

## TRENDS IN SPORTS PARTICIPATION IN BRITAIN: 1977-2002

**Chris Gratton & Themis Kokolakakis**, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

### Context

In *Game Plan* (DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002) the government set ambitious targets for participation in sport and physical activity by the year 2020, that 70% of the adult population should be participating in sport and physical activity for at least 30 minutes on at least five days a week. This target represents more than double the current participation rate of 32%. The motivation for this ambitious target is to produce a fitter more active population and realise the significant health benefits from this. The problem in delivering such a target is that official national statistics on sports participation show no increase in participation from 1990 to the latest data we have in 2002. If anything the data indicate that participation has gone down, although this may be due to slight changes in survey methodology in the 2002 survey. At the very least, aggregate indicators of participation have been static since 1990. However, Gratton and Tice (1994) showed that standard measures sport participation that concentrate on individual sports or a single overall rate of participation (eg participation in at least one activity) often disguise significant changes over time in sports participation. This paper analyses trends in sports participation in Britain from 1977 to 2002 using data from the main national source for sports participation data in Britain, the General Household survey. There was a major change in survey methodology in 1987 which makes data after this year non-comparable with the earlier data and therefore the analysis will be carried out over two periods: 1977-1986 and 1987-2002.

### Project

#### 1977-1986

The report on the 1986 GHS analyses trends in sports participation from 1977 to 1986. The most significant change between 1977 and 1986 according to this analysis was in the participation of women in indoor sport (rising from 13 per cent in 1977 to 21 per cent in 1986), with other indicators showing only small increase in sports participation. However, there are two aspects of the conventional approach that may make it difficult to pick out major trends.

The first relates to the activities included in the definition of sport. Camping/caravanning is included in the outdoor sport category of the GHS throughout the 1977 to 1986 period. There is little logic to this. This activity has a participation rate of 2 per cent in the most popular (third) quarter, a significant amount for an activity with little or nothing to do with active sport. More seriously, two indoor activities dominate the indoor sport category for men: snooker with a male participation rate of 17 per cent in 1986 and darts with a male participation rate of 9 per cent in 1986 (but 15 per cent in 1977). There is perhaps more of an argument for including these activities as sports than there is for camping/caravanning and they may be important activities for indicating the overall pattern of leisure participation. However, if the main interest is to indicate the trends in sports participation in order to assess the success of publicly financed policies aimed at encouraging people into active sport for health reasons then it is much better to exclude these activities in particular since the large decline in darts participation over the period is pulling down the trend rate of growth in overall sports participation.

Gratton and Tice (1994) devised a new series of participation indicators which represent the major features of the GHS data. These indicators are capable of providing an adequate summary of the data in a relatively small set of statistics. By analysing the path of these indicators over time it would then become possible to analyse the major trends in the data.

### Results

#### 1977-1986

The six participation groups that provide the structure of the analysis are: taking part in at least one sport (SPORT), at least one outdoor sport (OUTDOOR), at least one indoor sport (INDOOR), outdoor sport only (OUTDOOR ONLY), indoor sport only (INDOOR ONLY), and both indoor and outdoor sport (INDOOR&OUTDOOR).

Looking at the categories relating to aspects of outdoor sports participation, the general characteristic is that there has been very little growth in these categories over the 1977-1986 period. OUTDOOR refers to those that took part in at least one outdoor sport over the four week reference period. By 1986 this category had a participation rate of 31.4 per cent but the rate of growth from 1977 to 1986 was only 14 per cent. OUTDOOR ONLY picks out a different aspect of outdoor sport. It looks at those that only participate in outdoor sport. This group shows virtually no growth between 1977 and 1986. This highlights a major feature of the participation data for this period: that is, outdoor sports are not attracting a significantly greater number of participants in 1986 than in 1977. In particular, those people that only take part in outdoor sport represent the same share of the adult population in 1986 as they did in 1977.

The picture for indoor sports is remarkably different. INDOOR (i.e. participants in at least one indoor sport) has a growth rate of 58 per cent between 1977 and 1986. The equivalent figure from the conventional GHS analysis is 29 per cent, indicating how the inclusion of darts and snooker seriously reduces the growth rate in indoor sports participation. INDOOR ONLY has a growth rate of 60 per cent. Thus we see a clear difference in the growth of participation between indoor and outdoor.

The final group INDOOR AND OUTDOOR represents those taking part in both indoor and outdoor sport. INDOOR AND OUTDOOR is a core group of sports participants that is represented in many other groups. It is a small group in 1977 at only 6.1 per cent but it has grown rapidly with a 52.5 per cent growth rate between 1977 and 1986. The frequency with which this group takes part was 15 times a month in 1986 or nearly every other day.

### **1987-2002**

These results show substantially more dynamism in sports participation than the conventional analysis of the sports participation data. The paper will go to replicate the analysis for the period 1987-2002 to investigate whether the conventional analysis over this period is also disguising significant trend changes in sports participation in Britain. It compares the real levels of sports participation in this period with forecast levels using the 1977-86 trends. It will also replicate results of the COMPASS framework for sports participation over this same period for both adults and young people. The results show that the trend rise in participation tailed off in the 1987-1996 period but participation did continue to rise at a slower rate. Between 1996-2002, however, there was a marked decline in participation.

Before policy makers intervene to attempt to deliver on the new ambitious targets for future sports participation, it is important to understand more fully what is been happening over the recent past to trends in sport participation.

### **References**

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Contact: c.gratton@shu.ac.uk