

Measuring volunteering: Issues of reliability and validity

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Introduction

Volunteers have been acknowledged as 'the lifeblood of sport' in the UK since the first national study into sports volunteers in 1996 (Sports Council of Great Britain 1996). A subsequent study for Sport England in 2003 estimated that 15% of the adult population volunteered in some way for sport which equated to 5.8 million volunteers who contributed time with monetary value of some £14.1 billion to sport every year. The scale of volunteering and its importance to facilitating sports participation is such that questions to measure volunteering in sport have been included on numerous national surveys in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, notably the Active People Survey and the Taking Part Survey (both 2005/6 to the present day); the Irish Sports Monitor (bi-annually from 2007 to 2013). These and the other national surveys reviewed gave prevalence rates for sports volunteering of between 5% and 15%.

Literature review

There is considerable variation in what is meant by volunteering and the scope of what type of activities should be included and excluded in any measurement. The Sports Council of Great Britain study in 1996 used a 'tight' definition 'helping others in sport through formal organisations such as clubs or governing bodies; whereas the 2003 study adopted a more inclusive definition: 'individual volunteers helping others in sport and receiving either no remuneration or only expenses'. The 'tight' definition can be described as 'formal volunteering' through an organisation. By contrast, the more inclusive version included formal volunteering and also recognised 'informal volunteering' which can be defined as 'giving unpaid help as an individual to people who are not relatives' (Volunteering Australia, 2014). It would therefore be reasonable to expect that there would be differences between surveys, depending on the definition of volunteering adopted within surveys. In the current UK context what is meant by the term 'volunteering' is not merely an academic debate but a genuine issue which is important to the government's new strategy for sport and which is acknowledged as being difficult as indicated in the quote below.

As this [volunteering] is a complex area to measure accurately Sport England will take time to design and test the right questions and introduce them to Active Lives in 2016..

The purpose of this research therefore was to help inform a best practice approach to measuring sports volunteering for a proposed new national, Active Lives.

Methods

A mixed methods approach was used to conduct the research. A review was conducted of national surveys that measured volunteering and, where relevant, secondary analysis was conducted on the data sets and the syntax used to derive measures of volunteering. Focus groups were organised by the Active Lives survey contractor to conduct cognitive testing of

the scope of volunteering and the results were fed into our analysis. Finally two workshops were organised with the research team and Sport England to develop the brief and to shape the initial thinking after the production of various position papers.

Results

Analysis of national surveys found that generally they tend to produce reliable results in the sense that repeated iterations gave comparable results after allowing for sampling error and checking that the same questions had been asked. In the case of the Active People Survey it was found that levels of volunteering had seemingly doubled in a year, when a question was changed from a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer to a more complex question with an elaborate series of prompts which subsequently led to a derived response to the question. As an initial key finding, volunteering can be conceptualised as occurring in three different contexts. First, volunteering can be seen as being an integral part of an individual's participation in sport. This might be a formal role in an organisation such as a committee member; or an informal role, not necessarily through an organisation, such as providing transport for fellow participants. Second, volunteering might also be undertaken by people who are not participants of a particular sport but who give of their time to 'to give something back' and whose help is not conditional upon directly helping themselves, a family member or a relative. Third, there are some people whose volunteering is solely confined to helping out immediate family and close relatives. This third category may or may not be policy relevant and is worth identifying separately so that it can be excluded or included depending on policy priorities. The conceptual, operational and financial challenges of incorporating this line of thinking into a national survey are considerable.

References

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