


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Community Fútbol Coaches Working Together to Prevent Violence and Promote Positive Youth Development in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

In resource-limited settings in Colombia, there is a lack of safe spaces for youth, with adolescent males being 10 times more susceptible to physical violence than females. Acknowledging the potential of community-led sports-based interventions, we examined how community fútbol (a.k.a. soccer or football) coaches in the Caribbean region of Colombia prevent youth violence exposure. By conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with 13 community coaches, we explore how fútbol, recognised as the world's most popular sport, serves as a space and tool for violence prevention. Our mixed methods study employs qualitative interviews and social network analysis (SNA). The findings reveal that the community's vulnerability, including familial violence and drug use, has detrimental effects on children. Community coaches, positioned as trusted figures, strive to positively influence youth by instilling essential life skills. However, they face challenges such as resource scarcity, limited institutional support and financial difficulties. The coaches express the need to balance adolescents' socioemotional development and the competitive nature of tournaments (olympism). Moreover, a disconnection between community coaches and NGOs utilising Fútbol for Development stems from differing aims. We argue that collaboration between these two groups holds ample opportunities for mutual benefit and enhanced youth impact.

1 | Introduction

The United Nations has expressed deep concern over the health implications of exposure to violence¹ and lack of access to safe spaces for youth around the world (UN 2018). According to the World Health Organisation (WHO 2014), educational institutions, communities and homes must serve as sanctuaries, free

from stigma, maltreatment and violence, where children and adolescents can find refuge. Safe spaces are physical environments where adolescents can convene, socialise and actively engage in community life without violence, threats or discrimination. Youth residing in resource-limited settings, especially in Low and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), such as Colombia, are at a heightened risk of lacking access to safe spaces.

The Global Status Report on Violence prevention (2014) conducted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations (UN) in 133 countries, showed that more than one quarter of adults reported having been exposed to violence as children (Butchart et al. 2015; WHO 2014). Also, in a study conducted with 100 LMICs almost half (47%) of adolescent men self-reported being in a physical fight during the past 12 months (WHO 2015). This violence often increases hypervigilance towards environmental cues as a protection from danger which can be adaptative in the short term but can have negative impacts in the long term (Phan et al. 2020). Exposure to violence, may disrupt cellular, behavioural and social development due to its impact on the neural system that controls self-regulation (Blair and Raver 2012). Studies such as Schwartz and Gorman (2003) and Mazza and Reynolds (1999) have found a positive association between exposure to violence and depression, anxiety, poor academic performance, social adjustment and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Furthermore, violence and adverse environments can lead to depressive symptoms in adulthood and inter-generational transmission of violence (Cerna-Turoff et al. 2021; Cuartas and Roy 2019; Posada et al. 2015).

In Colombia, adolescent men are at 10 times the risk as women for becoming victims of physical violence, including homicides (53.7 per 100,000 men ages 10–24 compared to 4.9 per 100,000 women; Gobierno de Colombia 2019). Furthermore, across Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), gender expectations can place adolescent males in situations where they must defend their honour when confronted with aggression, increasing their violence exposure (Browne et al. 2019). Also, studies have noted that in communities with high levels of criminal activity (e.g., drug distribution, gangs), there are increased levels of community and familial violence (Matjasko et al. 2012). In fact, adolescents perpetrating or being victimised by violence in community spaces are often experiencing violence in their own homes (Browne et al. 2019; Gorman-Smith, Henry, and Tolan 2004).

Notably, organisations or individual adults can successfully improve adolescents' physical and social environments (De la Vega-Taboada et al. 2023; Ekholm 2013). Interventions by authoritative and respected adults through organised community activities (e.g., sports, arts) before and after school can create safe spaces for adolescents to play sports, socialise, learn, discover and explore (De la Vega-Taboada et al. 2023; Sieving et al. 2017). However, there is limited systematic study of the mechanisms by which safe spaces emerge (Lyras and Peachey 2011) and their perceived impact on youth in violence-exposed communities in LAC and particularly in Colombia, a region identified as failing to provide safe spaces and far from the global goal of ending violence towards children and adolescents (UNICEF 2020). Due to the need for preventing youth violence during out-of-the-school time, we will investigate community-led sports-based interventions that aim to prevent youth violence in a particular region of Colombia.

1.1 | Sports Participation Can Mitigate Risks for Violence and Crime

Worldwide, there is ample funding for violence-decreasing strategies that aim to increase school enrollment and anti-bullying

programs during school time, but safe spaces created through sports and recreation are not as well funded (WHO, 2020). It has been argued that instead of simply viewing sports as a final activity goal for youths escaping unsafe spaces, it would be more effective and efficient to frame sports as a potential conduit to a bigger life purpose (Deuchar and Weide 2019; Ekholm 2013). On one hand, research has shown that in the absence of a well-structured program and a culture of non-violence, sports can promote violence through hazing, brawling and foul play, thus disrupting sports' opportunity to transform social relations and produce positive social change (Fields, Collins, and Comstock 2007). On the other hand, there is abundant research highlighting that sports programs intentionally structured (e.g., promoting life skills) to serve socially vulnerable youth, have positive impact on their quality of life, socioemotional skills and crime reduction (Coalter 2015, Deuchar and Weide 2019; Ekholm 2013).

Sports can foster community cohesion, particularly in areas with low levels of collective efficacy, which are more prone to community violence (Maxwell, Garner, and Skogan 2018; Vilalta and Muggah 2016). Collective efficacy encompasses trust among members, willingness to assist others, friendship networks and supervision levels within adolescent groups. Consequently, initiatives like sports tournaments can enhance collective efficacy in violence-exposed communities (Schulenkorf 2012).

Also, adolescents' sense of connection with responsible adults serves as a protective factor for violence and risky behaviours in community settings (Sieving et al. 2017). Thus, high-quality youth-adult relationships are foundational to protecting adolescents from violence exposure and from becoming perpetrators of violence. For instance, a large body of literature on mentoring, highlights that the mentor-mentee relationship quality is positively associated with healthy developmental outcomes and negatively associated with bullying involvement (Sieving et al. 2017). In vulnerable communities, mentors can be community fútbol² coaches and dance coaches, who are respected adults from the community that consistently provide recreational activities for the youth (De la Vega-Taboada et al. 2023).

1.2 | Positive Youth Development

Positive Youth Development (PYD) challenge the traditional perspective that conceptualise adolescence as a chaotic or stormy life stage. It comes from a non-deficit and ecological approach in which the adolescent is seen as an individual with agency, capacities and opportunities, not as someone who needs to be fixed (Arnett 2006; Shek et al. 2019; Lerner et al. 2005).

Scholars employing this theory, exemplified by Lerner et al. (2005), developed a framework delineating the markers of Positive Youth Development (PYD) through five dimensions, termed the 5Cs. These include: (1) competence, encompassing constructive perceptions of one's abilities such as conflict resolution skills or decision-making abilities; (2) confidence, denoting an internalised sense of overall positive self-esteem; (3) connection, representing affirmative relationships with individuals and institutions manifested in mutually beneficial interactions; (4) character, reflecting adherence

to societal norms and ethics and (5) caring, indicating a compassionate and empathetic attitude towards others (Lerner et al. 2005). Recent research has analysed the impact of sport in developing those five indicators showing how sports can enhance those markers under certain characteristics such as the quality of the coach, the type of sport and the level of competitiveness (Jones et al. 2011).

1.3 | Community Coaches Play a Critical Role in Youth Development

Traditional sports coaches focus on improving their athletes' performance. They aim to develop the skills, physical conditioning, tactical knowledge and mental preparation of the athlete. On the other hand, community coaches embrace their roles as mentors, frequently offering guidance and emotional support crucial for the holistic development of their young athletes (Cronin and Armour 2015). Cronin and Armour (2015) emphasise that community coaches, usually are trusted figures uniquely positioned to instill essential life skills such as discipline, teamwork and perseverance, which contribute to athletic success and help protect youth from becoming involved in violence and criminal activities.

These dedicated mentors create a safe and nurturing environment where adolescents can learn to channel their energy, overcome challenges and build the relationships and resilience needed to navigate the complexities of their lives (Sieving et al. 2017). Consequently, fostering positive relationships between adolescents and their coaches becomes a cornerstone in deterring violent behaviours and promoting a healthier, more productive future for young people, particularly in vulnerable communities. Moreover, the way in which the community coaches collaborate and relate (a.k.a their social networks) is relevant as they can increase the collective efficacy (CE) of the community. The CE represents the capacity for action of a community, which is related to the level of connections among member and is a key factor for preventing violence (Maxwell, Garner, and Skogan 2018; Swatt et al. 2013).

1.4 | Fútbol in LAC

Fútbol is considered the most popular sport in the world, and in LAC that popularity is even stronger with more than 75% of men and 45% of women being interested in it (Malagón-Selma, Debón, and Domenech 2023; Ronconi 2022). In LAC fútbol it is not just recreational and has even been considered at the level of a religion, for example, the Maradonian Church (inspired by the Argentina fútbol player) has more than 100,000 members (Cuesta and Bohórquez 2012). Due to the level of dissemination in the LAC culture, fútbol may offer a route to intervene in communities in the region and become a tool to mitigate the risk of violence exposure and perpetration. Indeed, Sports for Development³ programs validate fútbol as a promising tool for violence prevention and crime reduction in Colombia and Latin America (Hills, Gomez Velasquez, and Walker 2018; Núñez and Portela-Pino 2024; Sobotová, Šafaříková, and Martínez 2018). For example, Núñez and Portela-Pino (2024) in a study conducted with NGOs in Colombia, found that coaches consider sports

fundamental for promoting social objectives, provided that certain conditions, such as intentionally teaching life skills are met.

1.5 | Current Study

Despite calls for preventing youth violence in at-risk settings (WHO 2015), few empirical studies describe non-clinical methodologies that have been successfully applied in violence-exposed regions. In this study, our research question was: How can a network of community fútbol coaches prevent youth violence exposure and perpetration in a vulnerable community in Colombia? For that purpose, we conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with an informal network of community coaches ($n=13$) in a resource-limited city, who are using fútbol explicitly as a space and tool for preventing youth violence. The interviews explored the coaches' perspectives of the factors influencing youth violence in their territories and how they believe they are addressing those factors with their programs and leadership. Also, to capture the network structure, which is key to address the community level impact of the coaches, we asked each participant to identify five persons with whom they collaborate the most.

2 | Methods

The researchers utilized individual semi-structured interviews to capture the perception of the community fútbol coaches. Also, they used social network analysis (SNA) due to its appropriateness on identifying the structure of a network and its influence in the research question.

2.1 | Participants

The participants were 13 ($n=13$) fútbol coaches working in the targeted city. They ranged in age from 23 to 71 years old ($M=44.7$, $SD=17.9$). See Table 1 for additional participant characteristics.

2.2 | Data Collection

After receiving the institutional review board approval (IRB-22-04555-AM01), researchers initiated the data collection of this study.

2.2.1 | Recruitment Procedure

Researchers utilised snowball sampling because it uses participants social network as a tool for recruitment and it is recommended when participants share with others a characteristic under examination (Browne 2005), in this case being a fútbol coach. The first interviewee was identified by observation during a fútbol practice in a public sport field in the studied town in the Caribbean coast of Colombia. This was the first participant and then he referred five coaches with whom he mostly collaborates. Then those coaches were interviewed and asked to refer five more coaches. One additional fútbol coach was recruited by nomination of a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) leader who was working in the region for a few years.

TABLE 1 | Demographics.

Participants characteristics	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Parent Binary Gender				
Male	9	69		
Female	4	31		
City of origin				
Study City	10	76		
Other Colombian Cities	3	34		
Primary race/ethnicity				
Mixed	10	76		
Other	3	14		
Years as fútbol coach				
1–5 years	5	38.5		
Over 5 years	8	61.5		
Being a coach is:				
A calling	11	84.5		
A job	2	15.5		
Average age of the participants	13		44.7	17.9

2.2.2 | Qualitative Interview Procedures

Once a participant expressed interest in being a part of the study, they scheduled a time for participating in an individual interview recorded through video meeting service (Zoom). At the time of the interview, participants completed an online consent form and a short online demographic questionnaire. Each participant was provided a pseudonym to be used as their identifier throughout the study.

All interviews were conducted in Spanish, averaging 35 min each. Participants received a gift (a professional fútbol) recommended by our local partners and approved by the IRB to compensate them for their time. Interviews were guided by a semi-structured questioning route. The leading questions included: (1) What social and cultural factors do coaches perceive as influencing violence exposure towards adolescent men, (2) What are the main actions coaches are doing to prevent adolescents' men from following violent developmental pathways, (3) Is fútbol a culturally appropriate approach to addressing the phenomena of violence? Why (4) What are the main barriers to conducting the fútbol programs? Additional questions and probes helped to ensure the researchers understood each coach's perspectives and to gather comprehensive and rich data.

2.2.3 | Social Network Measures

For gathering the social relations, researchers provided the possibility for nominating up to five coaches with whom they collaborate. Also, researchers asked about the strength of that

collaboration in terms of trust and frequency. The participants provided a number representing that collaboration from 1 to 10.

2.3 | Data Analysis

2.3.1 | Qualitative Interview Procedures

Researchers employed a reflective thematic analysis for its focus on determining, analysing and reporting patterns occurring in the data. Further, this approach ensures that there is a logically organised approach to begin structuring and reflecting on the data. The duality of balancing the need to capture the meaning and experiences of the participants and integrate the theory during analysis is achieved by this approach (Braun et al. 2019; Braun and Clarke 2022) and was needed to answer the research questions. The principal author first read the transcripts to gather impressions of the content. This was followed by the reflection of preliminary patterns relevant to codes applicable to the identified research question and to begin the coding processes. That initial process captured the emerging categories (open coding) and then the first author identified the themes that captured a central organising concept for different sets of codes (Braun, Clarke, and Rance 2014). Using a collaboratively reflective thematic analysis, the first author analysed the data and discussed it with two other authors by focusing on coaches' conceptualization of safe spaces, their challenges and their leadership styles (Braun and Clarke 2022). This process was conducted using MAXQDA 2023 (VERBI Software 2021).

2.3.2 | Social Network Analysis (SNA)

Social network analysis is an approach for examining and quantifying the patterns of relationships that arise among interacting individuals. It allows for the quantification of measures that, for example, identify individuals who play important roles in maintaining the information flow through the network (Makagon, McCowan, and Mench 2012).

For the study, it was relevant to determine which nodes (individuals) had the better capacity to promote the flow of information through the network or, in other words, who knows most of what is happening in multiple social circles. The measurement for capturing that is betweenness centrality (Makagon, McCowan, and Mench 2012). For a specific node, it captures how likely it is that a random set of nodes need to pass through that node for them to be connected. It is technically obtained by the percentage of the shortest path that must go through a specific node (Golbeck 2015). This is the equation of normalised betweenness centrality of a node⁴:

$$bc(v) = \frac{1}{n(n-1)} \sum_{s \neq v \neq t} \frac{\sigma_{st}(v)}{\sigma_{st}}$$

For visual purposes, we sized the nodes due to their betweenness centrality and built the network using the GEPHI (Bastian, Heymann, and Jacomy 2009) software. The bigger the node, the bigger its between centrality, thus the more important it is in maintaining the flow of the network. We

represented each relationship by a line (edge) and each person by a circle (node).

2.4 | Standards of Evaluation and Rigour

2.4.1 | Trustworthiness

The first author has more than 15 years of experience working with youth in this context. He had expert knowledge of this community's language, cultural meanings and linguistic variations. He designed the interview protocol and had previous experience conducting qualitative work. He engaged with the participants based on three field trips that allowed him to stay in the region for weeks. During the last trip, the first author presented some of the themes to community coaches and gathered their feedback on how well they felt represented (member checking). The analysis was then completed through discussions with the other authors, who are experts in afterschool programs and applied cultural psychology (peer debriefing) (Rose and Johnson 2020).

2.4.2 | Author's Positionality and Reflexivity

The first author was born in Caribbean city marked by stark income disparities, with a high per capita income coexisting with a significant population living below the poverty line. This inequality has important implications, particularly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where violence levels surpass the national average. Growing up in a more affluent part of the city, the author's perspective on violence differed from those experiencing it daily, leading to a profound impact when witnessing community violence during visits to underprivileged areas, especially the trauma endured by young boys.

Later, while implementing a socioemotional program in another Caribbean city, reflecting the same inequalities, he observed the exacerbating effects of structural inequities on youth involvement in crime. However, he observed the mitigating influence of fútbol—used endogenously by community coaches as a grassroots tool for social change. He noted the significant number of fútbol activities attracting large groups of boys in the afternoons and became curious about the coaches' dedication and motivation, especially in the face of deteriorating infrastructure.

This experience underpins his research on community fútbol schools' role in supporting at-risk adolescents. His work aims to contribute solutions to these systemic issues and inform policies, local fútbol and violence prevention initiatives. Due to its initial observations and optimism, he may be lean towards seen the positive effect of fútbol and not its limitations. For that reason, more authors were included in the analysis and the transcripts were analysed through critical lenses.

3 | Results

The authors used two levels to describe the themes for clarity and depth, as recommended by Braun et al. (2019).

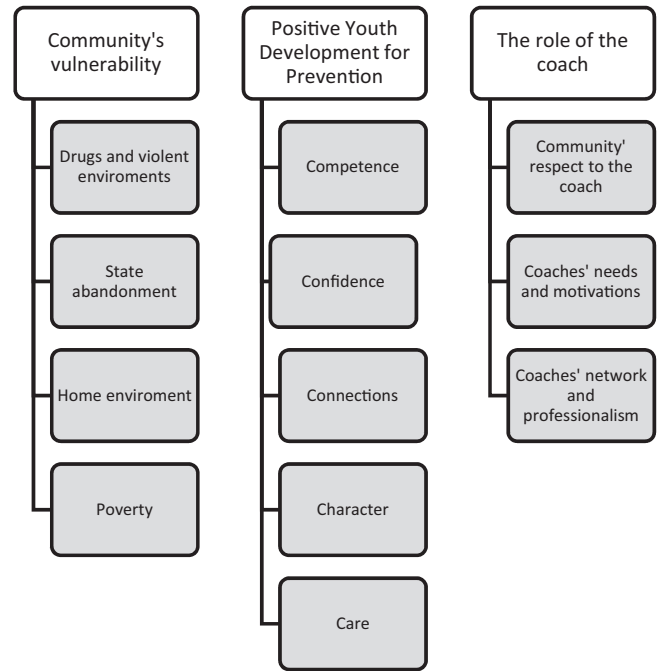


FIGURE 1 | Themes and subthemes.

They identified three themes (core concepts)—community vulnerability, positive youth development for prevention and the role of the coach—each with subthemes as illustrated in Figure 1.

3.1 | Community's Vulnerability

The authors included this theme because the factors affecting youth are specific to this context, and the coaches are detailed observers of how these factors influence the youths' daily lives. Many times, they base their interventions on those observations.

The theme encapsulates the factors that negatively impact youths' access to or ability to follow healthy developmental pathways. Coaches perceived it as a significant concern particularly for children already at risk for violence and drug use due to other factors reflecting their neighbourhoods, personalities or families. The community vulnerability subthemes included (beginning with the most recurrent) *drug and violent environments*, *state abandonment*, *home environments* and *poverty*.

3.1.1 | Drugs and Violent Environments

All the coaches reported that many children are exposed to drug use and violence in their neighbourhoods and families, and that the government's lack of support and resources were exacerbating the problem. One coach (Zape) said that 'there are more drug addicts than healthy youth.' Another shared:

Out of 100 children, 90 become drug addicts. They become antisocial. Why? Because of lack of

opportunities- the municipal government does not invest in the children (Rincon).

Fútbol schools were seen as spaces that would keep children away from these negative influences and provide a positive outlet for their energy and focus. However, the challenges are significant, with many children succumbing to drug addiction and criminal activity despite efforts to steer them in a different direction. The interviewees reiterated the importance of family and community support and the need for greater investment in youth programs and resources to combat the pervasive influence of drugs and violence in the environment.

One of my concerns is to try to make the child satisfied with what you are doing. But when one does not have help from any government, then it happens that one does not have possibilities to keep the child engaged. [...] So, we [use our money] to buy a ball. Because training requires many balls. If not, the child finds other ways, he deviates, and that is what one does not want [...]. For example, a boy who was a very good goalkeeper [...] even with the advice that I gave him, he got out of hand. He became [...] a hired killer. So, that worries you. Because you are looking for a way for the child to stay out of delinquency [but without the resources] (Cuadrado).

Also, the coaches expressed deep concern for vulnerable youth, for example those living in challenging families, as expressed by Rincon by saying 'they are easy prey for the criminal bands and for the gangs too' (Rincon).

3.1.2 | State Abandonment

The coaches described conditions of neglect that they attributed to abandonment by the district, state or the government evidenced by insufficient resources or support, deteriorated sports facilities and lack of protection from police that many said reflected corruption and nepotism. Coaches pointed to individuals in leadership positions whose lack of passion for sports led to abandoned sports facilities and a lack of resources for training and equipment. One of the women coaches explained: 'The people who are within that set of people [government]. They are non-sport people. [...] But if they place someone who really loves what they do, that's when they will improve sports' (Linda).

Also, the lack of support for sports and recreational activities is a contributing factor to this vulnerability, as was expressed by one of the coaches:

That has been painful for me. [...]. Many of the children have gotten out of hand. And they have fallen into disgrace. So, what happens? That is so painful for me. That one is trying to do things right, that is painful.

But why? Because we didn't find support from the government (Cuadrado).

3.1.3 | Home Environments

The home environment and family dynamics were found to play a significant role in a child's development and risk for violence, drug use and delinquency. Parents with alcohol or family problems may inadvertently expose their children to negative influences according to most coaches. They also perceived a lack of investment by parents in their children's education.

Because children, everything they see they want to learn. Children learn as they grow. So, they take anyone, for example, the father is a drug addict, then the kid sees that the father is a drug addict and follows the example of that person. And fútbol is one of the things that make the child get out of the problem (Falcao).

The prevalence of drugs in the community was also linked to unhealthy home environments as many of the adolescent men had family members involved in drug sales and consumption. The coaches and community members expressed that they work hard to provide support and guidance to children to prevent them from falling into the same patterns of drug use and violence as their relatives.

This is a high-risk community. Around here most children, like those who came here [to the fútbol field], are children who their dads, moms, brothers, cousins, and uncles, sell drugs. They think that they must be the same as their relatives who sell drugs. But hopefully with sport, hopefully we change their perspective of life (Rincon).

3.1.4 | Poverty

Poverty was conceptualised as inadequate resources to meet basic needs including healthy food and elements to play (e.g., socks, shoes). Parents and family members can play a crucial role in supporting young athletes, but financial constraints were seen as hindering their ability to do so. Coaches and sports programs trying to provide a positive outlet for children often try to fill this gap. But they, too, often have too few resources.

[when obtaining] the money to pay the referee, there are children who say, coach, I do not have [money], I did not bring it, coach, I even did not have breakfast, I have not had lunch. And those are the things that make you [sad] (Rincon).

So, there are children who don't come to play because they do not have the fútbol cleats, they don't have socks. [...] Their dads want them to play, but they have no resources (Falcao).

3.2 | Positive Youth Development for Prevention

The coaches viewed violence prevention education as those sets of messages, activities and support they offer their students that prevent them from choosing (or being pulled towards) a drug trafficking or any other violent developmental pathway. This encompasses the set of direct activities, including explicit violence prevention and non-violent conflict resolution messages—that equip youth to follow a positive developmental pathway. Five subthemes emerged in this area, each representing a feature from the PYD framework (The 5Cs): competence, confidence, connection, character and caring.

The importance of education for prevention and positive youth development is highlighted among the interviewees, focusing on using fútbol to achieve these goals, as one of the coaches mentioned ‘Because we here not only work on the sports dimension, but the formative dimension of the person’ (Tino).

3.2.1 | Competence (Cognitive, Social)

The coaches expressed their intentions on transforming of the way the adolescents relate with each other. They focus on generating social skills that allow participants to solve problems non-violently and to grow friendships (social competence).

When I came here this first day, two little boys were fist fighting and now they are friends, because I began to place them on the same team. I put them together so that they can relate and now they are friends (Leicy).

Furthermore, when the youth do something wrong in the community (e.g., disorganizing trash in the street, breaking a window with a ball), the coaches hold them accountable and insist they resolve the issue through socially appropriate interventions, such as apologising to the affected person (social competence).

The lady called me saying that my kids took the banana peels she had in her patio and started throwing them to each other, I told them they must apologize to the lady (Jorelyn).

Also, the coaches and educators emphasise the importance of studying and pursuing careers beyond professional fútbol (cognitive competence), as shown by one of the coaches, ‘we teach those kids principles that will serve them, not only for the school, but for their life in general.’ Further, the coaches expressed they train adolescents to avoid getting exposed to violence in the community, by making rational decisions: ‘We try to tell him, look, my son, you can’t get into that sector, because that sector is dangerous, etc’ (Cuadrado).

Many coaches shared examples of how they have helped children overcome aggressive behaviour and improve their academic performance through sports as one coach expressed: ‘When they dedicate to training, boys suddenly change their mentality and start thinking about school’ (Falcao).

3.2.2 | Confidence

The coaches emphasised the need to instill self-value and confidence in players, transmitting values through individual and group messages and including the ones who may not have advanced athletic skills or exceptional talents but to whom they want to offer constructive developmental opportunities. Notably, these youth may not significantly enhance the team’s competitiveness, but their participation contributes to a broader, positive impact.

Imagine if you take him out because he is bad [...]. And it’s better to have it here. It doesn’t matter if I put him to play for a little while, a few minutes, whatever, but we have him here [...] He’s not killing time on other [bad] things (Falcao).

Some of the fútbol schools receive support from psychologists that volunteer their help due to friendships and conviction. They provide players with individual and group psychological support, promoting self-esteem and camaraderie. In that sense, the community is empowered to support youth sports programs to develop good people, not just professional athletes.

We have a psychologist [...] So, we collaborate with her. Thus, individually, and collectively after each training we try to bring them together, tell them how positive they trained, what they excelled at in training, what can be improved (James).

Based on PYD perspective on empowering youth by including them in the decision making, one coach expressed how she does that in their trainings:

To make them stay here, we give them the main role, for example, today we are going to start, and we are going with their opinion, we are going to start as they want us to start, giving them the protagonism, so they feel good where they are with me (Leicy).

3.2.3 | Connection

The coaches discussed the importance of involving families in sports activities to address issues of aggression and violence that may originate at home. They acknowledged that cultural barriers make it difficult for some parents to attend meetings, but those who do show enthusiasm and can provide valuable support and guidance to their children. Building trust with families is seen as crucial to identifying and resolving issues that may affect a child’s performance or behaviour. The community coaches highlighted the challenges of dealing with issues that may stem from a child’s home environment, such as drug use, and the need for a collaborative approach between schools and families to address them. As one of the coaches expressed:

At least in my work, I try to ask the parent; how is the child at home? what behaviour is he having? I go

to school and ask the teachers: teacher, how is this child in class? sometimes I get some understandings and ends up helping that parent. [Then I advise] Take it to the doctor, take it to the psychologist, [etc.] (Pacheco).

Thus, when things are not going well with the kid, the coaches try to engage intentionally with the parents to promote a more systemic intervention, as expressed by El Pibe:

We call the parents, and we hold a meeting with the parents. We have a meeting with them and talk about how he [their kid] is behaving, what good and bad behaviours he is having. And then the child is also corrected. Now he is not corrected as a group, we call him apart.

3.2.4 | Character

One of the most important element for forming character, thus helping the adolescent distinguish between right and wrong are the referees during the fútbol games as Linda expressed: 'Refereeing changes the way children play'. There are even referees that give advises after a fault is committed.

Also, some coaches expressed they do not let players who showed non-cooperative and violent behaviours during the week, to play in the weekend games. This arguably may go against some PYD principles due to its punitive approach. However, the coaches' intention is on forming moral values (character).

I always talk to them before starting training, children who are [...] aggressive and disorganised, who do not pay attention to me, I put them to do three laps [...] holding hands together, and if they do not cooperate, [...] I send them to the bench. Then I make the decision to put them to play on Saturday or I don't put them to play, because that's what they like the most (El Pibe).

It is a recurrent practice among these community coaches to use physical activity as a corrective measurement for undesirable behaviours as expressed by another coach when dealing with fights and immoral actions.

And I call them both and suddenly make them do a few more exercises than the others, so that they stop fighting and are not rude. I make him go around, I put him to do abdomens, push-ups, so that they stop the fight.

3.2.5 | Caring

The coaches presented some evidence of their promotion of caring and compassion; however, it was one of the least referenced

elements. For example, here is a reference to an activity they provide for adolescents to get to know each other better and care about others' lives:

[the coach tells them:] each partner is going to be called by their preferred name, you are going to play games in which you will be in front of each other, and you have to investigate what the partner likes the most, so you can know them more deeply (Leyci).

Some coaches also expressed their intention of generating empathy among each other, to promote caring and compassion.

[we generate] empathy with their peers, for example, we are now promoting free expression, so that their opinions are important, that they should always listen to what the other says (Linda).

[we play] educational games, fun games, and show them videos. What the psychologist does is like giving love to the kids (Falcao).

3.3 | The Role of the Coach

Coaches reflected on their role in the community, the love and respect they exchange with the children and community at large, and some challenges they face. They described a lack of resources and recognition from sports organisations but highlighted that instead, they receive support from some parents, small businesses and the community. Three subthemes emerged from this theme: *Community respect to the coach, coaches' needs and motivations and the coaches' network and professionalism*.

3.3.1 | Community Respect to the Coach

More than half of the coaches emphasised the appreciation they felt from the community for their roles as youth fútbol coaches. A few acknowledged that they—and their families—even feel a sense of elevated security, in their homes and in the streets, attributed to their extensive coaching tenure and the mutual respect they have earned, even from individuals with a history of delinquency (some were once their students and others have their children enrolled in their coaching programs). Yepes explained this by telling a recent story:

The motorcycle I have there was stolen from me. And the guy [said] this is the teacher [coach]'s motorcycle. I mean, a young guy that I raised playing fútbol, today they are already men, but they have deviated on the other side. [when they realized it was mine] They brought the motorcycle back to me. They do not bother us, on the contrary [they help] because they have kids [enrolled in our programs] (Yepes).

Also, the coaches explained how their role is sometimes at the level of a dad, 'In some cases, they are more confident in telling me things than they are with their own dad' (Linda). Further, the coaches highlighted the dedication, love and hard work required to run a successful fútbol school, even sometimes, going against their own family.

Well, my sons and daughters criticize me. They are rude when they see them [the fútbol kids] arriving. I don't know, but I think they are jealous. Because they are already grown up, so now I dedicate myself more to these [fútbol] kids (Catalina).

3.3.2 | Coaches' Needs and Motivations

Many coaches described feeling motivated by a love for teaching and seeing children improve. They find satisfaction in watching the children enjoy training and improve academically and behaviorally. They feel motivated when their fútbol schools are attracting children as Cuadrado expressed: 'When you get 7, 8 children, that is, you get discouraged, but when you get [...] 30, 40 children, then that's it [happiness]'. In fact, 84.5% of the coaches described coaching fútbol as their 'calling', their purpose for living, and a way to give back to their community.

That keeps me [a live] the love for sport, yes, sometimes with my partner we argue, as she says, you are old. Yes, if I leave fútbol, I will die, it is my passion, I am happy when I am training, I am happy, and when I train the children, I feel a satisfaction because I already did my job (Cuadrado, 71).

3.3.3 | The Coaches' Network and Professionalism

The coaches cultivate robust friendships through their participation in championships and friendly matches as the coach Yepes explained 'People who don't belong, who aren't in the tournaments, don't interact with each other and don't support each other like people who are in tournaments'. Their primary focus is to improve their players' skills and prepare them for the important weekend community competitions. These events come with certain formalities and demand teamwork and support from all those engaged, including administrative responsibilities. While a few coaches mentioned occasional tensions with their peers, most readily acknowledge the camaraderie within the sport and their collaborative efforts to elevate players to greater competitive levels. As Yepes said:

Many of them have reached the professional level based practically on these tournaments. [...] parents are happy with those sport activities because they say that [through them] those kids are forced to study [...]. [if they study] they can train and go to the games. It is also a way of forcing the child to study (Yepes).

The competition dimension of the environment was not shared by the coach who was working with a Sport for Development NGO. The following diagram represents the levels of connections between the coaches in the region. Each circle is a coach, and each line is formed when two coaches collaborate with each other. The size of the circles represents each coach's level of intermediation in the network (betweenness centrality). The biggest circle represents the coach who leads the week-ends tournaments. He is the most intermediary person in the network (Betweenness centrality = 155.5). This person can be considered a bridge, the one that allows the most flow of information in the network. The isolated circles represent the NGO's coach and her close network of colleagues. Due to the two sub-graphs observed in the diagram, the lack of collaboration between the two types of programs (NGOs and fútbol schools) is revealed (see Figure 2).

4 | Discussion

The results showed the critical issues of community vulnerability and the potential of sports, mainly fútbol, to address these concerns. The community's vulnerability can have detrimental effects, especially on children exposed to risk factors such as familial and community violence and drug use. To help children overcome those adversities, community coaches attempt to influence youth positively but often face resource scarcity, lack of institutional support and financial difficulties.

Echoing Lerner's 5Cs framework (Lerner et al. 2005) and in the face of adversity, the commitment of coaches and their constructive relationships with participants are apparent as they strive to foster Positive Youth Development. This is accomplished through: teaching values such as respect (character), nurturing of self-esteem (confidence), promoting peaceful conflict resolution (social competence) and promoting strategies to avoid drug involvement and delinquency (cognitive competence). This impactful endeavour emphasises the critical role of sports as a tool for violence prevention and positive behaviour development, as documented by many other researchers when they identified that sports can take youth out from the criminal bands (Deuchar and Weide 2019), that the community coaches can have a lasting impact in violence prevention (Cronin and Armour 2015) and community development (Mejía Restrepo and Núñez 2024) and that sports programs can make a difference in developing life skills in socially vulnerable youth (Hermens et al. 2017).

In terms of the challenges the community coaches face, they declared they have a need to negotiate their focus between adolescents' socioemotional development and teams (a.k.a. schools)' competitiveness. In other words, their primary focus is on using sports to promote positive youth development, but they must also be competitive to thrive as a fútbol school. The fact that they face this dichotomy sets these community coaches in the middle of a spectrum that ranges from high-competitive fútbol schools to Sport for Development schools. On one hand, high-competitive fútbol schools focus just on winning games and increasing skills, while Sport for Development programs, including the ones working in Colombia, have an organisational structure, de-emphasise competition and even encourage changes in the rules to promote positive youth development

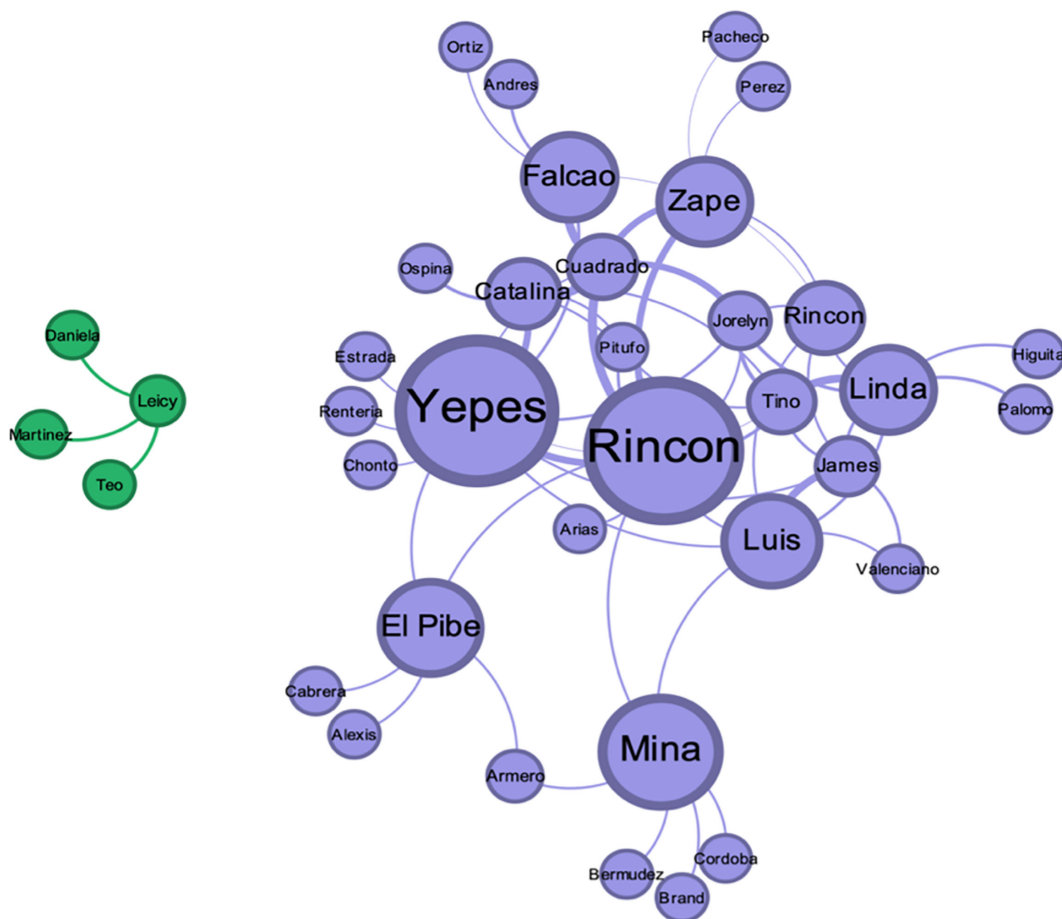


FIGURE 2 | The social network of the coaches based on collaborations (community coaches, purple and NGO's coaches green).

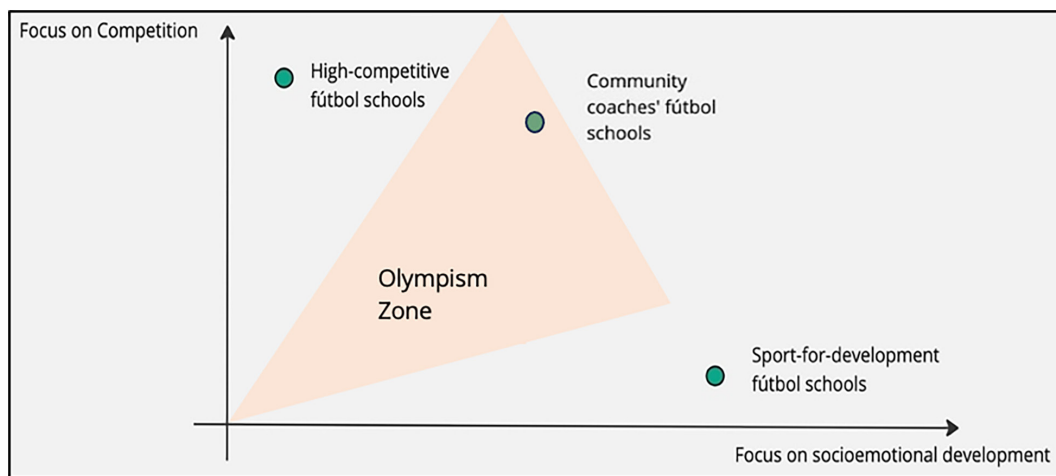


FIGURE 3 | Fútbol schools' focus.

(Núñez and Portela-Pino 2024). These community-led fútbol schools fit in the middle of that spectrum, as they carry on the spirit of helping society while developing youth athleticism and encouraging competition. This middle point can arguably be conceptualised as Olympism⁵ (see Figure 3).

We argue that the misalignment of objectives between community coaches, embracing competition and NGOs, prioritising social-emotional learning (SEL), contributes to the observed disconnect identified in the Social Network Analysis (SNA). We

claim that there are ample opportunities for mutual benefit and elevated youth (and societal) impact exist if these two groups collaborate. Community coaches may benefit from the formal socioemotional development training NGOs can provide if a relationship develops. For example, non-punitive tools for developing character. Similarly, NGOs can enhance their impact and connection to the local region by building relationships with community coaches whose understanding of the regional history and culture has been critical to their successful recruitment and retention of youths over the years (Hambrick, Svensson, and Kang 2019).

SNA can identify the most efficient and effective intervention points for developing these connections. The ideal individuals to build equitable and effective relationships would be those with the highest betweenness centrality in the network (Golbeck 2015). In this model, this would be Yepes (69-years-old), the tournaments' organiser and Rincon (63-years-old), who has several fútbol schools and lives in front of a very active field. Rincon and Yepes facilitate the information flow within the community fútbol school network as bridges in the system. Their access to privileged information (e.g., how many kids play fútbol, who are the active coaches, the history of fútbol schools) would help insert external NGOs fluently into the local fútbol system (Golbeck 2015). As noted, tournaments strongly influence the sports culture and, therefore, the city's culture. Consequently, providing incentives (awards) for promoting Olympism in the tournaments (e.g., fair play, teamwork, sportsmanship spirit, etc.) may enhance a more peaceful culture in the region. In general, promoting tournaments of this nature can be a highly cost-effective strategy for enhancing violence prevention initiatives implemented by community coaches.

The more extended history of community fútbol schools than formal NGO-led sports for development programs highlights the importance of the self-preservation drive as a motivation for becoming community coaches. Many perceived coaching as an effective strategy for safeguarding their well-being and their families. This perception is rooted in the respect afforded to community coaches and the accompanying protection they receive, even from individuals involved in illicit and risky activities. We interpret this motivation through the lens of evolutionary psychology, where actions that may appear selfless in the present (e.g., using their own money to promote a fútbol school) have delay reciprocity aimed at ensuring the safety (or survival) of themselves, their families and their communities (Dawkins 1981). This condition should be enhanced by supporting these individuals (with resources or trainings) due to the impact they generate in the community.

4.1 | Limitations

Snowball sampling technique depends on the initial connection, that first node (or seed), and this may have biased the creation of the network and may have influenced the disconnection between NGOs and community coaches revealed in the SNA. However, we stopped when saturation was achieved (> 12 Interviews; Guest et al. 2020). Also, some interviews were kept brief to minimise the burden on the coaches. In addition, we acknowledge that the results are particular for this community and communities alike and cannot be generalised to all populations or communities.

5 | Conclusion

Results underscore the urgent need for a more efficient investment in sports and recreational activities within vulnerable communities. Addressing community vulnerability requires a multi-pronged approach involving coaches, sports programs, parents, local institutions and government support. By providing adolescents with healthy opportunities for using their time

and energy, they will have more pathways to grow into responsible, well-rounded individuals who can break free from the cycle of violence and contribute positively to their communities. Accordingly, community coaches provide invaluable work, and they can benefit—and benefit the youth they serve—by connecting with NGOs and institutions outside their social networks.

Using multiple analytical approaches, including thematic analysis and social network analysis, provided a comprehensive and complementary insight into the complex nature of youth violence and the violence prevention initiatives championed by community coaches through their fútbol schools.

Ethics Statement

The research was approved by the IRB of Florida International University: IRB-22-04555-AM01.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

- ¹We conceptualised violence as 'the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against another person or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation'.
- ²We will mainly use the Spanish word 'fútbol' to refer to the sport that is known in North America and Oceania as soccer or in the English-speaking world (outside of North America and Oceania) as football.
- ³Sport for Development programs are sport programs intentionally structured to serve socially vulnerable youth's sports participation and/or life skill development (Coalter 2015).
- ⁴Symbols of the equation: bc : between centrality, v : the node under investigation, σ_{st} : the number of shortest paths between s and t , $\sigma_{st}(v)$: the number of shortest paths between s and t that passes through v , n : number of nodes in the network.
- ⁵Olympism: The usage of sport to promote more peaceful societies, by blending cultural enrichment and competition (Lyras 2012; Nuñez and Daetz 2020).

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