

Sports participation

Mike Collins examines the 2002 General Household Survey results and asks whether public investment is having any effect on participation levels

The government's omnibus survey, the General Household Survey, has included a few questions on sport since 1977, but the questions only settled down to enable strict comparisons after 1987, and trends were able to be measured through results in 1990, 1993 and 1996. Basically these showed very minor increases in participation, with:

- A slow closing of the gender gap that had been evident, probably more due to the popular secular trend for women to take up keep fit and aquarobics rather than anything the state did (see Table 1), though equity policies after the 1991 Brighton Declaration on women in sport may have helped a little;
- A small increase in older people taking part in sport (Table 2) though nowhere near to the extent that happens in other European states like Scandinavia, or Flanders (UK Sport, 1997);
- A major gap between the high participant professional and managerial social groups AB and the D/E semi and unskilled groups – ironically, a gap even wider in use of the public temples to sport, sports centres and swimming pools, after prices increases above

inflation during the period of CCT. This gap had closed slightly, but after the 'white collar recession' in 2001-2 participation in the A/B group had gone down by two per cent, but DE was back to where it had been in 1987 (Collins, 2003A, and see Table 3); and

- Very tiny increases in participation via clubs, still at a level below several European countries (Collins, 2003A).

So, as Nick Rowe, head of research for Sport England, summarised with restraint: 'The evidence we have points to stagnation in the levels of participation in sport during the 1990s... [and] evidence on the social class of participants demonstrates that participation is significantly skewed towards the professional groups, and that these social inequalities have not become any less significant over recent years' (Rowe, Adams and Beasley, 2004: 5,6).

After a gap of six years, the GHS questions were repeated in 2002. Direct comparisons are difficult because the social categorisation has changed to a scheme that better reflects a post-industrial, service economy. It will be much more helpful as trends develop, but limits immediate interpretation. The questions asked

are limited by the space and effort of multiple minority responses for a large number of sports (which the GHS field and analysis forces have in the past found a lot of work for what they see as a minor area of society and one that changes only modestly). They are about participation in 42 sports played in the past four weeks and the past year, plus walking, with the options of including other sports in an open box. They also refer to participation as a member of a sports, social or fitness club: analysis can be carried out by a few demographic factors, and when the choice of rotating questions coincides with other leisure, tourism, health or income topics, etc.

1996-2002 trends

The 2002 results (Fox and Rickards, 2004) showed one striking overall finding: that overall regular participation (once or more in the past month) has decreased by four per cent since 1996 from 47 per cent to 43 per cent, excluding walking. For some, this has come as an unforeseen blow. For me, it is not surprising – indeed I predicted that it was likely (Collins, 2003B).

There are several reasons why this might be:

- We spend a modest sum on sport in total, even compared to many European countries;
- This is spread over a larger number of sports than most countries, other than in USA, USSR, Germany and France;
- We are not spending enough to keep our 1970s public infrastructure in good order – Sport England (Davis Langdon, 2003) recently updated its 1995 estimates and showed that £110m a year would be needed just to keep existing facilities legal and functioning. To update them would probably double this figure, and together, by my reckoning, Lottery, Exchequer, local authority and PFI spending raise a bit more than half of this. So staying level is a real problem, let alone providing the large increases in capacity needed to support the more than doubling of physical activity that DCMS and Sport England aspire to by 2020;
- Everyone says that it is getting more difficult to get voluntary labour, because the jobs are more demanding, involving more training and higher professional and ethical performance standards, and more people want to play longer rather than transferring into coaching, officiating and administration. Even in sport-mad Australia, data shows that while participation once a year went up from

%	1987	1990	1993	1996	2002	96-02 % change
Male	57	58	57	54	50	-4
Female	34	39	39	38	37	-1
Total	45	48	47	46	43	-3

Table 1: Participation by gender, once a month or more often, excluding walking

%	1987	1990	1993	1996	2002	96-02 % change
Age						
16-19	80	82	81	78	72	-6
20-24	69	72	71	70	61	-9
25-29	63	67	65	63	61	-2
30-44	56	59	58	57	54	-3
45-59	35	42	43	40	39	-4
60-69	23	28	28	30	27	-3
70 & over	10	12	16	13	14	+1
-Total	45	48	47	46	43	-4

Table 2: Participation by age, once a month or more often, excluding walking

Participation in decline



26.5 per cent to 28.9 per cent in 1997-2001, volunteering went down by 9 per cent in the same period, from 11.5 per cent to 9.5 per cent, especially in the second and third roles just mentioned (Cuskelly, 2004); and

- The 'new money' from the Lottery and DfES is focused on the small numbers of elite performers and school sports. Adults, who would gain the greatest health benefits, have been ignored by DCMS and Sport England

in all but rhetorical terms; and the new Framework (SE, 2004B) says nothing to suggest that priorities are shifting or resources increasing.

Against this scenario, is the decline to be wondered at? So, let's look in more detail: how is this change distributed between men and women, younger and older, better and worse off, whites and minorities?

'The evidence we have points to stagnation in the levels of participation in sport during the 1990s'

Gender

Table 1 shows that the differential between men and women has continued to fall slowly, but more since 1996, because more men than women have ceased to play.

Age

Table 2 shows that participation has declined most among the young, the recent school- and college-leavers aged 16-24, traditionally the highest participants; this is hard evidence of reduced interest. It means that DCMS/DfES efforts in schools will, in the short term – even if successful – only make up recently lost ground. If this continues to 2005, some qualitative research will be vital to diagnose what is triggering this. It may be other, non-sporting activities like computer games. Interestingly, the tiny group of active septegenarians increased a little!

Socio-economic groups

I have described this as the most intransigent of the inequalities in British sport. This is where the changes in classification make only rudimentary comparisons possible. But what is clear from Table 3 is that the professional and managerial groups, the bastions of high participation, and the skilled technical workers with good incomes and limited overtime, who had been the spearhead of increased participation in almost every form of out-of-home leisure in the 1980s and 1990s, showed a decrease similar to the total

Socio-economic group	1996	Socio-economic class of household head	2002
Professionals	63	Large empl/higher man. Higher professional	59
Employers/managers	52	Lower man and profess.	51
Intermed/junior non-man	47	Intermediate	43
Skilled man/self-employed non-professionals	45	Small empl/own account Lower supervis/technic. Semi-routine	38
Semi skilled/personal service	37	Routine	31
Unskilled manual	23	Never work/unemployed	26
Total	46	Total	43

Table 3: Participation by social class, once a month or more often, excluding walking

% once a month or more often	1990	1993	1996	2002	% change 1996-2002
White	48	48	46	44	-3
All Minority groups	43	38	41	30	-9
Total	48	47	46	43	

Table 4: Participation by ethnic group, once a month or more excluding walking

% who were	Male		Female	
	1996	2002	1996	2002
Members of a club in previous 4 weeks	41	44	25	32
Competed in last 12 months	32	39	10	14
Received tuition in last 12 months	19	30	27	45

Table 5: Participation by gender in clubs, competitions and tuition

– and, indeed, greater than the lower status, lower paid workers. This is another indication of reduction at the core. Whether this is a result of overall price increases, or of work pressures in the UK's long-hours economy, is open to speculation.

Ethnic groups

Participation by ethnic minorities, with on average lower incomes, dipped in the 1990-91 recession and has dipped more than participation by white people since 1996 (Table 4). The gap with certain groups is marked – Indian 26 per cent, Pakistani and Bangladeshi 18 per cent, Black Caribbean 25 per cent, compared to the white majority.

Clearly, for whatever reasons, participation has faltered and, in faltering, has become more unequal rather than more inclusive in gender, class, and ethnic terms.

Involvement in clubs, competition and tuition

Interestingly, in contrast to this gloomy picture, the data on the more committed participants shows a different scene. There is a marked gender advantage of men in club membership (covering sports, youth and social clubs) and competition, but both genders showed a marked increase in the six-to-seven year period. Those who had enjoyed some tuition from an instructor or a coach increased even more (Table 5). Whether

these are the first fruits of the greater focus of policy and money on performance sport and more professional coaching is, again, a matter of speculation.

Conclusions

Coalter (2004) suggested that some trends that seem likely are:

- Age becoming a smaller constraint on older people, more of whom will have greater sports 'literacy' from their youth; and
- Participation being encouraged if/when more young people pass through higher education with its time and facilities coaching and ethos (Collins, 2004).

He opined that, in order to encourage current non-participants (especially young women), there is a need to place greater emphasis on

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task-orientation, intrinsic-orientation and encourage the development of competence and self-efficacy ...and to increase choice and lessen compulsion (2004:82). 'New', individualistic sports are more attractive to some, for these reasons, than traditional and team games. This is a challenge to sports officers and their development teams and centre managers, whether in direct public provision, extended schools, trusts, contracted-out, voluntary or commercial services.

When the results were published, the chief executive of Sport England, Roger Draper, stoutly defended the policies in its new Framework (Sport England, 2004). But the stark fact is that they sharpen a major challenge to national and local sports organisations even more. The UK spends much less per head on sport than many other developed countries; all the social marketing in the world cannot overcome a shortage of facilities and trained manpower, much of which has to be through the public purse to attract those older, and poorer people who are needed in large numbers if the targets are to be tackled even to half measure. The easy markets have been tapped, and there are no cheap gains to be made from here on.

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