

## Education Department Research Findings

## Sport, Exercise and Physical Activity: Public Participation, Barriers and Attitudes

Lorraine Murray, Ipsos MORI Scotland

The Tourism, Culture and Sport Group of the Scottish Executive commissioned a module of questions in Ipsos MORI's Scottish Social Policy Monitor. The questions examined the public's participation in sport, exercise and physical activity, barriers to participation, and their attitudes towards sport and physical activity. The research consisted of a representative survey of 2,077 adults interviewed in-home between January and June 2006. It was designed to inform policies aimed at increasing the proportion of the Scottish population who exercise regularly.

### Main Findings

- Given that experts suggest 30 minutes activity on most days, findings show that the majority of people, 65%, are not exercising enough: 27% exercise just once or twice a week, 7% just once or twice a month, 9% less often than once a month and 22% *never* exercise.
- There are clear demographic differences between those who exercise regularly and those who do not. Participation is higher among younger people, men, those living in the least deprived areas and those in higher income households.
- By far the biggest barriers to participation are lack of time and poor health.
- Participation levels drop off after the age of around 25 – when people start getting jobs, having families etc. When they might be able to start increasing their activity levels, once their children are older and work commitments lessen, health problems start to become more of a barrier.
- Motivational barriers (e.g. 'I just can't be bothered' or 'wouldn't enjoy it') and barriers relating to the availability or accessibility of facilities (e.g. cost, proximity to, or quality of facilities) impact on some people but are considerably less important overall than lack of time and poor health.
- Attitudes towards physical activity are very positive. This suggests that efforts to increase participation are best focused on making it easier for people – such as advising on how exercise can be fitted in to the daily routine – rather than persuading them of the benefits.

## Introduction

Experts agree that adults should accumulate at least 30 minutes of moderate activity on most days of the week. However, there is great deal of evidence that most people in Scotland are not sufficiently active and that this is a significant factor in the nation's poor health record<sup>1</sup>. For example, the 2003 Scottish Health Survey found that only 38% of adults met the recommended levels of activity<sup>2</sup>.

## Participation levels

The findings from this survey confirm that the majority of people, 65%, are not exercising enough: 27% exercise just once or twice a week, 7% just once or twice a month, 9% less often than once a month and 22% *never* exercise.

There are clear demographic differences between those who exercise regularly and those who do not. Participation is higher among younger people, men, those living in the least deprived areas<sup>3</sup> and those in higher income households.

## Why do most people not exercise enough?

Those who are currently inactive, or have been active in the past, were divided into three behavioural sub-groups of the sample: the 'always inactive' (those who exercise less than monthly and have been inactive since leaving school), the 'previously active' (those who exercise less than weekly but who indicated that they used to exercise much more) and the 'currently active' (those who do exercise at least weekly, but went through a time when they used to exercise much less).

For all three behavioural sub-groups, lack of time was one of the biggest factors - and was overwhelmingly the main reason given by the 'currently active' for why they had gone through a phase of being less active.

Health (including 'got too old') was also a big factor for those who were 'always inactive' and, particularly, the 'previously active'.

Motivational reasons affected almost a third of those who were 'always inactive', but fewer of the 'previously active' and the 'currently active'.

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1 *Let's make Scotland more active: a strategy for physical activity* (2003) Scottish Executive

2 *2003 Scottish Health Survey: summary of key findings* (2005) Scottish Executive

3 As measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)

The availability/accessibility of facilities was cited by a third of the 'currently active' as reasons why they stopped exercising for a while, but by relatively few of the 'always inactive' and the 'previously active'. The quality of facilities was not a major issue for most people: only 14% selected 'better equipment/playing facilities' and 13% wanted 'better facilities e.g. café, changing rooms'.

## Attitudes towards sport and physical activity

Attitudes towards physical activity are very positive with the vast majority of respondents appreciating the physical and mental health benefits and agreeing that it is enjoyable to be physically active. This suggests that efforts to increase participation are best focused on making it easier for people – such as advising on how exercise can be fitted in to the daily routine – rather than persuading them of the benefits, a battle that has already been won.

## Differences relating to age

Lack of time is the biggest barrier for all age groups up to and including those aged 45-59. There is a considerable drop in participation between those in the 16-24 age group (50% of whom exercise several times a week) and those in the 25-34 age group (36% of whom exercise several times a week) as job and family responsibilities increase.

Although lack of time is clearly the biggest factor, the availability and accessibility of facilities impacts on the participation of those aged 16-34 much more than older groups, and they are also more likely to be affected by motivational issues.

Health problems increase with age and are by far the biggest barrier to participation for those aged 60+. Efforts to increase participation among older people therefore need to focus on support for health problems/disabilities, and on increasing awareness and confidence about the levels of exercise and types of activities that might be beneficial.

## Differences relating to deprivation

Although more people in deprived areas were not exercising, reasons for not exercising were broadly similar across different groups. Health and time were the biggest factors, as they were for those in the least deprived areas. However, motivational reasons affected more people in deprived areas.

Those living in the most deprived areas were no more likely to indicate that the accessibility, availability or quality of facilities (including cost) were barriers to participation. However, they were more likely to say that a safer neighbourhood would make a difference (20% in the most deprived areas mentioned this, compared with 9% in the least deprived).

Those living in the most deprived areas were not as strongly convinced of the benefits of exercise. Lower numbers in these areas *strongly* agreed that “being physically active is good for your physical health”, that it is “good for your mental health”, that it “gives you more energy” or that it is “enjoyable”. This perhaps suggests that health communications stressing the benefits of being physically active should be targeted at deprived areas.

## Gender differences

Compared with women, men's participation levels drop sharply between the ages of 16-24 (58% of men in this age range exercise several times a week) and 25-34 (36% of men in this age range exercise several times a week). This is partly because men were much more likely to say that they stopped/reduced their activity because they 'got too old'. This may perhaps reflect the type of exercise that men were involved in (football, for example) which may be harder to continue as age increases and may also be more likely to result in injuries which limit future participation.

Strategies to increase men's participation could therefore focus on ways to maintain their participation as they reach their early/mid twenties and encourage participation in alternative forms of exercise if age or injury prevent men from taking part in sports they previously enjoyed.

As with men, lack of time is the biggest barrier to women's participation and they are much more likely to say that they reduced their activity because of family responsibilities. Linked with this, perhaps, they are more likely than men to want to do something at home. Strategies to increase women's activity levels might therefore be best focused on providing advice on how to fit activity around daily routines - including how to exercise at home.

A significant minority of women (29%) agree that “when I hear the word sport I turn off” and women are much less likely than men to enjoy the competitive side of sport. Non-competitive activities, rather than sports, are more likely to appeal to these women and this should be borne in mind in campaigns and initiatives to increase their participation.

## Conclusions

The people who do exercise regularly are doing so for the many physical and mental health benefits - and they also enjoy it. Moreover, almost everyone appreciates the benefits and agrees that being physically active is good for physical and mental health, gives you more energy and is enjoyable. But despite this *understanding* of the benefits by those who never exercise, and the actual *experience* of the benefits by those who exercise sometimes but not often enough, there are clearly some significant barriers preventing people exercising as much as they should - or, indeed, as much as they would like.

The biggest barrier is time. Two-thirds of those who want to exercise more say that lack of time is one of the main problems. Participation levels drop off after the age of around 25 – when people start getting jobs, having families etc. When they might be able to start increasing their activity levels, once their children are older and work commitments lessen, health problems start to become more of a barrier.

It could, of course, be argued that being ‘too busy’ is something of an excuse and that if people had more motivation they would prioritise exercise and find the time. Nonetheless, strategies aimed at increasing people's activity levels need to acknowledge this barrier and help remove the ‘excuse’. It is telling that the change most wanted by respondents was to be able to fit activity in around their usual routine.

Health is also a big barrier, affecting a third of those who want to exercise more, and it is increasingly a barrier with age. Overall, motivational issues and the accessibility, availability and quality of facilities are considerably less important than the problems created by lack of time and poor health.

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Dissemination Officer  
Information and Analytical Services Division  
The Scottish Executive Education Department  
1-B South  
Victoria Quay  
Edinburgh EH6 6QQ

Tel: 0131 244 0894

E-mail: [recs.admin@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:recs.admin@scotland.gsi.gov.uk)

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