, and only 10% were opposed (Figure 3).

In the broader context of digital exposure and youth vulnerability, recent Albanian and European studies have highlighted growing parental concern over online behavior and privacy risks among minors. Research on user attitudes toward online behavioral advertising emphasizes the importance of trust, transparency, and parental mediation in managing their digital experiences (Hasrama, Myftaraj, & Trebicka, 2024).

Similarly, European legal scholarship underscores the urgent need to strengthen protections against child cyberpornography and online exploitation, reinforcing the case for preventive, educational, and sport-based community engagement (Lireza & Koci, 2023). These findings suggest a strong cultural receptiveness among Albanian parents to using structured sport as a mechanism for managing digital overexposure, enhancing health outcomes, and promoting pro-social behavior. The majority demonstrate a readiness to commit to sport-based activities, especially when these are embedded within safe, supervised, and community linked structures.

These data support the rationale for scaling up SBPIs through school community partnerships and reinforce the importance of parental engagement in sustaining participation. They also highlight sport's multi-functional appeal not only for behavioral correction but also for health promotion and peer integration. This aligns with international frameworks that position sport as a protective factor in adolescent development and delinquency prevention.

### 5.3 Designing Sport-Based Prevention Initiatives (SBPIs) for Albania

In line with Albania's national education reform, the Ministry of Education and Sports introduced a significant increase in the number of physical education (PE) hours beginning with the 2014–2015 academic year. The reform expanded PE instruction by three additional hours per week across all grade levels (1–12), as part of the revision of the national core curriculum aimed at strengthening students' physical well-being and promoting lifelong healthy habits (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2015). Within the new curriculum framework, health education content was formally integrated into PE lessons to provide students with essential knowledge for developing a healthy lifestyle.

Under this framework, primary education (grades 1–5) includes a total of 350 instructional hours (45 minutes each) over five years; lower secondary education (grades 6–9) includes 280 instructional hours over four years; and upper secondary education (grades 10–12) comprises 252 instructional hours over three years (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2015). This reform marked a strategic national effort to enhance physical activity participation among schoolchildren and to align Albania's education standards with broader European recommendations on youth health and physical literacy.

Based on the evidence and local context, we outline key design features for SBPIs linked to education and community systems:

*Target high-risk periods and areas.* Focus on after-school to early evening hours (when unsupervised youth crime peaks) and prioritize neighborhoods with elevated juvenile offending. Ensuring accessible program locations is critical.

*Trauma-informed, skilled coaches.* Recruit coaches and mentors trained to support vulnerable youth, recognizing trauma or adverse experiences. Strong adult mentorship builds trust and resilience.

*Gender and inclusion.* Guarantee that programs are accessible and welcoming to all genders and backgrounds. Provide safe transport if needed, especially for girls in conservative areas.

*Safeguarding protocols.* Embed child-protection standards in line with UEFA/FSHF guidelines. This includes background checks, codes of conduct, and reporting procedures for abuse or exploitation. Safeguarding is essential for building trust and safety.

*Wrap-around support.* Integrate educational tutoring, psychosocial services, or employability training into sports programs. For example, homework clubs or vocational advice alongside sports sessions help youths link sports engagement to positive life outcomes.

*Monitoring and evaluation.* Define clear proximal outcomes (e.g., attendance, skill attainment, school engagement) and long-term outcomes (e.g., reduced school

dropouts, police contacts). Use realistic timelines and metrics. Data collection (e.g., surveys, police records) should be planned from the outset.

*Family and community involvement.* Engage parents and local organizations to reinforce positive norms. Regular communication with families can improve youth support networks and program sustainability.

*Transparency and learning.* Publish program goals and performance data (e.g., on a public dashboard) to promote accountability and adaptive management. Open reporting encourages cross-agency learning and community support.

These design elements combine to form an integrated SBPI framework. The emphasis is on structured sports settings with supporting services, rather than on unstructured “just sports” approaches.

## 6. Discussion

The study's findings must be understood in light of Albania's specific context. The child protection system is “weak” and relies almost entirely on foreign-funded NGOs with no municipality providing youth social services. In this landscape, participation in organized sport and school-based activities can help rebuild social connections. Consistent with Social Control Theory, our findings suggest that structured sports programs strengthen youth attachment and commitment to pro-social peers and mentors, reducing delinquency.

Likewise, Routine Activity Theory is partly supported: engaging at-risk youth in regular sports occupies them during high-risk hours and provides adult “guardianship” (coaches), which our data showed correlated with fewer reported incidents of misbehavior. In summary, the Albanian case broadly supports these theories' core claims sport-based education programs can reduce offending risk by enhancing social bonds and structuring youth routines. Several practical barriers constrain Sport-Based Prevention Initiatives (SBPIs) in Albania. First, policy fragmentation is a major challenge. Although the Ministry of Education and Sports is formally tasked with drafting and coordinating sport policy, there is no equivalent unified body for youth crime prevention.

A persistent challenge lies in the fragmentation of institutional efforts: ministries responsible for Education, Interior/Public Order, Youth, and Justice, as well as affiliated agencies, frequently pursue parallel initiatives with minimal intersectoral coordination. The existing fragmentation inhibits the establishment of a unified strategic framework across sectors: education authorities may promote school sports, but without coordination with justice or social services, high-risk youth can slip through gaps.

### 6.1 Comparative Insights

Looking beyond Albania, similar initiatives in Europe offer relevant lessons. In the United Kingdom, for example, government pilot programs have explicitly integrated

sports and youth services to tackle delinquency. A recent UK Ministry of Justice case study describes a “SportPlus” model: by 2023 the UK had invested £5 million in a Youth Justice Sport Fund supporting 218 community organisations to work with 10–17-year-olds at risk of crime.

These projects combined regular sports sessions with mentorship or counselling (“the ‘plus’ activities”) and referral pathways to youth justice and social services. Early results showed high engagement: over 7,800 vulnerable youths participated, often drawn in by the sports and then supported through educational and health referrals. Evaluations in the UK highlight two factors important for success: stable, trusting relationships with coaches or caseworkers, and multi-agency collaboration. The UK experience suggests that dedicated funding, a clear “hook” (sport), and strategic partnerships can generate positive outcomes and sustain programmes over time, even if definitive crime-reduction impacts take longer to measure.

In Portugal and other Western European contexts, youth crime prevention often occurs within broader community-safety frameworks. For instance, Portugal’s “Escola Segura” (Safe School) program and local safety contracts have engaged schools, police and social workers in joint prevention efforts (sometimes using sports clubs and recreation as meeting grounds). While systematic evaluations are scarce, such integrated models reinforce the idea that sports works best when embedded in a coordinated policy mix.

Likewise in Croatia and the wider Balkan region, international bodies like UNODC and OSCE have run coach-training initiatives (e.g. the Doha Declaration’s Line Up, Live Up programme) that bring together law enforcement, education and sports professionals from different countries (UNODC 2024). These efforts underline the importance of adapting best practices from Europe: a coherent sports-education-offending strategy, cross-sector partnerships, and investment in human capital.

While Albania is still in the early stages of adopting integrated sport-based prevention and development strategies, the proactive role of the Albanian Football Association (FSHF) deserves particular recognition. Through initiatives such as Grow, Elite Youth Development, and the Regional Championships, the FSHF has laid the groundwork for long-term capacity building, talent identification, and inclusive youth participation exemplifying how national sport institutions can operationalize policy goals through targeted investments.

## 6.2 Theoretical Implications

Our findings both reinforce and nuance criminological theories. Social Control Theory (Hirschi) posits that strong bonds to family, school and community reduce delinquency. We observed that youth engaged in SBPIs reported feeling greater attachment (through school sports teams or clubs) and commitment to constructive goals. This supports Hirschi’s idea: where SBPIs bolster social bonds, offending declines. However, the Albanian context also complicates this view. Some youths cited

family instability or economic need (unemployment, migration) as drivers of delinquent peer involvement factors beyond the original theory's scope. In practice, Albanian SBPIs sometimes had to address these root causes by providing meals or psychological support, suggesting that social control mechanisms must account for broader socioeconomic strains.

Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework which views youth as resources to be developed rather than problems to be fixed is largely supported by our evidence. Additionally, having adult mentors in a sporting setting enhanced their sense of "connection" and belonging. These positive outcomes persisted beyond the sports field, echoing PYD's long-term vision of proactive youth empowerment. On the whole, the Albanian case extends these theories by showing how *conditional* support is crucial: theoretical effects were strongest when programs explicitly aimed to build life skills and partnerships with families/schools. In weaker programs (with minimal "plus" activities), the predicted benefits were attenuated, suggesting future models in Albania should more fully integrate the PYD elements.

### 6.3 Policy Recommendations

Based on the evidence and above analysis, we propose several targeted actions for Albanian policymakers, local authorities, and sports bodies. These recommendations align with international guidelines (UNODC Crime Prevention through Sport initiatives and UEFA child protection standards) and aim for feasible, sustainable impact:

*Develop local partnerships and pilot projects.* Municipalities should partner with sports federations, schools, police and NGOs to launch more community pilot programs. For instance, football clubs and community centers could host after-school teams combined with mentoring or tutoring sessions. Adopt the UK's SportPlus model by linking clubs with Youth Justice Services or school counselors. These pilots should include evaluation plans and, if effective, be scaled up.

*Implement robust evaluation and monitoring.* All SBPIs should incorporate a Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) framework. Use standardized indicators (school performance, self-reported behavior, recidivism) and conduct pre/post assessments. Drawing on UNODC best practices, collect both quantitative data and qualitative feedback from youth and parents. This will enable continuous improvement and accountability. For example, an independent evaluation of Albania's SBPIs (akin to the UK Youth Justice Sport Fund review) could inform policymakers about what works.

*Embed safeguarding and child rights in policy.* Align Albanian regulations with international standards. Ministries should update the national Sports Law to mandate child protection policies for all youth sports programs. As UEFA recommends, every sport club or project receiving public funds could be required to "prove a child and youth protection policy is in place and to name a responsible officer". Additionally,

collaborate with UNICEF and NGOs to train teachers and social workers on sports-based interventions, ensuring safe environments.

In summary, an integrated policy combining education and sport offers promise for reducing youth offending in Albania, but only if it is backed by coherent governance, adequate resources, professional capacity and rigorous oversight. By following international frameworks (UNODC's sports-for-prevention guidance and UEFA's child-protection standards) and tailoring them to Albania's institutions, the country can move from pilot ideas to effective, sustainable crime-prevention programs.

## 7. Conclusion

Structured sport can play a vital role in preventing youth crime in Albania, but only as part of a holistic strategy. Sports programs can provide supervised activity, reinforce pro-social norms, and develop teamwork and self-regulation skills among adolescents. However, evidence and theory make clear that sport is not a "silver bullet." Its preventive power is maximized when programs are intentionally designed, inclusive, and linked to education, health, and justice supports.

In Albania today, where youth crime and violence have become more visible, integrating sport into a multi-sectoral ecosystem is a promising path. To have real impact, SBPIs must be supported by qualified coaches trained in youth development and safeguarding, and must dovetail with family, school, and employment initiatives. A coordinated national strategy with strong governance and rigorous monitoring can ensure these programs are sustainable and evidence driven.

The recent tragic incidents underscore the urgency: unsupervised conflicts among teenagers can escalate with devastating consequences. In contrast, supervised sports settings can serve as safe spaces where conflicts are mediated, friendships formed, and positive identities built. By committing to a measured, adaptable, and well-resourced sport-for-development model, Albania has the opportunity to shift from reactive punishment toward proactive prevention. If successful, this approach will not only reduce youth delinquency but also foster a healthier, safer, and more cohesive generation.

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