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# HOW SPORT CAN BE BAD FOR OUR (PUBLIC) HEALTH? AN ANALYSIS OF DATA FROM TWO SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS AND FROM ACTIVE PEOPLE AND THE HEALTH SURVEY FOR ENGLAND.

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## **Abstract**

### AIM

Sport often enjoys a privileged position within the wider leisure and cultural industries, with greater levels of public funding and often greater levels of political support. The arts, for example, does not have national targets to achieve defined levels of participation across the population supported by public money for delivery. Sport's privileged position is largely as a result of its perceived potential contribution to the health of the population, and the purpose of this paper is to explore whether that privileged position is warranted on public health grounds.

### BACKGROUND

Public health is concerned with promoting health among the population as a whole rather than with individual patients or diseases. As a strategy for promoting public health, the WHO (2011) and most Western democracies, including the UK (CMO, 2010), have developed guidelines for the amount of physical activity their citizens are advised to undertake to enhance their health, which comprise some variation of 150minutes physical activity per week. In promoting physical activity, sport is often given a lead role, particularly through general promotional messages linked to claimed inspirational effects of sports people, events or competition. But in a recent series of papers in *The Lancet* focusing on the global health implications of physical inactivity it was suggested that the solution does not lie with sport nor, indeed, with exercise, but with promoting the need to move more in our daily lives (Das & Horton, 2012).

### METHODOLOGY

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This paper draws on two analyses:

(i) An analysis of two national surveys in England, the Active People Survey (n=c.170,000) and the Health Survey for England (n=c.15,000). Through synthetic estimation across these surveys the paper will establish the prevalence of sport participation and engagement among those who do and do not achieve 150minutes of physical activity per week.

(ii) An analysis of two worldwide systematic reviews of research evidence on: the use of messages associated with sport events, role models and competition to increase physical activity and sport participation (Weed et al, 2009); and, the communication of public health messages through public information screens (Weed et al, 2010). This evidence, collectively comprising 99 studies, will provide insights into the likely impact of sport-related communication strategies on those not achieving the public health target of 150minutes of physical activity per week.

## RESULTS

The two analyses outlined in the methodology show that:

(i) In England, 61% of the population achieve 150 minutes of physical activity per week, but 23% are active for less than 30 minutes per week. In addition, 21% of the population do more than 150 minutes of sport per week, but 52% have done no sport in the previous month and, of those, 23% have done no physical activity outside of that required for their job. Finally, 30% of the population are wholly disengaged from sport and have not participated in the previous year, but at least 13% of the population achieve 150 minutes of physical activity without taking part in sport.

(ii) Messages associated with sport events, role models and competition can be effective in encouraging those who already participate in sport to participate more, and in encouraging those who have participated before to participate again, but they are not effective among those not currently or historically engaged with sport. In addition, public health messages using a primary theme from which the recipients are disengaged can have negative effects in causing the recipients to react against the promoted behavior.

## CONCLUSION

The least active members of the English population are those least engaged with sport. Therefore, while sport messages may have success in raising physical activity levels among those already engaged with sport this will help little in maximizing the percentage of the population

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achieving the public health target of 150minutes per week as most of those positively affected by sport messages will already be active at this level. However, among the least active, where the potential health gains of physical activity are greatest, not only may sport messages be ineffective, but they may cause the least active to react against increasing their physical activity. In this respect, there is some evidence to suggest that sport may be bad for our public health.

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