

## PROMOTING RECREATIONAL SPORT PARTICIPATION IN GREECE: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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### Abstract

Declining levels of sport participation has been a worrying issue internationally in recent years, due to the links between physical inactivity and health-related issues, such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease (Vail, 2007). Providing opportunities for sport and recreation participation is considered today as an important strategy for governments to promote quality of life (Kemperman & Timmermans, 2008). Research has shown that sport and active recreation is associated with multiple physical, psychological and sociological benefits, which are important dimensions of quality of life (Garret, Brasure, Schmitz, Schultz & Huber, 2004). Sport participation, should, therefore be promoted in local, national and international levels. Greece is today among the top European countries in terms of obesity and associated diseases, as a result of high physical inactivity levels and unhealthy diet (International Association for the Study of Obesity, 2008, <http://www.iaso.org>). Considering that obesity is associated with high medical, rehabilitation and health care costs, it could be realized that the promotion of recreational sport participation in the community should be an issue of high priority in Greece. Due to the absence of national recreational sport participation data in Greece, research and information is still limited. The present paper aimed to report on annual sport participation rates and frequency of sport participation, demographic differences, and constraints on sport participation, among young and middle-aged parents in Greece. We selected this specific group of the population because previous studies have shown that parents with young children have low sport participation rates in Greece (Alexandris & Carroll 1997; 1998). Furthermore, this group should be targeted to participate in family sport programs, which have been proposed as a good strategy for promoting recreational sport participation (Shaw & Dawson, 2001). Self-reported

measures of sport participation were used, following the methodology and the research instrument developed by Alexandris & Carroll, 1998). Three hundred parents aged between 31 and 55 years old (mean age 38.8 years old) participated in the study. The data were collected by two local authority sport centres, in which parents have registered their children to participate in sport programs. The results indicated that 65.3 % of the responders never participated in any sport activities during the previous year that the research was conducted. In terms of the frequency of sport participation, 9.4 percent participated at least once a year, 58.3 percent participated at least once a month, and 32.3 percent participated on a weekly basis. Furthermore, statistical significant differences in sport participation were found among the age groups ( $F=15.9$   $p<.001$ ) and educational groups ( $F=8.26$   $p<.05$ ). Sport participation decreased with advancing age and among the less educated individuals. Non-statistical significant differences were found between males and females and among for the different occupation groups. Finally, lack of time, facilities / services and lack of partner related constraints had the highest mean scores. In conclusion, the present study provided evidence that recreational sport participation rates among young and middle aged parents in Greece is low. Education, gender and age were shown to be amongst the factors that relate with sport participation rates. Both external and internal constraints were shown to influence sport participation rates, supporting previous studies in Greece (e.g., Alexandris and Carroll, 1997). These results support our argument that the emphasis of sport policy in Greece has been towards the promotion of elite sports against the promotion of recreational sports. Promoting recreational sports should be amongst the main priorities of social and health policies in Greece today.

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