Sport Management Review 18 (2015) 207–217

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Sport Management Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/smr

Integrating public health and sport management: Sport participation trends 2001–2010

R.M. Eime [a,b,*], N. Sawyer [a,b], J.T. Harvey [a], M.M. Casey [a], H. Westerbeek [b], W.R. Payne [b]

[a] School of Health Sciences, Federation University, Australia
[b] Institute of Sport, Exercise and Active Living, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 11 October 2013
Received in revised form 14 May 2014
Accepted 14 May 2014
Available online 19 June 2014

Keywords:
Sport
Participation
Health

ABSTRACT

In order to inform strategies to increase levels of physical activity (PA) for a healthier society, it is important to understand participation trends in leisure-time physical activity (LTPA). Little is known about the context of LTPA participation, particularly from the perspective of "sport and recreation" (S&R) categories such as organised and club-based activities. The primary aim of this study is to contribute to the sport management literature by specifically examining PA participation levels and trends in Australia over a decade, for those aged 15 years and older, through the lens of S&R. This paper also discusses the potential synergy between the public health and sport management domains with regard to LTPA/S&R. The Australian Sports Commission provided data from the Exercise, Recreation and Sport Survey (ERASS), a population survey conducted quarterly from 2001 to 2010 by computer-assisted telephone interview. Participation in LTPA was analysed by year, gender and age, in three hierarchically related categories: (1) any LTPA participation, (2) participation in an organised context, and (3) organised participation in a club. Participation rates in any LTPA increased significantly over the decade. However, this was not matched by increases in organised and/or club participation, which largely remained steady over the 10-year period. Much of the organised participation was within a club setting, and participation in this context is more likely among males than females. There is some evidence that the overall level of LTPA is increasing, which is positive for health, but there was generally no increase in club-based participation, resulting in sport contributing relatively less to overall population LTPA. However, the depth of information available from population surveys regarding club-based LTPA is insufficient to draw definitive conclusions, or make important strategic decisions about sport and health policy. There is a critical need for more comprehensive sport participation data to provide the evidence for improved programme and policy development. An avenue for this to occur may be through the integration of participation data from peak sport organisations.

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* Corresponding author at: School of Health Sciences, Federation University, PO Box, 663 Ballarat, Australia. Tel.: +61 3 5327 9687.
E-mail addresses: r.eime@federation.edu.au (R.M. Eime), n.sawyer@federation.edu.au (N. Sawyer), j.harvey@federation.edu.au (J.T. Harvey), m.casey@federation.edu.au (M.M. Casey), hans.westerbeek@vu.edu.au (H. Westerbeek), warren.payne@vu.edu.au (W.R. Payne).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2014.05.004
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1. Introduction

Globally, physical inactivity is now the fourth leading cause of death (Kohl et al., 2012). There has been an increase in the prevalence of obesity in many societies and physical inactivity has been identified as a public health (PH) pandemic (Kohl et al., 2012). Insufficient participation in physical activity (PA) is linked with premature death, and diseases such as coronary heart disease, stroke, some cancers, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and depression (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Conversely, regular participation in PA throughout the lifespan is imperative for good physical and mental health (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2008).

Current guidelines suggest that adults accumulate 150–300 min of moderate intensity physical activity or 75–150 min of vigorous physical activity, or an equivalent combination of both intensities, each week. Furthermore, muscle strengthening activities on at least two days per week is recommended (Department of Health, 2014).

It is a common finding in developed countries that many people are not sufficiently physically active to meet the recommended levels for health benefits (Eime, Harvey, Sawyer, et al., 2013; Tucker, Welk, & Beyler, 2011). High levels of physical inactivity are likely to contribute to the proportion of Australian children (25%) and adults (63%) who are overweight or obese (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Currently Australia, like many developed nations, is not an active nation and this is likely to have dire consequences for national morbidity rates and the PH system at large.

Leisure-time physical activity (LTPA) is a term used predominantly in the PH domain. Sport and recreation (S&R) is a term used predominantly by sporting organisations and in the associated branches of government administration. Although the word "recreation" does not necessarily imply PA per se, its use in the term S&R refers specifically to PA, and so S&R is essentially synonymous with LTPA. Both terms are used in this paper, depending on the context. Sport is specifically defined as: "a human activity involving physical exertion and skill as the primary focus of the activity, with elements of competition where rules and patterns of behaviour governing the activity exist formally through organisations, and is generally recognised as a sport" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). More broadly, the contexts of LTPA have been classified in terms of modes, settings and types (Eime, Harvey, Sawyer, et al., 2013). They distinguished four modes of LTPA: team sport, individual sport, organised but non-competitive PA; and non-organised PA. Settings comprise school, club or centre, and home and neighbourhood; and types referred to the many specific sports and other forms of LTPA (Eime, Harvey, Sawyer, et al., 2013). In this classification scheme, sport takes place in particular combinations of mode (team or individual competitive), setting (school or club) and type (activities that have rules, exist formally through organisations, and are generally competitive and recognised as sports), while "recreation" is represented by two modes of LTPA: organised but non-competitive PA; and non-organised PA.

Changing PA participation levels is not only a PH issue; participation levels and trends are also important to the field of sport management (SM). Understanding sport participation trends and the influences on participation can provide the necessary evidence to inform SM policy and practice related to a large range of contexts from community 'grass-roots' participation to elite levels of competition. For example, in Australia, Commonwealth, State and Territory Sport Ministers recently agreed that there was a need for an "holistic and strategic approach to the organisation and development of sport and recreation policy" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, p. 3). As a consequence, a National Sports Policy Framework was developed outlining a guide to the development of sport policies and coordinated strategies at both the community and elite levels for the success and health of Australia as a nation. A collaborative approach was highlighted for the development and adoption of policies that support both increased grass-roots participation as well as elite success internationally (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). The approach to policy development evident in Australia is also apparent in other developed nations such as the United Kingdom. However, in a report published by Oxford University and Sport England it was noted that, "The evidence base for the effectiveness of interventions for the specific promotion of sport is far less developed than for the promotion of physical activity" (p. 3) (Cavill, Richardson, & Foster, 2012). It is clear that successful translation of such political statements and frameworks to policies and practices requires a solid evidentiary base (Cavill et al., 2012).

In Australia, it is also anticipated that agreed national priorities driving the development of sport policies and strategies, will contribute to the Commonwealth government's objective of improving health and wellbeing (Nicholson, Hoye, & Houlihan, 2010). The report "dynamic structure of Australian sport" was recently published by the Australian Sports Commission (2011). It provides a conceptual model of the Australian sport sector and the interrelationships between government, national, state and community sports organisations, as well as other key enabling peak agencies. The overriding objective of the report was to create "a more physically active, healthier, resilient, high performing, proud Australia" (Australian Sports Commission, 2011, p. 1). This sport policy objective highlights the importance of the synergies between SM and PH to get more people, more active, more often, leading to a healthier society.

In order to have targeted strategies to improve sport participation and consequently PA levels, we need to understand trends in, and influences on, sport participation. In the PH field, the importance of high quality data regarding PA levels, trends and determinants to inform PH policy development is well recognised, and in accordance with this, there is an abundance of research in this area (Hallal et al., 2012; Merom, Bauman, & Ford, 2004). Research within the PH domain has identified the proportion of adults (15 years and older) and adolescents (13–15 years) that are active or inactive in PA in general in over 120 countries, and this information guides the development of PH policies and programmes to increase activity levels (Hallal et al., 2012). However, this research focuses predominantly on general levels of PA rather than sport (Henderson, 2009). Consequently, we do not have extensive knowledge of sport participation trends. To implement effective

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