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Measuring levels of physical activity to monitor health benefits in Northern Ireland

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MEASURING LEVELS OF ADULT PARTICIPATION IN SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

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INTRODUCTION

The desire by Government to measure participation in sport and physical activity in the UK has been driven in part by factors such as monitoring the investment in local authority facilities, evaluating the difference National Lottery funding has made, and monitoring service level agreements between Government and national agencies. A new agenda has arisen which is to monitor the amount of physical activity people are undertaking in order to derive a health benefit as a link between physical activity and health has been firmly established. Scientific literature consistently identifies that regular physical activity: reduces the risk of premature mortality; coronary heart disease; colon cancer; diabetes mellitus; and osteoporosis as well as helping to reduce depression and anxiety, improve mood and enhance a person's ability to perform daily tasks (US Department for Health and Human Services, 1996; Department of Health, 2004). Furthermore, there is also evidence of 'dose-response' whereby the more physical activity people undertake, the greater the health benefits they derive (DoH 2004).

This new agenda requires new research and much more sophisticated research instruments than currently exist. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the evidence and then to design and test a new survey instrument designed to assess levels of adult participation in sport and physical activity in Northern Ireland.

METHODS

This large-scale population based survey was commissioned by Sport NI and conducted by Ipsos MORI, Belfast. The sample universe comprises all individuals aged 16+ living in Northern Ireland. In total, approximately 4,600 interviews will be conducted during the course of one year, spread evenly over four quarters. In the first quarter (23 July – 29 October 2009), 1,130 interviews were conducted and this paper is based on the interim findings from this research. The survey is conducted face-to-face, in-home, using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). A stratified random sampling approach was applied for the selection of households. The main aim of the survey is to enhance the understanding of sport and physical activity patterns and determinants across the adult population of Northern Ireland.

RESULTS

The key preliminary headline findings from the survey are detailed below.

- 34% of respondents achieve the Chief Medical Officer's recommended level of physical activity.
The strongest influencing factor on people's physical activity is age.
- Among those who have not participated in the last 12 months the main reasons are health-related (61%) and a lack of interest (50%).
- Participation in sport and perceived happiness are positively correlated.

DISCUSSION

In today's society, changing inactive lifestyles and increasing levels of activity presents a tremendous public health challenge - a challenge that cannot be ignored if health is to be improved and preventable diseases such as metabolic syndrome are to be avoided. Physical activity needs to be seen as an opportunity for enjoyment, for improved vitality, for a sense of achievement, for fitness, for optimal weight, and, not least of all, for health benefits. It is in this context that this research is relevant and necessary. Government, relevant agencies, communities and individuals in Northern Ireland need to become aware of current levels of activity and then reflect on how conducive homes, neighbourhoods and environments are to supporting more active living.

References

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