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Douglas Hartmann

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FOCUS

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 NPRA 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).

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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?"[1] 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

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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 nonproductive 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 statistics and 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

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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.

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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

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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.[3] 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

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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 intensifying 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-based funding sources 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 produced by a market-dominated sport delivery system. Pitter and Andrews (1997, pp. 92-93) made this point by contrasting the slow and uncertain evolution of problems-based sports programs with the rapid takeoff and proliferation of consumption-driven suburban soccer leagues across the country, symbolized by the spectacular success of the American Youth Soccer Organization (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 delivery are not just limited to unequal access. They involve differential treatment 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 soccer programs tend to be oriented toward participant-driven demands for recreation, physical fitness, and fun as well as to athletic achievement. They go

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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.[5] 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."

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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, Ansari, & 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

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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, nonsport 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

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lives of a very specific social group: poor, inner-city youth and young men of color. Midnight basketball, that is to say, was targeted not to a specific social problem but to a specific social group, a population that was considered acutely at risk and hard to reach.

Some advocates were more explicit about this than others. The Minneapolis DHFS, for example, made no bones about the fact that they had decided to underwrite a basketball-based program because after having funded a dozen or so programs targeted to young men of color, they had found that the Ghetto Basketball Association was the only program that had successfully attracted the young men of color who, as both victims and perpetrators, constituted the vast majority of cases of homicide in the city at the time (Barnes-Josiah et al., 1996; Wixon, 1998). For their part, the agencies and organizations I worked with in and around in Chicago in the early 1990s did not care one way or another about whether their grant proposals and funding discussions focused around issues of drugs, crime, violence, gangs, or conflict resolution. They would simply tailor or rewrite proposals, position papers, and personal pitches depending on the particular interests of the foundation or funding agency they were appealing to at the moment—or better yet, throw all of these into the mix. This was not, I came to realize, because they did not care about the larger social ends toward which their sports-based programs were oriented; rather, it was because they saw all of these problems as intimately interconnected and inseparable, at least insofar as securing funding and institutional support was concerned. Targeting one of them was no more or less appropriate, in their minds, than targeting another—or, again, all of them together.

If there is qualification to this argument, it has to do with race. The program's racial contours and character were typically absent from the overt descriptions and appeals used by midnight basketball advocates. This is particularly interesting because I am firmly convinced that the most distinctive, indispensable feature of midnight basketball as a policy initiative and object of public attention had to do with its purported appeal to African American men. This is an argument my research associate Darren Wheelock and I devoted concerted attention to in our study of the 1994 crime bill discourse. We found that 40% of the time midnight basketball references came right before or after names or neighborhoods that were clearly coded as African American. And the racial roots of the Republican attack on the liberal preventative components of the crime bill through the symbol of midnight basketball are revealed when we consider that there were a number of other sport and recreation-oriented prevention provisions included in the bill (after-school recreation programs, Ounce of Prevention, Olympic development centers)—all of which were even more costly than midnight basketball, yet none of which was explicitly targeted in Republican attacks. The only thing that distinguished midnight basketball was its clear and undeniable connection with poor, young, African American men. Photographs and visual imagery also support this point. In my entire time researching midnight basketball, I have found only one photograph or other visual represent-

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ation that did not explicitly portray an individual of color (and that one was from a radical publication clearly trying to undermine the racial imagery that animated popular conceptions of the program). Finally, the whole Democratic idea of expanding federal support for midnight basketball in 1994 was an overt appeal to African Americans and the Congressional Black Caucus. President Clinton's own references to midnight basketball may, in fact, provide the clearest evidence of midnight basketball's racial character.

The president made midnight basketball's racial images and connotations manifest in his first public mention of the program in April of 1994 when he connected midnight basketball with a plan whereby his Housing Secretary Henry Cisneros (himself a prominent minority member of the Clinton cabinet) would provide emergency funding for "gang-infested" public housing in Chicago. When the president spoke about midnight basketball on June 17, it was at a CHA housing project where he told his predominantly African American audience that midnight basketball was a program designed to assist "people just like you." A week later, this time at a park in inner-city St. Louis, Clinton deflected questions about the controversial provisions of the Racial Justice Act by instead ruminating on "prevention programs" such as "midnight basketball." Finally, it is worth noting that Clinton gave perhaps his most important and impassioned public defense of the crime bill—replete with an extended discussion of recreation and midnight basketball—in front of an all-Black AME Gospel church in Atlanta, Georgia.

In one sense, this reminds us that the connections between basketball and Blackness run so deep and were so taken for granted, they almost do not need saying. Dave Shields's (1999) description of the NBA seems to apply to midnight basketball: It is "a place where, without ever acknowledging it—and because it is never acknowledged, it's that much more potent and telling—white fans and black players . . . enact every racial issue and tension in the culture at large" (p. xiii). But this is also and more important reminiscent of the awkward, paradoxical place of race and racial problems in American culture in general, especially with respect to images of crime, violence, and social disorder in the post–civil rights era. On one hand, racial inequalities and injustices are still clearly with us; yet at the same time, these issues are extremely difficult to discuss or even acknowledge given ideologies of racial equality and color-blind, race-neutral, liberal democratic discourse itself (Chambliss, 2000; Russell, 1998).

There are good reasons to be skeptical of the racialized assumptions and stereotypes about risk and response built into midnight basketball initiatives. Just one example is the belief that late-night hours constituted the period that was most problematic for this population. At least for the younger members of this target group, there is a good deal of research that suggests that high-crime hours may not be late-night hours but after-school and early evening hours (Fox, 1999; Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). Nevertheless, it is not surprising that this population was so targeted. The social problems of those generally designated as the "urban underclass" (note the seemingly

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race neutral label) were very much on the public agenda at this time. Poverty and unemployment, welfare dependence, drug addiction, crime and violence—these were all at levels the University of Chicago sociologist William Julius Wilson (1987), in perhaps the most important public and scholarly statement on the matter, described as having reached "catastrophic proportion." In the Chicago housing projects where midnight basketball got its first major trial, the problems were particularly acute. According to one of Wilson's former students Sudhir Venkatesh (2000), in fact, 90% of CHA residents were unemployed and on welfare in the late 1980s, 75% lived in female-headed households, and project neighborhoods had the highest crime rates in the city.

One final dimension about midnight basketball should be mentioned in this context: its gender-specific character. The "gendered" dimensions of the problems of the urban underclass—rendered visible by Wilson's obsession with teenage pregnancy, out-of-wedlock births, and the pathology of female-headed households—were beginning to be addressed explicitly for the first time at this time. Much of this emphasis came from feminists who focused on the role of women in the welfare state (the well-known collection edited by Linda Gordon, 1990, being a case in point). But the young men in these communities were rapidly being recognized as a problem for community leaders and public policy makers as well. This was not only because no one really know what to do about them but also because they were conspicuous by their perceived absence from family life, legitimate employment, and public life on one hand and hypervisibility when it came to crime, violence, and delinquency on the other.

In any case, if the popularity of the midnight basketball concept reflected a clear public consensus on *who* the problem was, there was much less agreement on what kind or kinds of problems this population presented, how best to deal with these problems, or even why basketball leagues constituted an appropriate and promising policy response. Indeed, few people appeared willing or able to even talk about these complicated issues and alternatives. As a way into them, I will explore what I believe to be their most straightforward and concrete dimension: the divergent and competing visions of sport embedded in this initiative. Delving into these differences—which are connected with but not reducible to prevailing liberal and conservative political ideologies—will not only begin to unpack the different conceptions of risk and response contained within this consensus, it will give us a better understanding of the power and appeal of the midnight basketball concept itself.

VISIONS OF RECREATION AS A RESPONSE TO RISK

Part of the broad appeal of midnight basketball as a response to the perceived problems of inner-city youth and young men of color was that basketball was (and is) presumed to be an activity having a unique appeal to this otherwise problematic, hard-to-reach population. It was, as my Minneapolis informants put it, the only way to reach these guys, to get this socially

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dislocated population in the door. They had come to this conclusion reluctantly (on one hand, they were deeply skeptical of sport; on the other, they did not want to fall into racial stereotypes about the cultural tastes of young African American men) and only after having invested thousands of dollars in a dozen other outreach programs the previous year. But it seems to have been warranted: A preliminary evaluation of the demographic profile of program participants revealed that more than 90% of program participants came from the targeted population, an unprecedented figure at least in the Twin Cities (Hartmann, Sidebottom, & Wheelock).

But outreach and recruitment is only one part of any social policy initiative. What still begs discussion is what compelled community leaders, politicians, policy makers, and bureaucrats, most of whom had no particular interest or experience in sports, to believe that having these at-risk young men run around in short pants and try to throw a rubber ball through a metal hoop might make a difference. It would seem that we are back to the question implied at the outset of the article: What would basketball accomplish for these at-risk, inner-city young men of color?

The question is all the more perplexing when we consider how limited these programs actually were and how little concrete evidence of their effectiveness existed. To begin with, the midnight basketball concept lacked any sort of coherent theoretical rationale. It was, in a very basic way, an immediate, practical response to a perceived social problem. Of course, social programs do not require clearly articulated philosophical statements to be effective public policies. But even on a concrete, programmatic level, the most extensive basketball-based projects operated only a few nights a week for a couple of months a year and served no more than a couple hundred individuals. Standifer's original pilot program, for example, counted only 60 participants during its first year of operation (1986) and still had only 84 in 1988, the year in which it was "discovered" by the national media. The Chicago plan, for its part, called for a total of 160 participants. Although this number may be impressive as a basketball league, it paled in comparison to the estimated 6,600 at-risk young adults residing in the Horner and Rockwell homes, much less to the 85,000 who lived in CHA housing across the city. On the face of it, then, these programs would seem to have had even less chance of significantly mitigating the problems of at-risk youth than Pitter and Andrews (1997) believed that all such programs have of equalizing sport provision across the country.

Yet, spectacular results were claimed for midnight basketball. Most notable in this respect was Standifer's widely publicized assertion that midnight basketball had reduced crime by 30% in Glenarden during its first 3 years of operation. It was a classic case of a spurious statistical correlation based in nothing more than the observation that his program had been in operation during the same years that the crime rate in his Washington, D.C. community had dropped by that amount.[6] Nevertheless, the claim was repeated regularly in the media and often inflated greatly, indeed doubled at one point by President Bush (quoted in Carter, 1998, p. 45). This might be

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expected in regular popular discourse, but it has been repeated in several supposedly scholarly publications as well. Farrell et al. (1995), for example, claimed that their Milwaukee-area basketball program led to a 30% reduction in crime; McCann and Peters (1996) claimed that a Phoenix project they analyzed resulted in 10.4% fewer juvenile arrests and a 50% reduction in juvenile problems reported to police.

What may be most striking about all of this is *not* that the midnight basketball concept was deemed an acceptable experiment by community organizers, political elites, policy makers, and public commentators. What is most striking is that this rather flimsy idea was so widely embraced and so uniformly celebrated as an innovative and exciting policy initiative. In a commentary on its main editorial page, *The Chicago Sun-Times* summed up the initiative in four words: "Simple. Logical. Cheap. Effective," and asked, "Why didn't anyone think of [it] sooner?" ("Good Sense Scores a Point," 1989, p. 60). A nonscientific poll conducted by *The Chicago Defender*, one of the nation's historic African American newspapers, found that fully 85% of Chicagoans surveyed approved of the program, seeing it as giving youths "opportunities to get involved in a positive and constructive activity" (Locke, 1990). Even during the height of Republican attacks on midnight basketball in the summer of 1994, midnight basketball seems to have retained relatively impressive support in public opinion polls. For example, a Gallup poll that asked respondents if they favored "providing local communities with federal tax money to provide social programs and activities for low-income children such as *Midnight Basketball*" as a proposal to reduce crime found 65% support, a figure 10% higher than support for the compromise crime bill taken as a whole.[7]

How, then, do we account for the almost universal appeal and enthusiastic support for a program that appeared, on the face of it, to be extremely limited, had no clear rationale, and had produced no real evidence of effectiveness? Two factors, I believe, were crucial. One of them involved the political climate and recent transformations in social policies at the federal level. I am thinking here primarily of the cuts to the various social programs that constituted the American welfare state as ushered in under President Ronald Reagan's "new federalism" (cf. Wacquant, 1994; Wacquant & Wilson, 1989). These cuts hit hardest in the nation's cities, home to many of the nation's most distressed citizens ("the truly disadvantaged," in W. J. Wilson's [1987] terms). Between 1982 and 1987, to give just one telling example, the nation's public housing budget was cut by 87%; at one point, Venkatesh (2000, p. 116) said it got so bad in Chicago that the CHA's request for money to bring its housing up to minimum standards actually exceeded HUD's nationwide budget for all such repairs! Such budgetary cutbacks were, moreover, exacerbated in urban areas that had seen major portions of their jobs and industrial bases leave for suburbs, the Southwest, and overseas. These transformations left community organizers and urban policy makers with few options and extremely limited resources for dealing with the problems of the at-risk, urban underclass. This meant that policy initiatives had,

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first and foremost, to be inexpensive (or, as the *Sun-Times* said, "cheap"). Few other options were available. It was, as *The Chicago Tribune* called it (November 30, 1989), a "desperation shot."

I will have more to say about the meaning and symbolic significance of these resource shortfalls and cutbacks shortly. But resources (or their absence) were not the only factor at play here. As with most major social policy shifts, there were also powerful ideological underpinnings driving and legitimating these policy changes and budgetary cutbacks.[8] Proponents also had high hopes for midnight basketball because they really believed or at least wanted to believe it would be an effective response to urban risk, and they believed this for reasons pertaining to their perceptions about the social value of sport participation itself. Unfortunately, it is with this second dimension of midnight basketball's widespread appeal that the story gets complicated. This is not only because the vision of sport embedded in the midnight basketball concept is multifaceted but also because these different visions are linked with competing perceptions and presuppositions about this population and the problems they presented.

At least three different ideas or sets of ideas about midnight basketball and its purported effectiveness for dealing with at-risk urban youth can be identified.[9] One drew on sport's long-standing public reputation as a positive, progressive social force, for being a means for overcoming social disadvantage as well as providing a hedge against delinquency, crime and violence (Segrave, 1980). Sports participation, in this conception, was primarily about character building and the cultivation of self-discipline—especially for boys and young men or for turning boys into young men (MacLeod, 1983; see also Novak, 1976; Oriard, 1991). Expressed most frequently by coaches and athletes themselves, this is what I might call the traditional sport idealist view. It saw sport participation itself as inherently interventionist because it required and thus created a strong moral character through the virtues of effort, competition, teamwork, and fair play.

This idealist line had little appeal for no-nonsense policy makers, politicians, and public commentators who had no particular interest or belief in the value of sport. But many of these actors nevertheless realized other possibilities in midnight basketball. Perhaps the most familiar came mainly from the new generation of liberal Democrats—whose political icons were figures such as Carol Mosley Braun, Patricia Schroeder, Charles Shumer, and the president himself. In this newer conception, competitiveness, individual accountability, and moral character were de-emphasized in favor of using sport as a hook to attract at-risk youth into programs and activities that would educate, counsel, mentor, and train. Sport, in this instrumentalist vision, was an activity whose energies and excitement could be redirected toward other, more socially significant ends; it had little or no intrinsic social value on its own.

A somewhat different conception of risk was at work in this instrumentalist approach as well. The traditional sports idealist vision saw the problems of risk primarily in moral terms, an emphasis reflected in the

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Chicago project's inclusion of haircuts and personal grooming as parts of the program and its broader concerns with self-discipline, conflict resolution, and family values. In contrast, those who saw sport as a hook tended to de-emphasize competitiveness, individual accountability, and moral character in favor of shortcomings in human and social capital—things such as education, job skills, and social networking—lacking as a result of structural inequalities and disadvantages. In proposing the midnight basketball pilot program to the Housing Department, the CHA had taken pains to call attention to both dimensions. Midnight basketball, their proposal noted, "takes an old concept—sports as a constructive character-building activity—and gives it a new twist—the organization of a structured, 'after-hours' program." Using sport as a hook, the CHA believed its program would move beyond Standifer's original midnight basketball model by adding "components" that would "encourage the participants to take charge of their own lives, attain legitimate economic dependence and become constructive family members and citizens" (p. 2). Indeed, what made midnight basketball attractive was that it held the promise of reestablishing the social fabric and moral fiber of life for these at-risk young men at the same time—essentially what George Bush meant to highlight with his thousand points of light foundation; a set of ideas that his son would call "compassionate conservativism" or Robert Putnam (2000) would later call "civic engagement." And if Putnam's thesis was formulated as a critique of bowling alone, midnight basketball offered precisely the practice of playing basketball together that Putnam took as ideal. So it was that CHA Chairman Vincent Lane promoted the program to the public. "We're going to try to move them down the road to being contributing citizens."

It is in this context that the institutional arrangements behind these programs take on added significance. I am thinking here of their public-private partnerships by which these programs were both funded and operated. More than just a funding tool, public-private collaborations were built around and in fact required the cultivation of social relationships and voluntary ties among participants from a diversity of social backgrounds. These considerations clearly help to explain why President Bush went so far as to single out midnight basketball (one of only three of the thousand points of light initiatives highlighted as such) as exemplary in his proclamation recognizing a "National Celebration of Community Service."[10]

Given the extent to which it has come to be identified with proactive, preventive approaches to the problems of at-risk urban young men since 1994, it would be easy to overlook the third, much more politically conservative element of midnight basketball. This element is suggested by the very idea that at-risk youngsters had to be kept off the streets during high crime, late-night hours as well in the intensive involvement of law enforcement personnel and the requirement of having uniformed police officers serve as security for all games. As much as midnight basketball appealed to various liberal advocates, in other words, it also contained a harder edged, "keep 'em off the streets" mentality. This is what might be called its "containment and

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control" dimension, the feature that more than any other marked Standifer's midnight basketball concept as original and unique within the long legacy of interventionist sports-based programs in American history. This aspect of the multifaceted midnight basketball concept shared many of the assumptions about the moral and social roots of the problems of at-risk, inner-city youth. But whereas the various liberal-interventionist lines saw sport as a remedy for these deficiencies, this approach was more inclined to believe that the tendencies toward crime and violence among young African American men could not be prevented or inhibited but only contained and controlled. Standifer, who made a point of parking police paddy wagons outside the gym in the early days of the program, suggested as much in an interview he gave a local publication (*The Maryland Weekly*) at the time: "If you could fill 24 hours of a young adults [*sic*] day, you could eliminate a lot of the problems. Since we can't do that, we've chosen what we feel is the most vulnerable time frame" (quoted in Carter, 1998, p. 30). Others made stronger statements. For them, there was nothing constructive about practices of sport such as basketball because there was little hope for reconstructing or rehabilitating the population toward which it was directed.

Implicit in this vision as well was the assumption that the risk these populations posed was not to themselves but to others; they threatened the order and stability of urban communities in general. And in fact, this harder edged, surveillance and control dimension of midnight basketball fit perfectly with what would soon be called the "new penology" (Freeley & Simon, 1992) emerging in American criminal justice circles at the time. Connected with rising fear of crime and ultimately translated into massive public funding for more prisons and police nationwide, many politicians and policy makers were becoming convinced that the impulse to risky behaviors and lifestyles among poor, inner-city boys and young men was so deeply rooted that it could not be prevented. The best way to deal with the problems of at-risk, inner-city youth, thus, was simply to get them off the streets, to keep them under strict social control.

It is, of course, not difficult to imagine how these three very different visions of and approaches to dealing with at-risk urban young men through basketball might come into conflict. Nevertheless, what should not be overlooked is the fact that, at least initially, this strikingly diverse and otherwise competing set of ideals and interests comfortably coexisted in the space of midnight basketball. Indeed, it is my belief that what gave midnight basketball its initial widespread public appeal and generated its unique bipartisan support is precisely the way in which it offered a unique and unlikely synthesis of otherwise competing approaches to the problems of at-risk young people. Liberal Democrats, for example, could see these programs as part of a larger attempt to compensate for social and educational disadvantages African American young men faced in the inner city. Conservative Republicans, for their part, could emphasize the way in which it simply kept these at-risk youth off the streets, out of public circulation, and under strict supervision. And those who found themselves outside of or between established

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Republican and Democratic positions could focus on the program's traditional, liberal ideology of character building, individual worth, and racial advancement.

There was a powerful, if unstated racial element here as well—specifically, sport's long-standing reputation and historical legacy as an institutional leader in the struggle for the advancement of racial minorities certainly is a factor here as well (Hartmann, 2000, pp. 32-34). Many of those who championed midnight basketball drew on this color-blind, universalist rhetoric at one time or another. Gil Walker, the CHA sports director who imported Standifer's midnight basketball model to Chicago, was one of those: "Come into the gym," he told Vivian Carter (1998), "and all of a sudden those barriers are broken down because of basketball. Basketball transcends gang affiliation, it transcends race, it transcends economic situation, basketball transcends all of that nonsense" (p. 38).

Suffice it to say, then, that this unique (if uneasy) synthesis of competing approaches to the problems of at-risk youth and young men constituted the real innovation and true genius of Standifer's midnight basketball concept. Indeed, it seems to me no accident that it was the socially liberal, fiscally conservative Republicans like Jack Kemp and George Bush who originally championed midnight basketball on a national scale.

POINTS OF CONTENTION, UNDERLYING CONSENSUS

Ultimately, of course, midnight basketball did not offer a workable coalition or stable synthesis. The bipartisan support that midnight basketball had enjoyed since its inception in 1990 evaporated suddenly and spectacularly in the summer of 1994 when conservative Republicans attacked the program as a symbol of everything that was wrong with the original version of the 1994 crime bill. Part of the reason midnight basketball became the object of Republican ridicule and attack had to do with the ideological differences between liberal Democratic approaches to crime, risk, and delinquency ("prevention," as they came to be called) and the more surveillance and control Republican emphasis on increased prisons and police, the contrasts I alluded to in the previous section. Once Republicans realized midnight basketball's inherent limitations as a tool for social surveillance and control—that it served only a handful of young men, that it operated only a few days a week for a limited number of weeks per year, and so forth—they were free to relinquish any commitment to midnight basketball and attack it as a symbol of everything wrong with liberal, prevention-oriented approaches to crime and violence.

Another factor leading to the breakdown of the uneasy consensus that had once surrounded midnight basketball involved federal funding and governmental involvement in general. Here, it was not so much the cost per se as it was the fact that this increased funding would have gotten the federal government into the role of permanently funding such programs (rather than just providing startup grants). The fate of Clinton's showcase "Americorps" project, as described by Pitter and Andrews (1997), is a useful

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parallel. The program initially enjoyed solid support from Republicans. As soon as the Clinton administration tried to expand the funding beyond the initial limits of 2 or 3 years per program and only for programs with the potential for securing funding from other public and/or private sources in subsequent years, bipartisan support quickly dissipated. "The whole focus," according to Pitter and Andrews, "was to motivate Americans to . . . develop solutions to social problems that would attract and later be sustained by private funding or other nonfederal public funding" (p. 87).

Finally, there was the broader political symbolism that surrounded midnight basketball. As mentioned earlier, my colleague Darren Wheelock and I have spent a good deal of time analyzing the central role midnight basketball played in 1994 crime bill debates (Hartmann & Wheelock, 2000). Constructed as an exercise in the study of racial codes in American political processes (cf. Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Edsall & Edsall, 1991; Lieberman, 1995), we showed how Republicans used the racial symbol of midnight basketball to persuade a largely White, Anglo-Saxon public to be less positive about and supportive of the proactive, preventative aspects of the bill championed by liberal Democrats. In this context, I might also note that Republicans were able to mobilize the long-standing cultural stereotypes about the lightness and frivolity associated with sport to trivialize prevention programs more generally. Perhaps, it may be that any attempt to leverage political points through recreation-based programs will inevitably be vulnerable to this attack in American culture. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that in this same exact debate over federal crime policy, the NRA defended its interests against gun control in part by appealing to the sanctity of recreational hunting in American culture. One can almost not help but come to the conclusion that the racial identity of those presumed to practice this seemingly dangerous recreational form had something to do with the fact that this was an argument that (as far as I know) was never seriously challenged. In any case, equipped with midnight basketball, conservative Republicans were able to turn the tables in the legislative debates and media coverage of these debates and jettison some $3 billion in prevention programs from a bill that had once been considered a done deal. The point here is not just that support for midnight basketball broke down around racial-political lines. More than this, it is that the racially coded midnight basketball played a critical and essentially conservative role in shaping federal crime policy legislation as we know it today.

As important and disheartening as it is to recognize the overtly racial (if not simply racist) roots and implications of the Republican attack on midnight basketball in 1994, it would be a mistake to now overlook the fact that it was Democrats who brought race back into these debates in the first place by championing the racially symbolic midnight basketball initiative. I say this not because there is something inherently wrong with the general notion of appealing to racial interests in promoting and defending political ideologies and agendas. (Indeed, I would argue, contra the universalistic arguments advanced by scholars such as William Julius Wilson, Theda

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Skocpol, or Todd Gitlin, that it is very difficult if not impossible to launch meaningful social challenges to racial hierarchies and inequalities without putting race at the front and center of these struggles.) The question, rather, is with some of the assumptions about race—both in general terms and as experienced by young African American men—Clinton and other Democratic leaders brought to bear on this legislative process. And here we run into some inconsistencies, inconsistencies that reveal certain affinities between liberal Democratic and conservative Republican attitudes and approaches regarding race that may not have first been apparent.

One of the problems with the racial attitudes, assumptions, and priorities liberal Democrats brought into the 1994 crime bill is that they made their racial appeal in covert, symbolic ways—that is, through small, ostensibly race-neutral programs like midnight basketball—rather than overtly and directly. This approach not only betrays an underlying cynicism and futility with respect to the politics of race, it seems to have allowed Republicans to play a race card that the Democrats were unable to respond to effectively. (To do so, Democrats would have had to acknowledge a racial politics seemingly at odds with their expressed color-blind ideology.) Another problem is that the crime bill did not address well-established racial inequalities and outright racism in the criminal justice system (D. Cole, 1999; Feld, 1999; Lusane, 1991; Mauer & the Sentencing Project, 1999; Miller, 1996), a failure evidenced most dramatically by the elimination of racial justice provisions from the final form of the bill.

More directly to the point of the present analysis is that for all of the liberal talk of the social and economic disadvantages faced by at-risk youth, the Democratic crime bill paid little or no attention in terms of policy construction or funding provisions to the social-structural context of risk. I am thinking here not just of the danger of the streets and the impoverishment of urban communities but also of the cuts to urban funding initiated during Reagan's regime, the postindustrial economic transformations that left many inner-city residents without work or prospects for work, and various forms of overt and institutional racism faced by communities of color. If these factors do not fully explain the African American problems with crime, violence, and delinquency, they certainly constitute a context that left people of color, as both communities and individuals, isolated and with very limited resources and opportunities to mobilize in response. Yet, even the most liberal components of the bill did nothing to address the structural roots of these inequalities but dealt only with their consequences through prevention-based programs such as midnight basketball.

Part of the problem here is the obvious discrepancy between liberal understandings of the problems of risk and the policies they put forward; that is, their inability to craft policies that correspond to these analyses. (For early critiques along these lines, see Kramer & Michalowski, 1995; Platt, 1994). Indeed, many of the prevention-oriented programs were based on assumptions about the existence of educational opportunities and jobs

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that directly contradicted more structural understandings of the roots and causes of these supposed problems. To the extent such opportunities existed, they were far more limited than many assumed. In the CHA program, for example, the jobs that were made available were entry-level, janitorial positions paying only $7 an hour (Dinges, 1990); midnight basketball, it would seem, was being used as much a recruitment device for service work as much as an opportunity being offered.

Given the absence of attention to external, structuralist factors contributing to the crime problem, it was almost inevitable that the entire focus of liberal crime prevention strategies was oriented toward addressing the perceived moral and behavioral shortcomings of at-risk individuals and communities themselves—whether they had to do with morals, character and self-discipline, or human and social capital. It is here, however—in these moralist and paternalist assumptions about the roots of risk and in the face of a policy regime that does little to get at their deeper structural roots—that we begin to appreciate what might be called, following George Lipsitz (1998), the deep racial consensus underlying liberal and conservative understandings of the problems of race and risk in contemporary American society. For Lipsitz, this consensus has mainly to do with how White Americans, both liberal and conservative, protect and preserve the privileges that go along with their skin color, without actually describing this agenda in explicit racial terms. This is what he called "the possessive investment in whiteness." "Liberals," according to Lipsitz, operate "under the name of respecting prevailing market practices, encouraging business investment in cities and helping the 'middle class,' conservatives under the guise of promoting state's rights, protecting private property, and shrinking the welfare state" (p. 24). And whether viewed with "pity" or "contempt" (Scott, 1997), there is the shared belief that "minority disadvantages are said to stem from innate deficiencies rather than systematic disenfranchisement and discrimination" (p. 24).

To gain a deeper appreciation of the depth of this racial consensus and its operation in and through sport as well as the inherent symbolic dangers of using the language of race and risk in the context of any recreation-based program, I will conclude by discussing Cheryl Cole's (1996) seminal study of the Nike corporation's "PLAY" movement and its use of Michael Jordan in the marketing campaign that went along with it.[11]

THE BROADER SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF SPORTING INITIATIVES

In the mid-1990s—at precisely the same time midnight basketball was coming into the national consciousness—the Nike Corporation launched a splashy and ambitious campaign to revitalize youth sport nationwide by working in tandem with nonprofit, community-based agencies and organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs (whose national organization partnered with Nike on the project). The initiative was the product of a

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well-publicized Youth Fitness Summit held in Washington, D.C. in 1993. The summit was ostensibly in response to the decline of public facilities for recreation and sport for youth especially in urban areas.

> For America's youth . . . going out to play is getting tougher all the time. Budget cuts are forcing schools to scale back or eliminate sports and physical education programs. Communities can't afford the upkeep on public parts and recreation facilities. Safety issues have many parents fearful of letting children out of their sight. (quoted in C.L. Cole, 1996, p. 379)

PLAY—short for "participate in the lives of America's youth"—was Nike's response. It was an attempt to create a movement and network of organizations and agencies that would secure every child's "right to play." The "principles" motivating the movement, according to the four-page "Revolutionary Manifesto" the company circulated widely around the country, were that "every child [had an] inalienable right to an active life: the joy of sport, and the pursuit of fun."

It is not difficult to see (if not simply dismiss) the PLAY campaign as a public relations ploy. And even though she lacks behind-the-scenes, ethnographic evidence, C. L. Cole (1996) constructed a compelling case that the initiative was launched in direct response to Nike's public relations crisis of the early 1990s.[12] What is more challenging and directly relevant to the concerns of this article is explaining why the campaign was so effective—why the national Boys and Girls Clubs of America decided to enter into a partnership with Nike in bringing this movement to fruition; why the PLAY advertisements came to occupy such a central part of Nike's overall marketing strategy; why, as Cole put, Nike is publicly exalted for investing this money in youth sport even "despite" "market pressures and declines in stock value."

Part of the explanation is fairly straightforward. "In the realm of the public," as C. L. Cole (1996) put it, "PLAY and other Nike public-service style advertisements serve[d] as expressions of Nike's conscience and its overlapping commitment to and investment in America" (p. 380). That is to say, this campaign allowed Nike to present itself not just as a company but as part of or even representative of the national community. This effect was achieved not only by arguing that every single young person had a right to sport but also by suggesting that sport was crucial to society itself because it facilitated the transition to adulthood through its unique capacity for cultivating "character" and "community" among young people. If kids had a right to sport, on one hand, society also needed sport to socialize them, on the other. And there was more. In its broad, universalist defense of children and of sport as a means of appropriate socialization, Nike also set itself up as an alternative to the policing and punishment scenarios (what I described above in terms of containment and control) being played out elsewhere in the United States. In contrast to these divisive and particularist approaches, Cole wrote, the PLAY campaign presented itself as "a socially progressive program based upon a call for social and political unity around

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children" (p. 384). PLAY offered, in other words, a broader, more inclusive (kinder, gentler) America—one that realized the rights of all American children regardless of superficial cultural differences such as race, class, gender, or religion and that unified these diverse social groups together through the grassroots, nonprofit organizations and agencies that compose the American sport delivery system.

The problem with this vision, according to C. L. Cole (1996, pp. 386-387), is that if much of its appeal derived from a claim to transcend race, class, and gender, it also depended on an implicit racial logic, one involving the close semantic connections between order and disorder, action and agency, and race that are embedded in the advertisements for the campaign. For when it came to African American youngsters, as Cole sees it, the ideas the PLAY campaign invoked shifted slightly but significantly. It was not so much that African American youth were overrepresented in the imaginary space created by this initiative (although it seems they were). It is rather that they were imagined as being particularly at risk for crime and violence and as such in dire need of sport and the discipline it can provide.

> Whereas sport and physical activity are used to shore up America's bourgeois fantasy of childhood fun and play for White middle-class youth, *sport and physical activity function to regulate, discipline, and police already deviant bodies in urban areas.* . . . In the context of urban America, sport is not about kid's play and bodily movement but a moral and normative imperative. *Without sport . . . inner-city youths are at once at-risk . . . and the sites of danger.* Our attention is directed once again to crime, law and order, discipline, and their correlates: gangs, drugs, sports and Nike. (C. L. Cole, 1996, p. 386, italics added)

For mainstream America, then, African American young people do not so much have a right to sport as they have a need for sport; without it, or some equivalent social form, they are at-risk—not only to themselves but also to us. Thus, "PLAY appears to break from popular discourses on crime and seemingly shifts the terms of the popular dialogue on inner-city youth in the context of dominant 'get-tough' and 'three-strikes' approach[es]." In actuality, however, it only makes sense in relation to and in fact depends on these racialized discourses, this imagined sense of "what/who we understand to be America's urban problems and *how race is made to matter and not matter in the national imagination* (C. L. Cole, 1996, p. 386, italics added).

All of this is most clearly revealed *not* in what the advertising campaign says, according to C. L. Cole (1996), but in what it does not say, in its absences and silences. "What if there were no sports?" the first PLAY spots famously asked. "What if there were no teams? What if there were no dreams?" Although the "what if" uneasiness underlying the campaign is presented in general, abstract terms, Cole insisted that there is a subtle racial subtext or threat of general disorder and social deterioration underlying it. This racial subtext is made clear, in Cole's reading, in the way in which African American basketball star Michael Jordan is deployed in the advertisement. Jordan narrates the entire ad, including the questions that ask

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"us" to envision ourselves and our society if there were no sports. But Jordan himself is pictured only in the advertisement's closing sequence. This is not, according to Cole, incidental. The image of Michael Jordan—an athlete who despite all of his transcendental qualities and capacities is also a Black man—reminds us that there is a racial logic and threat underlying and justifying the PLAY movement. It reminds us, more specifically, that without sports, we would not only lose the chance for future Michael Jordans, but we would likely be left with all of the problems associated with Blackness and risk itself: gangs, crime, drugs, violence, and so forth. Thus, we are presented with not just a trope of innocence and guilt of unmet needs but a trope of danger, threat, and fear where race appears as central.[13] "If we did not imagine [a Black man like Jordan] in the space of sport, where would we imagine him?" Cole asked, mimicking the ad (pp. 385-386). Who, I might add, would we imagine him to be?

It may be that C. L. Cole (1996) pushed her reading of Nike's PLAY campaign a bit too hard. But the more general critical interpretative insights on which it is based certainly apply to our midnight basketball case, and in no more important way than with respect to the broader symbolic significance of sport in the racial culture of American society. Indeed, showing how racial codes and assumptions operate in Nike's PLAY campaign is only part of the point for Cole. Her larger and more significant point is that the Nike campaign serves to support, sustain, reinforce, and legitimate racial discourses and practices in the culture at large. The argument here is both simpler and far more significant revolving around the presence of Michael Jordan, the most prominent athlete and adman of his generation, and the popularity of sport itself and the idealized, normative assumptions that surround it (see also Andrews, 2001).

It is not too much of a stretch to suggest that midnight basketball served a very similar function in American public culture, especially during the 1994 crime bill debates. That is to say, midnight basketball served as a symbolic means by which racial stereotypes about risk, fear, and crime were reinforced and legitimated, with different possibilities to be certain, but united around beliefs about the risk and nature of risk posed by African American young men. Here, that the programs were included in a crime bill rather than as some sort of social assistance package—social welfare broadly conceived—is definitely revealing. The implication is clear: The problems of the at-risk, inner-city youth were not about the problems they were having in American society but about the problems they created for Americans. Indeed, the fact that the debate over midnight basketball took place in the context of an extended national debate on what would become the nation's largest crime bill in history may be the perfect illustration of Cole's larger point with regard to the inverted racial assumptions underlying crime and sport in contemporary American culture.

That the crime bill legislation itself did not enact broad-ranging social initiatives is thus not the only problem with the legislative agenda enacted at the federal level in the 1990s. The problem is the symbolic message about

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the nature of crime and its prevention. In the absence of real institutional resources and meaningful policy interventions, the symbolic function of midnight basketball may not only have been to legitimate racial ideologies and practices but also to obscure and disguise what Pitter and Andrews (1997) described as "the circumstances that impinge upon the agency and power of urban communities." Here, we come to the core of the liberal-conservative consensus on race—the way in which it employs "indirect, inferential and covert policies that use the denial of overt racial intent to escape responsibility for racialized consequences" (p. 216). "It disguises as *racial* problems," Lipsitz (1998) wrote,

> the general social problems posed by deindustrialization, economic restructuring and neoconservative attacks on the welfare state. It fuels a discourse that demonizes people of color . . . while hiding the privileges of whiteness by attributing the economic advantages enjoyed by whites to their family values, faith in fatherhood and foresight. (p. 218)

RECREATION, RACIAL CONSENSUS, AND BEYOND

There are many questions about midnight basketball left to be answered. Many of them have to do with issues of implementation and effectiveness, especially in terms of the everyday operation and practice of ordinary, local midnight basketball leagues themselves. How, for instance, do the tensions I have described above play themselves out at the local level? Do these programs work? Is there any evidence of effectiveness? What affect does funding have on all of this? How are these programs understood and experienced by those who they are intended to serve? Is there any way out of or around those who want to avoid being caught in the racial consensus I have described?

But if there is one point that should be emphasized with respect to future research and policy formation, it is that the critical, theoretical framework I have put forward here contrasts dramatically with the understandings of many of the league organizers and participants I have met and interacted with over the course of my fieldwork. For those who are actively involved in such leagues on a day-to-day (or rather evening-to-evening) basis, there is very little talk about race and politics and policies of social intervention. Their emphasis is on basketball itself. (This is much as it is for many African American popular cultural practices; see Kelley, 1997.) Alternatively, perhaps what is most conspicuous by its absence from mainstream, political discourses about midnight basketball is any consideration of what makes basketball a meaningful and enticing activity for young African American men is the opportunity for sport and recreation itself. The absence of any public discourse about sport for its own sake among inner-city African American young men takes on additional significance in the context of cuts in public parks and recreation departments, especially the elimination of basketball courts and other public spaces that are seen as magnets and breeding spaces for crime, deviance, and undelinquency. Unsupervised play

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among young African American men, it would seem, is not only undesirable, it is also inherently dangerous. Perhaps I have gone too far here. But it is interesting to consider the implication that policy makers, politicians, community activists, and everyone else have absolutely no interest in the extent to which the game of basketball may supply a much-needed source of meaning, creativity, and accomplishment in a world that gives them very little pleasure otherwise.

NOTES

1. This question served as the monograph to James's (1963/1983) masterful, autobiographical study of cricket in the West Indies, *Beyond a Boundary*, a work whose contributions to theories of race and sport I have explored in some detail elsewhere (Hartmann, 2001).
2. In Chicago, I had some peripheral involvement with the Chicago Housing Authority's (CHA's) original midnight basketball project while working for the Institute for Athletics and Education (IAE) at the University of Chicago. As stipulated by the CHA's official U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) proposal, the IAE served as a consultant to the initiative (Kpo, 1990, p. 8); in my capacity as research coordinator for the institute, I reviewed CHA plans for the program, participated in discussions about it, and prepared a memo summarizing the IAE position (which was supportive but not entirely favorable). Several years later, while a graduate student at the University of California, San Diego, I worked with Professor Hugh Mehan in preparing an external evaluation of the sanctioned midnight basketball program run in southeast San Diego by a Christian-based outreach organization called High Five America. My role in this context consisted primarily of conducting intake interviews with program participants and writing field notes of my observations of the everyday operation of the program. Finally, once I arrived in the Twin Cities (with a teaching job in the sociology department at the University of Minnesota), I got involved with a nonsanctioned basketball-based program called Stay Alive. Sponsored by the city of Minneapolis's Department of Health and Family Support, Stay Alive operated in conjunction with local Native American and African American organizations in majority-minority neighborhoods. By far the most extensive and intensive of my experiences (involving a small team of students from the university), my involvement with this Minneapolis program involved formal consulting, program evaluation, and daily interaction with the program.
3. See also Chalip and Johnson (1996). For a more general theoretical statement of the organization of sport as a social system, see Bourdieu (1978, 1988).
4. Exact numbers for this trend have not yet been produced, but the work of Crompton and his colleagues (Crompton & McGregor, 1994; Crompton & Wicks, 1988) gives us some sense of the trend. Indeed, reliance on external resources had almost already doubled in the earliest years of this period (from 14% in 1974-1975 to 24% in 1987-1988).
5. Cover letter and proposal submitted to the HUD Secretary's Fund, dated October 13, 1989. I have only been able to find one reference to sport, recreation, or physical fitness in the documents I have assembled on these original initiatives. It came in the media packet originally compiled and released by Standifer's league as it was trying to expand, but it was only one of a dozen reasons midnight basketball programs were touted to be effective and was an ambiguous point at that. It read as follows: "The mandatory use of all players in each game and required man-to-man defense insures a high degree of participation and physical activity." That is to say, even here, physical activity seems to be as much about occupying the time and

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energy of young men as it is about providing them with legitimate athletic opportunities (Midnight Basketball League, Inc. media packet: "The Alternative").

6. Such claims have been a common feature of the problems-based recreation industry. The Police Athletic League in Goowin, Arizona, for example, claimed that juvenile arrests dropped 16.1%, and juveniles were 43.9% less likely to be victims; in Cincinnati, a recreation-based program was said to have resulted in a 31% reduction in crime incidence; Fort Myers, Florida, apparently witnessed a 27% drop in crime with its STARS outreach program; a Kansas City, Missouri, program claimed a 25% reduction in crime; and Forth Worth, Texas, asserted a 28% drop within 1 mile radius of the program site. All of these, as Witt and Crompton (1997b) pointed out, were lacking in scientific comparisons and/or controls. This is not surprising: Despite their prominence and popularity, sport and recreation programs ranging from boot camps to after-school programs in general have received little analysis until recently. For example, the most comprehensive survey of the social scientific literature on crime prevention (Sherman et al., 1998) listed only one scholarly study that focuses explicitly on recreation-based programs, and even its findings about community-based after-school recreation programs are limited and inconclusive at best. In this respect, it will be important to see the results of the study of 621 at-risk prevention recreation programs launched several years ago by Witt and Crompton (1996).
7. Gallup Organization telephone survey of 1,011 respondents in a national adult sample conducted for CNN and *USA Today*. Survey date August 16, 1994; release date August 19, 1994.
8. The formal ideology that provided the impetus and blueprint for Reagan's new federalism, for its part, was articulated most famously in Charles Murray's *Losing Ground* (1984). According to Murray, Reagan's policy was driven not only by its cost-cutting per se but also and perhaps more fundamentally by its argument that the problems of the urban underclass were the result of excessive reliance on public support itself. In this view, public assistance had stripped these Americans of a work ethic, personal responsibility, and sense of connection to the larger community. Reformers in the Reaganite mode thus believed that public policy not only needed to limit or eliminate public funding to inner-city populations but also to rebuild communities and social ties from the ground up—and that this (conveniently) could only be accomplished through grassroots, community-based initiatives and private enterprises.
9. These three ideas or approaches were not explicitly specified and articulated by midnight basketball practitioners or proponents as such. Rather, I have extracted them out of my reading and analysis of the various documents and programs that constitute the empirical foundations on which this study is based. That having been said, I can say that the 12 core objectives and rationales enumerated in Standifer's original midnight basketball framework can be easily reduced to the three categories I am putting forward.
10. Proclamation 6269 of April 12, 1991 (56 FR 15481). Transcript of presidential remarks "Points of Light National Celebration of Community Service" for April 17, 1991.
11. I read this article as the culmination of a series of articles Cole and her coauthors produced exploring the ways in which racial difference and deviance are constructed in and through sport media. (See C. L. Cole & Andrews, 1996; C. L. Cole & Denny, 1994).
12. The crisis I am referring to here is not the one about the exploitation of third-world labor Nike has grappled with in most recent years. The crisis of the early 1990s was brought on by three developments, according to C. L. Cole (1996): public outrage about youth "sneaker crimes," Operation Push's proposed boycott of the company, and the backlash against Spike Lee's "racial tolerance" ads. One could easily see it

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as even more self-serving than this, in my view—that is, as part of a deliberate strategy to nurture and expand consumer demand for athletic footwear. After all, everyone who plays sports needs shoes to play in, and declining sports participation rates among youth and adolescents at the time posed a serious concern for everyone in the sports apparel industry.

13. For a powerful journalistic exploration aimed at reclaiming the innocence and inherent meaning of the lives of inner-city children of color, see Kozol (2000).

AUTHOR

Douglas Hartmann *(Ph.D., 1997, University of California, San Diego) is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota. His research focuses on the intersections of race, sport, and culture in contemporary American society and the international Olympic movement. His forthcoming book* Golden Ghettos: Race, Culture and the Politics of the 1968 African American Olympic Protest Movement *is being published by the University of Chicago Press.*

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