

Is sport participation in England saturated? The unseen influence of participation turnover

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Background and research question

Until recently, Sport England, the national agency to which the UK government devolves responsibility for community sport development in England, employed participation for 30 minutes at a time on at least three days a week as its threshold definition for regular sports participation. The related policy goal was to increase by one million the number of adults participating at or over this level between 2007/8 and 2012/13, an increase of just under 15%. However, following only glacial progress towards this goal (an increase of less than 2% in three years), Sport England has now adopted a goal of year-on-year growth in the number of adults participating in sport for 30 minutes at least once a week. However, around 40% of the adult population in England already participates in sport once a week, so what evidence is there that an increase in this proportion is achievable.

Literature review

Approaches to increasing physical activity levels have tended to be underpinned by models that assume progression through stages of engagement in which attitudinal change precedes behavioural change (Prochaska et al, 1992). However, much sport development practice tends to assume latent demand for sport participation that can be released and satisfied by the removal of barriers (Foster et al, 2005). Each of these approaches in isolation are flawed, because barriers are irrelevant without motivation, but stimulating motivation whilst barriers prevail leads to frustration and disengagement. As such, a model that considers the interaction of motivation and barriers is necessary (Weed, 2010a). However, a further problem with sport participation policy has been that it has rarely recognised that people move in and out of participation in sport over the lifecourse, with participation frequency rising and falling, and often lapsing all together, as life circumstances change (Weed, 2010b), resulting in a considerable level of turnover that is not captured in national sport participation figures.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

The presentation will report on multi-dimensional secondary analyses and synthesis of datasets from Sport England's Active People survey (n=363,724) and Sport England's Satisfaction with the Quality of the Sport Experience (SQSE) research (n=44,287) between 2007/8 and 2010/11,

including synthetic estimation across the datasets (Bajekal et al, 2004), to examine the extent to which a year-on-year increase in the proportion of the adult population in England participating once a week is achievable.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

Key insights, the detail of which will be outlined and analysed in greater detail in the presentation, are that:

- Since 2007/8, adult sport participation at any threshold level in England has appeared to be relatively static.
- Half of the adult population in England do not participate in sport at all (ie, have not done so in the last month), and a significant proportion (around a third of the adult population) appear to have little interest in doing so.
- Of those participating in sport at any level, around one third have been doing so for some time, around a third have increased their participation in the last year, and around a third have decreased their participation in the last year.
- On average, of those participating in sport at any level, one third were not doing so at that level a year ago, and a further third will not be doing so at that level in a year's time.

Summary results from cross-sectional surveys do not show turnover in sport participation. However, synthetic estimation across the Active People and Satisfaction of the Quality of the Sport Experience surveys suggests that while around 40% of the adult population in England participate in sport once a week, a further 10-15% are engaged with sport and are likely to re-commence participation once a week or more within a year, whilst 10-15% of the population are likely to fall out of the group participating at least once a week within a year. Therefore, at any one time, more than half of the population (circa 55%) are engaged with sport and are likely to be actively considering participating once a week or more, whilst around a third are not interested in sport participation at all. If a further proportion are currently experiencing life circumstances that make sport participation a low priority, might this suggest that adult sport participation in England is saturated, and that, consequently, the pursuit of increased sport participation levels as a policy goal is futile?

References – limited to 5

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