

The Persistent Failure Of Interventions To Increase National Sport Participation Levels In England: Understanding Sport Participation Data And Evidence

Weed, Mike

Canterbury Christ Church University, United Kingdom

E-mail: mike.weed@canterbury.ac.uk

Aim

The aim of this paper is to reconcile the contradiction between data on national sport participation levels in England, which have changed little since the early 1990s, and evidence from evaluations of sport participation interventions during this time that claim successes in engaging new people with sport.

Background

Despite multiple attempts by successive governments, national agencies and other sport organisations to intervene to increase sport participation in England, national sport participation figures since the early 1990s show stagnation or decline, with Weed's (2016) analysis across five national surveys showing movements within each survey of less than +/- 2%. During the same period, multiple evaluations of sport participation interventions have claimed positive impacts in terms of encouraging new people into sport. Each of these data sources are robust, with successive national surveys having sample sizes ranging from 15,000 to 175,000 with a maximum sampling error of less than +/- 1%. Similarly, intervention evaluations have grown in the robustness of their designs, increasingly ensuring sampling errors of less than +/- 5%, with more recent evaluations including control or comparator groups and adopting time series rather than repeated cross section designs.

Method

Data and evidence from two annual national surveys, Active People (cross sectional, n = c.175,000) and Taking Part (time series, n = c.6,000), and two evaluations of major sport participation intervention investments, This Girl Can (a national campaign, £10 million investment) and Get Healthy Get Active (33 projects, £13.8 million investment) are assessed, compared and analysed in relation to each other to seek explanations for the apparent contradiction in the conclusions they reach about sport participation.

Results

An evaluation based on a survey of 1,000 women estimated that an additional 1.6million women newly participated in sport as a result of the This Girl Can campaign (TNS BRMB, 2016), whilst evaluations of Get Healthy Get Active projects across 2013–2015, in which all 145,000 people engaged were initially surveyed, showed that 29,000 previously inactive people became active through their engagement with the projects (Sport England, 2016). During the same period (2013–2015), the Active People survey showed that overall sport participation fell by 91,000 (c.0.6%), and during 2015 sport participation among women rose by only 45,000 (c.0.6%; Sport England, 2015).

The Active People survey therefore suggests that sport participation has been static between 2013–2015, with any shifts being substantially less than +/- 1%. However, the time series element of the Taking Part survey, collected 2012–2014, shows that more than 40% of the population change their sport participation during the previous year, but that these changes balance out, with 12.1% taking up sport and 11.7% dropping out of sport, and 8.9% doing more sport and 8% doing less sport (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2015).

Discussion

The comparison of these cross sectional and time series data suggests that sport participation in England is structurally stable at a population level, but individually volatile. The structural stability, over a period of over 25 years according to Weed's (2016) analysis, suggests that sport participation is largely explained by demographic and lifestyle factors that lead to people coming in and out of sport, or increasing and decreasing their sport participation, over the course of their life. However, by way of example, for every parent that drops out of sport as a result of the birth of their child, another parent returns to sport when their children reach school age. Consequently, these and other changes balance out because the population is largely demographically stable.

These insights help to explain the apparent contradictions between national sport participation data and evidence from specific interventions. They suggest that the 1.6 million women that were estimated to increase their sport participation as a result of the This Girl Can campaign in 2015 were offset by 1.56 million women that dropped out of sport, resulting in the net increase of 45,000 shown by the Active People survey.

Finally, these insights raise the prospect that evaluations of specific interventions are identifying sport participation take up or increases that would have taken place anyway as a result of demographic and lifestyle factors, rather than those stimulated by an intervention. Interventions may be the vehicle by which people change their sport participation, rather than being the stimulation for such changes. The time series data from the Taking Part survey suggest that, in the absence of interventions, people would find other vehicles by which to increase their sport participation once they have reached a lifestage at which they are ready to do so.

References

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