

GET BACK IN THE GAME: SPORT, THE RECESSION AND KEEPING PEOPLE ACTIVE

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International research has established that the importance of physical activity for health is more serious than its role in the “obesity epidemic”, which inspires so much commentary. Physical activity reduces the risk of various cancers, coronary heart disease, stroke and diabetes, and improves skeletal health. A major part of the overall physical activity of adults consists of sport and recreational physical exercise. To the extent that sports policy has the ability to increase participation in sport and exercise, there is consequently a sound justification for spending public money on it.

The *Irish Sports Monitor*[†] is a large, representative survey of participation in sport and exercise by adults (16 years and over). In 2008, it revealed that weekly participation had dropped from 32.9 per cent in 2007 to 30.8 per cent, abruptly halting a rising trend over recent decades. Although the fall was somewhat compensated for by more people walking and cycling as a mode of transport, it nevertheless means that of those adults engaged in a regular physical activity in 2007, one-in-sixteen had ceased participation one year later. Those who dropped out are likely to suffer a direct impact on their health and quality of life.

Evidence strongly suggests that this significant change in sport and exercise habits was linked to the recession. Although prior to the recession those in higher income groups were very much more likely to participate, the relationship strengthened markedly in 2008. Furthermore, while traditional team sports maintained their participation rates, popular but relatively expensive individual pursuits, such as personal exercise (going to the gym, exercise classes, etc.) and golf, were the activities most affected. One in every seven members of a gym or health/fitness club gave up their membership in 2008. Young men, the social group whose economic prospects have been hardest hit, had the greatest fall in participation.

How should policy respond? The Institute’s programme of research in sport and physical activity, undertaken in collaboration with the Irish Sports

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Council, provides a significant body of evidence that can inform policy choices.

In line with international research, we find evidence that those who participate in sport and exercise in Ireland benefit through better health. Thus, to the extent that public funding contributes to higher participation, cuts in the sport budget are likely to result in significant costs to individuals and society, in terms of poorer public health.

Yet while higher participation is the primary stated goal of sports policy, in recent years over 60 per cent of the sports budget assigned to the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism has been directed to elite rather than grassroots sport. Tight public finances and the fall in participation demand that policymakers refocus on their main target.

The survey evidence on barriers to participation is clear. While there remains scope for improving facilities for young children, lack of sporting facilities no longer presents a barrier to adult participation in Ireland. Thus, if cuts must be made, the evidence concurs with last year's decision to suspend the Sports Capital Programme, which provides grants for clubs (not schools) to improve facilities.

Instead, the most effective way to attract people is likely to involve tackling the main barriers to participation faced by adults, which are family and work commitments. International evidence shows that it is possible to increase participation through the organisation and marketing of affordable and convenient sporting opportunities, such that existing facilities are used more frequently.

At whom should participation programmes be targeted? Much existing policy effort aims to get children involved in sport. While this is an important policy goal, the evidence shows that greater attention needs to be paid to adults, because a large proportion of people drop out as they enter adulthood. Continued participation generally involves making the transition, usually in young adulthood, from team sports to individual sports such as swimming, personal exercise, golf, running and many minority sports. The importance of this transition is particularly noticeable in the Midlands region, which has the highest participation in team sports in Ireland, yet the lowest proportion of adults participating in sport and exercise overall. Young adults in lower socio-economic groups are most likely to drop out; more so during the recession.

Hence, we need participation programmes to organise and market events and opportunities that target less advantaged adults and that appeal to those who are likely to have moved on from the sports of their youth. Activities need to be affordable and to cover a variety of sport and exercise pursuits. Local sports partnerships, local authorities and sporting national governing bodies constitute networks through which such policies can be implemented.

The sport budget is not there merely to promote recreation and entertainment, though it may enhance both, but should instead be considered an important part of public health policy. The recession is reducing our

physical activity and hence harming our health. An effective policy response requires funding, but it also requires that the funding goes to where evidence indicates it will get the highest return.

[†]LUNN, P., R. LAYTE, 2009. [*The Irish Sports Monitor, Second Annual Report 2008*](#), Dublin: The Irish Sports Council and the Economic and Social Research Institute.