

GRAYING OF THE SPORTS: ADULTS OF 50 YEARS AND OLDER MAKE UP A FAST GROWING SEGMENT OF THE SPORTS MARKET

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Abstract

Aim/background

In the Netherlands and other European countries, the theme "sport and the elderly" has been elevated for some time on the agenda for researchers, government and policymakers in sports. The Dutch population of 55 years and older has increased considerably over time, from 2,6 million in 1975 to 4,2 million in 2005. For 2035 it is expected to have grown to a total of 6 million people (De Boer, 2006). With this strong aging of population in mind, there are growing concerns about the health and physical fitness. In 2009, this reality gave reason to launch Fit for Life Netherlands, following the example of Finland. A network of regional and national organizations from the public and private sector was founded with the common goal to increase participation by older people in sport and exercise. It was known that the participation in sport and physical activity of the elderly lagged behind younger cohorts, but further questions remained. We therefore conducted a research project with the main goal (Van Lindert, 2009): "to understand the current participation in sport and exercise of people of 50 years and older, the differences between groups of elderly and the incentives and obstacles they experience to become more active."

Methodology

The main source for data on sports participation comes from the Amenities and Social Services Utilization Survey 2007, a representative national survey among 13.000 people from 6-79 years in the Netherlands.

Data about club membership derives from a national club panel, set up by the Mulier Institute in close cooperation with the National Olympic Committee* Dutch Sports Federation, consisting of 1300 Dutch sports clubs. Data on motives and experiences of older sport participants were derived from the "Sportersmonitor 2008", a representative online national survey with 4.200 respondents from 6-80 years. We also used data from the Eurobarometer (Europese Commissie 2010) and the ISSP 2007 (International Social Survey Programme) (Hover et al, 2010) to put Dutch sports participation of elderly in cross-

national perspective. These statistics are complemented by insights from existing (qualitative) research on motives and experiences of older sports (non)participants.

Results

The data shows for example that more people are taking part in sports than ever before; 71% of the Dutch population participated in sport at least once in 2007 and 65% of the population were taking part in sport at least 12 times per year in 2007. The participation in sport by elderly (50-79 years) is still lower than among the population as a whole. 60% the 50-64 year olds were taking part in sport at least 12 times per year in 2007. This applies to 44% of the 65-79 year olds. A positive sign is that the sports participation by elderly has made a huge leap over the years and increased more sharply than among the average Dutch population. As with the average population, socio-economic differences in sports participation are persistent among elderly. The proportion of elderly who participate in sport as members of a sports club increased significantly since 1983, unlike that of the average population, which fell slightly. Still, club membership is less common among the older group (65-79 years) than among the average population. The presentation is completed with data and insights on involvement in voluntary work of elderly, participation in fitness related activities and swimming and motives and experiences of older (non) sports participants.

Discussion

The research brought together existing data and knowledge on the (non) participation in sports by the older segment of the Dutch population. Further insight is gained in the reasons why older people do or do not participate in sports and what demands they place on 'the sports product'. It is clear we can speak of a growing sport participant segment and possibly of a new trend "growing of the sports", as a Dutch counterpart of the American trend "graying of the gym". This can only mean good news for the physical fitness of adults of 50 and older. The challenge for the near future nevertheless remains to attract different groups of inactive elderly to become more active and active elderly to join organized sports.

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