

Public Sports Facilities – Are They for the Public?

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Aim

About 80 percent of all public spending on sports in Denmark is spent by the 98 Danish municipalities (Ministry of Culture, 2014). Public spending on sports facilities have not been affected by the financial crises and the economic support from municipalities to sports facilities have not changed significantly since 2007 (Storm & Rask, 2017). Despite being a public good, public sport facilities are not used by all citizens. This abstract analyses who uses public sports facilities.

Purpose and Background

Sports facilities are prioritized in all Danish municipalities. The Act on Non-Formal Education and Democratic Voluntary Activity states that municipalities need to provide sports facilities to local sports clubs for free or for a minor fee. Additionally, municipalities are obligated to grant subsidies to sports clubs in the absence of suitable sports facilities. Furthermore, the act states that municipalities have to prioritize activities for children and people with a handicap, when assigning sports facilities. Considering adults, there are no rules influencing access to sports facilities. This raises the question who benefits from this public spending.

Research

Between 2015 and 2018, the Danish Institute for Sports Studies mapped sports participation among school children and adults in 16 different municipalities. Additionally, the use of selected public sports facilities (mostly sports halls and swimming pools) were recorded in 14 different municipalities across the country. Results from these municipalities were merged for use in this abstract. The data on sports participation includes 33,809 children and 15,702 adult respondents. The record of activities was conducted during two weeks in 133 public sports halls and 20 public swimming pools. The presentation will show who benefits from the public sports facilities (sports halls and swimming pools) and presents the opportunities municipalities have to improve the utilization of public sports facilities.

Results and Discussion

Because of the Act on Non-Formal Education and Democratic Voluntary Activity, sports halls are mostly used by local sports clubs, who stand for almost three out of four activities in the 133 public sports halls (from 16-22 pm). Almost all children in Denmark have been active in a sports club within the last year. It is therefore no surprise that almost two-third of the sports activities in public sports facilities are for children and youngsters (0-24 years old). The immediate conclusion is that sports facilities are used - as the act prescribes – primarily by children.

The data also gives insight into the use by adults. With only 37 percent of the adult respondents being a member of a sports club, adults use of public sports facilities is limited compared to children. Data shows that some adults are more reluctant to use public sports facilities than others. Amongst them who participate least in sports, those who are unemployed, only 14 percent uses a public sports hall, against 27 percent of all adults.

However, 29 percent of the unemployed used a (often private) fitness center, while it is 34 percent of all adults.

When asked if adult citizens are interested in using the public sports facilities without being a member of a sports club, 57 percent of the adults replies to be interested. Also, 45 percent of the adults would like to have the opportunity to use public sports facilities at a self-organized manner: Empty time slots where one just can enter the public sports facility in order to be active. Both these initiatives are business as usual in most swimming pools and fitness centers.

Analysis of activities in the 20 public swimming pools confirms that public sports facilities could reach a broader audience than sports clubs and children. In the public swimming pools 57 percent of the activities are organized by local sports clubs, additionally 34 percent of the activities are defined as activities related to public opening hours and therefore cover mostly self-organized activities. Furthermore, data shows that adults have more equal access to public swimming halls.

Conclusion and Implications

Most time slots in the public sports facilities are used by local clubs and children. Data shows that only a small part of the adult population actually uses the public sports facilities, because in practice one has to be a member of a sports club to get access to public sports facilities. Only 37 percent of the adults are a member of a sports club. Adults indicate however, that they would like to be active in the public sports facilities but wish flexibility and self-organization. Public sports facilities could learn from the more flexible swimming pools and fitness centers and can therewith be used to a higher extent by those who need it: the inactive population.

References

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