

Sport on (un)Even Terms? Government Support, Youth Sport and the Social Gradient in Sweden

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Aim

The aim of this paper is to analyse to what extent government subsidies for youth sports activities in Sweden is designed to counter socio-economic challenges. First, we study the occurrence of a social gradient in Swedish youth sport – i.e. a link between social position and sport participation among adolescents – by a multivariate regression analysis in which youth sport activity levels in local clubs are examined in relation to socio-demographic data in the municipalities in which the clubs operate. Secondly, we analyse the findings in relation to the structure and impact of the Swedish governments subsidies for youth sports activities. We argue that subsidies based on levels of activities promote than counteract socioeconomic differences in youth sports.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

In Sweden, state support to sport is – above all – welfare policy. The overarching aim of the government’s support to organized sports is to promote public health, physical activity and recreation, especially among adolescents (Berggard & Norberg, 2010; Norberg 2018). However, despite an ambition to provide “sports for all” and to facilitate for underprivileged groups to participate in sports, actual research about social stratification in Swedish children's and youth sports is limited. Blomdahl et al have studied youth leisure habits and living conditions in a selection of Swedish municipalities and shown that children and young people with high social position participate in club sports more than youngsters in low socio-economic groups (Blomdahl, Elofsson, Åkesson & Lengheden, 2014). Larsson (2008) found a similar result in a study of leisure and sporting habits among teenagers in four socio-demographic different areas. In sum: there are indications that social position affects sport participation among young people, but there is a need for further research.

In Sweden, sports clubs receive public support from the government and the municipalities. A major part of the governments support to local clubs is in the shape of subsidies for youth sport activities (the so-called “LOK”-grant). LOK is a national subsidy based on member activities between the age of 7-25. It is an important source of income for many sports clubs – and also an important part of the Swedish governments sport policy. Further, due to the fact that almost all clubs apply for LOK-grants, its statistics can be used to measure both the scope and character of organised youth sports activities in Sweden.

Research Design and Data Analysis

The first part of the study is designed as a multivariate regression analysis in which youth sport activity levels in local clubs (LOK) are examined in relation to socio-demographic data about the municipalities in which the clubs operate. The study is conducted on data from 2014. The data regarding youth sport activities include all club sports activities that were granted LOK-subsidies in 2014. The socio-demographic analysis includes all of Sweden's 290 municipalities and contains official statistics regarding the following five dimensions:

- 1) Demography (population density, proportion of immigrants, population change)
- 2) Socioeconomics (income and education levels, local business, crime)
- 3) Social capital (civic participation, safety and trust)

- 4) Lifestyle and health (physical activity levels, health conditions)
- 5) Sports and cultural life (access to sporting facilities, diversity of sports and public investment in culture).

Results and Discussion

There are always statistical challenges comparing municipalities of different sizes and conditions. With this reservation in mind, the mapping of youth sport activities indicates the existence of a social gradient in Swedish youth sport. Activity levels are higher in municipalities with high income and education levels, high urbanization and positive population development. Other factors of importance are sports diversity in the municipality and the presence of high school in the town. Thus, the result indicates that young people's opportunity to participate in sport in Sweden is unevenly distributed.

Against this background, we raise the question to what extent the state's support to youth sport activities is designed to counter socio-economic challenges. In economic terms, subsidies based on sporting activities tend to favour regions and clubs with many participants and high levels of participation. Due to the social gradient in Swedish sport, subsidies based on activities also favours high social position. Thus, albeit the government sports policy aim to reduce socio-economic differences in sport, its largest subsidy is in fact designed in a way that rather strengthens than mitigates socioeconomic differences in Swedish youth sports.

Conclusion and Implications

The paper is based on a survey of all municipalities in Sweden and all clubs receiving LOK support. Thus, it is an important contribution concerning youth sport and social position in Sweden. Further, the study confirms the existence of a social gradient in Swedish youth sport and that subsidies based on activity tend to promote rather than diminish uneven conditions in Swedish youth sport.

References

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