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NOTES ON MIDNIGHT BASKETBALL AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF RECREATION, RACE, AND AT-RISK URBAN YOUTH

Douglas Hartmann

A decade ago, dozens of American cities began to organize late-night basketball leagues for young men in mostly minority, inner-city neighborhoods. These so-called midnight basketball leagues initially enjoyed widespread public support; however, in the mid-1990s, they became the focus of intense controversy and debate. This article offers a grounded, critical overview. Midnight basketball is first described as part of the “social problems industry” that emerged in public recreation provision in the 1990s. The author then suggests that these programs are best understood in the context of contemporary political discourse and public policy regarding at-risk urban youth, and crime, delinquency, and public safety more generally. Midnight basketball’s racial roots and contours become central with respect both to the ideological consensus underlying contemporary American conceptions of crime and risk as well as the multiple and competing visions of cause and intervention. The article concludes by noting the starkly different perceptions of program participants themselves.

In a 1994 report titled “Beyond Fun and Games” (Tindall, 1995), the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) profiled 19 different programs dealing with a wide variety of social problems and public concerns operated by its local affiliates. The NRPA touted this collection of programs—which ranged from disease prevention, substance abuse, and public health to day care, juvenile delinquency, and teenage pregnancy to gangs, drugs, and violence to education and economic revitalization—for “bringing new dimensions to public recreation as human service.” They were among the earliest and most high-profile examples of what Robert Pitter and David Andrews (1997) described as the “social problems industry” that emerged in the world of sport and recreation in the 1990s (see also Schultz, Crompton, & Witt, 1995; Witt & Crompton, 1996). Premised on the remarkable proposition that having young people run around in short pants will have positive affects far beyond the limits of health and physical fitness, this “industry” has witnessed tremendous growth in recent years. Reliable estimates have not yet been generated, but if we consider that in 1997 the journal Parks and Recreation identified some 621 programs focused specifically

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on reaching “at-risk” youth (Witt & Crompton, 1997a), multiply that by the number of participants these programs served, and then add in the number of participants in comparable formal and informal projects implemented by organizations such as the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, Police Athletic Leagues, schools and community centers, and other such institutions all across the country, the scale and scope of this emerging industry is almost impossible to ignore.

As sport scholars well know, the notion of using athletically based programs to achieve broader social ends has a long history in American culture (Dyreson, 1998; Mrozek, 1983; Riess, 1989). American educational institutions have long justified interscholastic athletic competition and physical education itself as a means of cultivating school spirit, building character and self-discipline among youth and adolescent students, and preventing criminal and delinquent behaviors. The “play movement” of the early 1900s was promoted by progressive reformers who saw the development of parks and recreation programs as a way to socialize, assimilate, and “Americanize” the largely immigrant ethnic working classes moving to U.S. cities (Cavallo, 1981; Pope, 1997). And when President Kennedy launched the President’s Council on Physical Fitness in the 1960s, it was in direct response to the threat of the Soviet expansionism at the height of the cold war (Hoberman, 1984, p. 21). Indeed, given the absence of a genuine “right to sport” movement in the United States and long-standing American Puritan suspicions about leisure in general, the sporting establishment has invariably and almost inevitably been required to justify itself as a means to some larger ends.

Nevertheless, at least two features of these 1990-era programs are historically distinctive. One is their organizational structure and sources of financial support. In contrast to most previous sport and recreation-based social initiatives (which tended to be either publicly supported programs such as those run through public schools or parks and recreation departments or sponsored by private, philanthropic organizations like the YMCA or Scouts), 1990s programs were marked by a great deal of collaboration between and among public and private agencies, organizations, and initiatives—including prominent for-profit private sector organizations such as the Nike Corporation’s Participate in the Lives of American Youth (PLAY) program. Every one of the 19 programs highlighted in the 1994 NRPA report, in fact, was based in some kind of public-private partnership. The second defining feature of these programs is their focus on crime reduction, risk and violence prevention, and public safety. Eight NRPA programs listed crime prevention and public safety as their major emphasis, and it was “risk prevention” that researchers have chosen as the focal point of the evaluation the organization planned to conduct to demonstrate the effectiveness of such programs (Witt & Crompton, 1997a). For similar purposes, Pitter and Andrews (1997) identified 26 programs in 30 different metropolitan communities that “provide sport activities as a means of reducing crime and promoting public safety” (p. 89).
These characteristics mark this problems-based orientation as unique in the history of American sport and recreation provision and help explain why sport and recreation-based interventions were the subject of so much discussion and debate during the 1994 federal crime bill debates—a development that Chalip and Johnson (1996) claimed marked “the first time the [federal] legislature has seriously considered the possibility that sport could be incorporated into the domestic agenda” (p. 426). But they also endow this emergent social problems industry with social significance far beyond the world of sport, recreation, and physical fitness. Inspired by James’s (1963/1983) famous cautionary question, “What do they know of sport, who only sport know?” I am convinced that if we are to grasp the true meaning and political significance of problems-based athletic initiatives, we must look outside of the athletic realm. We must look, specifically, at the social “problems” these programs are purported to address. In this article, then, I intend to explore what these innovations in athletic programming reveal not just about American sporting policies and practices but, more important, about the problems of at-risk urban youth as conceived and addressed in contemporary political discourse and public policy. I will do this by focusing on the late-night basketball programs that countless cities and municipalities around the country have organized to attract and serve poor inner-city youth and young men of color. These so-called midnight basketball leagues make a good place to introduce, frame, and focus a more general study of problems-based athletic programs because they are easily the most well-known, widely copied, and controversial of all such initiatives.

**BASKETBALL AT MIDNIGHT**

The midnight basketball concept first came to widespread national attention in the fall of 1989 when the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), with a matching grant of $50,000 from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), organized leagues in two of its notoriously troubled housing communities (Rockwell Gardens and Henry Horner Homes). Even before the leagues had held their first game or even signed up a single player, the Chicago leagues were a public relations coup. The initiative was followed closely in the local media and praised repeatedly on editorial pages. Prominent local leaders—former Bulls coach and NBC commentator Doug Collins among them—were identified as “league owners” (sponsorship came with a $2,000 price tag), local sports celebrities including the legendary Michael Jordan were signed up to make appearances at games, and the Sun-Times agreed to publish league statistics, standings, and schedules in its sports section. Opening night at Malcolm X College was attended by the mayor, HUD secretary and Bush cabinet member Jack Kemp (the former congressman who had made his reputation as a professional football star and defender of President Ronald Reagan’s supply-side economics), and featured a demonstration by the Jesse White tumblers made famous by performing at halftime of Chicago Bulls games. Within weeks, the program was...
featured on ABC’s *Good Morning America*, one of NBC’s NBA television broadcasts, and in dozens of newspaper and magazine stories nationwide.

The CHA borrowed the concept from a man named G. Van Standifer, a retired systems analyst and former town manager of Glenarden, Maryland. Standifer had become convinced that one of the keys to the problems of poor, inner-city young men was the absence of safe, constructive activities during what he believed to be the high crime hours of 10:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m. His solution was to organize a basketball league that would operate in his Washington, D.C.-area community during these high-crime hours. Standifer’s basketball-based program was intriguingly simple and inexpensive. It operated only during summer months and had only three core components: first, that the target group was young men between the ages of 17 and 21; second, that no game could begin before 10:00 p.m.; and third, that two uniformed police officers had to be present and visible at each game. As I will discuss below, the program had an eclectic philosophical base and later added a variety of mentoring, tutoring, and advising workshops to its mix. But at its root was the notion that the program provided an alternative to the non-productive or even destructive activities of the street. “The Alternative” mantra, in fact, was selected as the program’s official motto. And if the initiative required minimal resources or expertise, its purported impact on crime reduction were massive. With strong support from local law enforcement officials, Standifer claimed that the program had contributed to a 30% reduction in late-night crime in his community in its first 3 years of operation. The Maryland County corrections chief, for example, told Chicago reporters, “I haven’t seen one single one of these basketball players back in my jail” since the program began (Foundation, 1990). Indeed, it was after seeing a story about the program in *The New York Times* and subsequently learning of the drop in crime in Glenarden, that Chicago officials resolved to develop a pilot program of their own.

Buoyed by the positive publicity of the Chicago project, Standifer created Midnight Basketball Leagues, Inc., and the organization, which eventually became the National Association of Midnight Basketball, Inc., experienced dramatic growth in the early 1990s, sanctioning some 38 affiliates or “chapters” nationwide (HUD, 1994). Each chapter, according to the parent organization, was a “non-profit, community-based organization adhering to formal training, rules and regulations” based on the original Standifer model outlined above. The association was written up in dozens of stories nationwide and featured on *60 Minutes*, ESPN, ABC’s *World News Tonight*, CNN, and a wide variety of other broadcasts. So appealing was the idea that startup grants for late-night basketball leagues were included in Section 520 of the Cranston-Gonzalez National Affordable Housing Act passed in the final years of the George H. Bush administration, and in the spring of 1991, President Bush designated Standifer and his program one of his official “thousand points of light” (Number 124, to be precise).

Perhaps even more notably, Midnight Basketball, Inc. spawned countless, nonsanctioned variations all across the country. Indeed, Pitter and
Andrews (1997) go so far as to describe midnight basketball as the “catalyst and template” (p. 93) for the sport-based social problems industry itself. It is primarily with this in mind that I have adopted a broad and expansive definition of midnight basketball in the work that follows—a definition that is not restricted solely to officially sanctioned programs but that also includes the wide variety of programs that use the following core principles: basketball; crime prevention orientation; evening hours (not necessarily midnight); target population: young adult, age 16 to 25 minority men; and strong security presence.

Midnight basketball is not a perfect or ideal-typical representative of problems-based athletic initiatives. Quite the contrary, a number of features mark midnight basketball as unique among the variety of sport and recreation programs that can be included under the rubric of “problems based.” For starters, there is the time of day of these programs and the fact that their target population is somewhat older than most sport and recreation-based outreach initiatives. Another distinctive characteristic is their strong security presence and emphasis on discipline and social control. More significant still is the degree to which midnight basketball programs are racialized (and gendered) despite the relentless race-neutral, color-blind rhetoric of its advocates. But what may be midnight basketball’s most distinguishing characteristic is that it has not retained the broad, bipartisan support it enjoyed when it first came to public prominence. That is to say, unlike any other sport and recreation-based outreach initiative midnight basketball has been the focus of a great deal of public discussion and debate, much of its extremely contentious and extremely high profile.

Much of the controversy first emerged in the context of the 1994 federal crime bill. In the context of the legislative process that produced this omnibus $30 billion bill, midnight basketball became the target of concerted Republican attacks and came to occupy a disproportionate amount of public debate and media coverage in spite of the fact that it constituted little of a fraction of a percentage of the total spending proposed in the bill (about $50 million at most). As I have shown in an extensive analysis of the racial politics played out in and through this controversy (Hartmann & Wheelock, 2000), more than 30% of national magazine articles on the crime bill made mention of midnight basketball, and dozens of politicians saw fit to discuss the program in congressional hearings on the matter. Such controversies have remained with us, at both national and local levels, ever since. Less than 2 years later, for example, problems surrounding a midnight basketball program in St. Louis, Missouri, were at the core of a scandal that brought down the city’s African American Mayor Freeman Bosley, Jr. (This was one of the first issues Bosley was forced to address in announcing his bid for reelection earlier this year.)

Rather than making midnight basketball an outlier on the problems-based sports program continuum, I am inclined to think that these unique qualities and characteristics make this policy initiative an eminently productive site for studying problems-based sport and recreation initiatives.
Specifically, I believe these features highlight and help us get to the center of core images, ideas, and ideologies built into and swirling around all such sport-based social outreach initiatives, especially with respect to their broader symbolic significance and their functioning in the cultural politics that surround recreation, risk, crime, and violence in contemporary urban America. They also ensure that there are plenty of empirical materials to draw on.

DATA AND METHOD

In spite of midnight basketball's obvious public prominence and political significance, scholarly research on the topic is extremely limited. Besides the various observations offered by Pitter and Andrews (1997), the only sustained scholarly treatment of midnight basketball comes from a dissertation that uses interviews with key political elites and program administrators to construct a basic history of the origin and early evolution of the initiative (Carter, 1998). Most of what is otherwise known about midnight basketball comes from journalistic sources that tend to be essentially anecdotal and incomplete. Those few scholarly works that exist (Derezotes, 1995; Farrell, Johnson, Sapp, Pumphrey, & Freeman, 1995) are essentially short-term, evaluative descriptions of individual midnight basketball leagues driven as much by the expectations of funding agents as by the concerns of policy evaluation or social scientific knowledge.

This interpretive analysis, one of the first products of a larger and more ambitious research program involving sport and recreation-based outreach and intervention initiatives in the contemporary United States, uses a variety of original empirical sources and research experiences. First and foremost are the archival materials collected for a study of the political developments involving midnight basketball in the context of the 1994 crime bill debates mentioned above. As part of this analysis, my research assistants and I compiled extensive, systematic samples of newspaper and magazine coverage of the legislative process and conducted close, careful readings of congressional hearings on the matter. During this process, we also collected extensive secondary and primary materials pertaining to the inception and evolution of the midnight basketball concept from its origins in Glenarden, Maryland, under Standifer and established telephone contacts with a number of current midnight basketball league administrators and organizers. In addition, this article draws on three on-the-ground, ethnographic experiences with midnight basketball programs in Chicago, San Diego, and Minneapolis.2

I draw on these materials, first of all, to construct a basic historical narrative of the origin and evolution of midnight basketball as a policy initiative and object of political discussion and debate. My broader analytic aim, however, is to develop an overview and critique of this program and the public attention it has attracted, focusing especially on its racial form and symbolic function considered in the context of the cultural politics of crime, violence, and risk in urban America. This critical interpretation is guided by
the theoretical principles I have laid out in a previous, Gramscian-inflected work describing sport as a “contested racial terrain” (Hartmann, 2000). In contrast to both prevailing popular opinion on one hand and dominant scholarly critique on the other, sport in this framework is understood as a racial terrain that is at once strikingly progressive and deeply problematic. But perhaps more important for the present analysis is that a full understanding of sport’s racial character requires attention not only to the racial organization of sport but also an awareness of the broader symbolic significance of sport in the public sphere, the racialized “cultural politics” (Gusfield, 1981) in which sport is implicated.

SPORTS FOR THE UNDERSERVED

In their generative treatment of the emerging social problems industry in sport, Pitter and Andrews (1997) situated midnight basketball—which they see, as I do, as paradigmatic for the entire industry—in the context of the social organization of sport in the United States conceived as a whole system of provision and consumption. Their discussion is informed by John Wilson’s (1994) important history on the matter. Wilson’s vision of the American sport system begins from the absence of universal sport provision in the United States and the concomitant domination of market- and consumption-based modes of sport access and delivery. These forces have combined, especially since the 1960s, to produce a “two-tiered” or “two-stream” system whereby “people who have the access to the disposable income and free time necessary to consume these services” have their sport and recreation needs served, whereas “the poor [and otherwise disadvantaged] are left with a shrinking pool of public . . . and private services, none of which they can afford” (Pitter & Andrews, 1997, p. 86). That is not to say that poor and disadvantaged populations must rely exclusively on market-based resources. Indeed, there has long been a relatively large, if decentralized system of public sport provision operated through private, philanthropic organizations; local parks and recreation departments; and community centers and schools. This is where midnight basketball fits into Pitter and Andrews’s scheme. As with other social problems-based sporting initiatives, midnight basketball leagues emerge by taking advantage of resources and funding niches that are not sport specific but are targeted to variously disadvantaged youth and their communities. League operators locate these funding opportunities and develop sports-based programs around them. Indeed, Pitter and Andrews described the social problems approach as a “new style of bringing sport and recreation to America’s underserved youth” (p. 86).

This interpretation of midnight basketball as a mode of sport provision for essentially disadvantaged and underserved populations is an obvious and appropriate place to start. For one thing, whatever other, larger objectives and ideals may be embedded in or projected onto these leagues, midnight basketball is, in a very basic and obvious way, a sports and recreation operation first and foremost. Indeed, the core element or belief built into the initiative as Standifer first conceived it was precisely that
basketball would bring poor, inner-city youth and young men of color in the
door—that these men would come to play ball (Carter, 1998, p. 27). The
supply side of this equation is also important. As anyone who worked in public
sport areas well knows, sports practitioners, especially those in depressed or
disadvantaged communities, began to realize in the mid- to late-1980s that
if they were going to sustain (if not expand) their offerings, they would need
to attach them to larger public spending priorities and funding trends. This
was precisely the point of the 1994 NRPA report quoted in my introduction:
to create a new justification for funding sport and recreation type programs.
Here, it is important to emphasize that the problem sports providers faced
was not just one of the limited resources but of declining resources as well.
Beginning with dramatic budget cuts to public parks and urban recreation
departments in the 1970s (Ingham, 1985; Shivers & Halper, 1981) and inten-
sifying with rising liability costs and the elimination of “extracurriculars” in
schools in the 1980s, funding and support for public sport provision has been
in dramatic decline (for discussions, see Chalip, 1988; Kelley, 1997; Rauner,
Stanton, & Wynn, 1994). It is probably not too much to suggest that it is the
cuts and declines in public provision that made sport administrators and
operators more responsive than ever before to nontraditional, non-sport-
less sources of sport provision and thus account for the watershed turn of the sport
and recreation industry away from the “sport for all” ethos that developed in
the 1960s and 1970s back to what Schultz et al. (1995) have called its “social
interventionist” roots.4

Conceptualizing midnight basketball in terms of sport and recreation
provision also puts in clear relief the social disparities and inequalities pro-
duced by a market-dominated sport delivery system. Pitter and Andrews
(1997, pp. 92-93) made this point by contrasting the slow and uncertain evo-
lution of problems-based sports programs with the rapid takeoff and prolif-
eration of consumption-driven suburban soccer leagues across the country,
symbolized by the spectacular success of the American Youth Soccer Organ-
ization (AYSO). Very simply, wealthier neighborhoods and communities have
resources that others do not to offset funding shortfalls and cutbacks. (For
more on youth soccer and its place in the American social landscape see also
Andrews, 1999; Andrews, Pitter, Zwick, & Ambrose, 1997.) And indeed,
Pitter and Andrews concluded their analysis with an ominous and in my
view fully justified prediction about the limits of programs such as midnight
basketball in terms of “serving America’s underserved youth.” The social
problems-based approach, they forecasted, will be “insufficient to sustain
the provision of sport and recreation to disadvantaged communities” (p. 96).

And the discrepancies between these two modes of youth sport deliv-
ery are not just limited to unequal access. They involve differential treat-
ment as well. Pitter and Andrews (1997) touched on this when they pointed
out that midnight basketball programs are typically “bounded by strict
rules, a code of conduct and mandatory workshops,” whereas suburban soc-
cer programs tend to be oriented toward participant-driven demands for rec-
reation, physical fitness, and fun as well as to athletic achievement. They go
on to suggest that these different modes of treatment “may be exacerbating the social and racial division[s] responsible for the very conditions the [problems-based] initiatives are trying to improve” (p. 93).

These observations are of the utmost importance, and I will have a good deal more to say about them below, particularly with respect to their racial subtext and implications. However, it is important to realize that a sport-based and market-oriented perspective affords limited analytical leverage by which to develop these points properly. Such an orientation provides little insight into why coaches and administrators presumably interested only in securing support for underfunded programs would adopt such radically different styles of running sports programs and dealing with program participants. More fundamentally, although conceptualizing midnight basketball in terms of its meanings and implications for sport provision may help us to understand why sports providers have found it expedient to adopt social problems rhetoric to secure scarce program resources, it cannot account for why public policy makers would be inclined to fund sports-based programs in the first place. This is a crucial point because sport provision was about the last thing that program funders, editorial writers, and citizen supporters had on their minds when promoting the idea of midnight basketball leagues as an innovation in American public policy.

NOT JUST FUN AND GAMES

In one of the earliest profiles introducing Standifer’s fledgling Maryland midnight basketball concept to the nation, The Washington Post assured its readers that “there are more serious things than basketball going on here” (August 18, 1988). The sports-based aspect of the program was, according to the Post, “just one part of a living clinic... in the omnipresent war on drugs.” When The New York Times picked up the story a few months later, its treatment similarly downplayed the athletically oriented component. “In a Late-Night Sport, the Game is Fighting Crime,” its headline read (February 13, 1989, Section 1, p. 49). These stories, it is important to note, were not run in the sports pages but in the main news sections of both papers. Similarly, when the CHA proposed its variation on the midnight basketball concept to HUD officers in the fall of 1989, the program was promoted as a “positive alternative to gangs and hanging out on street corners for high risk young adults” and described as both an “integral part of a much larger anti-drug strategy” and a “proactive step... in deter[ring] gang activity.” Neither sport nor recreation provision (nor, for that matter, physical fitness) was mentioned anywhere in its cover letter or the 10-page (single-spaced) proposal outlining the details of the plan. This in mind, the CHA must have been pleased to see The Chicago Tribune rate the idea a “slam dunk” (on its main editorial page, December 5, 1989), opining that “It's not just fun and games” but rather part of an “innovative” set of ideas to “break the cycle of crime, poverty and dependence that plagues life in public housing.”
And this is not just a matter of how these programs were conceptualized and promoted. Early midnight basketball initiatives were funded and operated by public agencies and private corporations with no explicit connections to or even interest in athletics. Standifer himself was a retired computer systems analyst and town manager, not a coach or athletic administrator. Legend has it, in fact, that Standifer got interested in basketball only after he concluded that it was the “activity of choice” for young people in his community late at night (Carter, 1998, pp. 26-27). The coaches during the first couple of seasons of Standifer’s league came not from parks and recreation departments or other typical basketball circles but from the Maryland State Department of Corrections and the U.S. Marshal Service. Interestingly, Standifer’s first corporate sponsor was not an athletic company but the Beer Institute of America (Carter, 1998, pp. 27-28, 32).

The programs I have done fieldwork on and around have similar stories. The San Diego program, for example, was run by an organization called High Five America, a Christian missionary group not unlike the more clearly labeled and well-known Fellowship of Christian Athletes. The basketball-based Stay Alive program I worked with in Minnesota was funded by the Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support (DHFS) as part of an initiative on violence prevention that began following a summer with an extremely high number of homicides in majority-minority neighborhoods and communities (Barnes-Josiah, Ansaari, & Kress, 1996). Its planners were not interested in basketball, anymore than they were interested in figure skating, motor racing, or cross-country skiing. (Few of them were even athletic or knew anything about basketball; they actually had to go out and recruit staffers with experience working in the athletic arena to make the program happen.) Rather, they simply saw in basketball an opportunity for social outreach and intervention. As one local city official told me in explaining his decision to dedicate a significant chunk of money toward a basketball-based program in the Twin Cities,

I don’t care about basketball at all—and neither does the Mayor or the City Council. That’s why we’ve got a parks and rec. department. I only care about finding programs that decrease the rates of violence and crime in our neighborhoods. That’s what this program is all about: violence prevention. If it is just about basketball, we shouldn’t be funding it—and if that’s what this program turns out to be I’ll stop funding it in a second. I’ll cut off the dollars myself. (Field notes, October 1999)

When federal funding was first allocated for midnight basketball in the early 1990s, it was not through the President’s Council on Physical Fitness or the grassroots sports development arm of the U.S. Olympic Committee, or even the National Parks and Recreation titles. It was not even through any of the various nongovernmental agencies and organizations that compose the decentralized American sport delivery system. Rather, it came through HUD (albeit a department headed at the time by a former professional football star). And when Democrats tried to expand and more fully
institutionalize funding for midnight basketball and a host of problems-based athletic programs in 1994, it was only under the rubric of two other, ostensibly larger pieces of legislation. One, led by Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder (CO) and Senator Carol Mosely-Braun (IL) would have included midnight basketball in an omnibus education bill—Goals 2000: Educate America Act—designed to improve high school graduation rates nationwide. The other Democratic approach was initiated by National Resources Committee Chair George Miller (CA) and his fellow Congressman Bruce Vento (MN) as part of their proposed Urban Recreation and At-Risk Youth Act.

The point here is not that the midnight basketball initiative was about more than basketball. The point, more precisely, is that for many administrators, funders, and observers, midnight basketball was about anything but basketball. Basketball, in all of these accounts, was merely a means to some larger ends. In naming midnight basketball one of his thousand points of light, President Bush himself may have made the point most clearly: “The last thing midnight basketball is about,” the president insisted, “is basketball” (quoted by Carter, 1998, p. 45 from The Washington Post in 1991). This is a rhetoric we must take seriously, if for no other reason than that it provided the justification for the funding and institutional support that was making this experimental concept a reality. And it is not enough simply to situate midnight basketball in the context of these other, non-sport concerns. More than this, we must make this context of urban problems and policy responses itself the focal point of the analysis. Anything else would be to mistake the forest for the trees.

IMAGINING AND TARGETING URBAN RISK

Having established that social problems outside of sport are the key to midnight basketball’s public appeal and political significance is only the first step, for it is not at all apparent what social problems midnight basketball (and the problems-based athletic industry in general) was supposed to resolve. The Washington Post, for example, thought midnight basketball to be part of the war on drugs; The New York Times believed it to be about crime fighting. When the CHA proposed league sponsorship to HUD, it described the goals of midnight basketball as twofold: deterring gang activities and part of a larger antidrug strategy. Following their lead, The Chicago Tribune described midnight basketball as about “breaking the cycle” of poverty and public dependence that “plagued” public housing in Chicago and around the country. In Minneapolis, late-night basketball was part of the city’s “youth violence prevention” initiative (thus the title “Stay Alive”) funded through the city’s DHFS. When midnight basketball finally found a legislative home in Congress in 1994, it was as part of the Youth Development Block Grant introduced into the House version of the federal crime bill in March.

It would be easy to get sidetracked in a discussion of which of these social problems was perceived as more fundamental or acute. But in my view, what is most important about them is what they all shared (besides basketball, of course), and that was the desire to reach out and influence the