

Evaluating Olympic Physical Activity, Sport and Health (OPASH) legacies: Developing a model using evidence from a worldwide systematic review

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Aim of paper

To develop a model to evaluate the physical activity, sport and health legacies of Olympic and Paralympic Games and other major sporting events.

This paper uses evidence collated about evaluation methodologies as part of a recent systematic review of the worldwide evidence base for developing a physical activity, sport and health legacy from the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games (Weed et al, 2009). The question posed for the systematic review in this respect was: How has the leveraging of a range of opportunities from Olympic Games, sports events and sports franchises been evaluated? This paper examines the implications of the evidence returned for developing an evaluation model for physical activity, sport and health legacies.

Literature review

Many reviews and commentaries of the potential sport development or health impacts of major sport events highlight the lack of robust evaluations of this aspect of previous events (e.g., Brown & Massey, 2001; LERI, 2007). This has led, to a certain extent, to the slightly misleading oft-quoted statement that “no previous Olympic Games has raised participation in sport and physical activity”. This is misleading because: (a) it is true only that there is no evidence that previous Games have raised participation (this is a failing of evaluation rather than a failing of outcome); and, (b) no previous Games has employed strategies towards raising participation (consequently, there has been little meaningful activity to evaluate). As a result, many publications examining physical activity, sport and health legacies tend to be either retrospective analyses of national surveys collected for other purposes, or discussions of intents, potential models and possibilities (rather than evidence).

Research design

Evidence from a worldwide systematic review is used to develop a model to evaluate the physical activity, sport and health legacies of Olympic and Paralympic Games and other major sporting events. However, as noted above, there are limited previous examples of such evaluations in relation to physical activity, sport and health. Consequently, the review was extended to cover the evaluation of processes that have used the Olympic Games, sports events and sports franchises to engage communities and constituencies in a wider range of behaviours (e.g., tourism, volunteering). This is because recent research has suggested that the principles of evaluating such processes are adaptable across different behaviours (Chalip, 2006).

Results

The initial worldwide evidence search returned 1,778 documents. Following a number of iterations and application of standard systematic review procedures for exclusion criteria on the basis of relevance and quality proxies (Coren & Fisher, 2006), 54 full text sources were included in the review, of which seven related to the review question on evaluation. These seven studies underwent a further quality appraisal, not for the purposes of exclusion, but to determine the weight they should be given in the synthesis, and this was a consideration in the subsequent analysis. As the seven sources were qualitative or discursive, an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to develop a narrative synthesis (Pope & Mays, 2006) which identified four key themes: (i) attribution and measurement, (ii) aggregation and presentation, (iii) nature of legacy, (iv) political will.

Discussion and conclusion

The paper will discuss the following major issues identified under each theme:

- Attribution and Measurement: isolating outcomes to the event; retrospectively establishing baseline measures; accounting for opportunity costs; common errors and misrepresentation.
- Aggregation and Presentation: obfuscation of the detail of impacts on particular sectors or communities by aggregated presentation.
- Nature of Legacy: recognising and considering negative and neutral outcomes; including pre-event “pregnancy” impacts and opportunities; examining unplanned outcomes.
- Political Factors: including potential positive and negative impacts of political will as an evaluation variable.

In conclusion, a model will be presented that offsets negative outcomes against positive outcomes (and recognises that some outcomes are neutral), for specific impacts on particular aspects of physical activity sport and health, which are isolated to the event in question, and examined for comparative success against other potential activities and investments.

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