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Bowling even more alone: trends towards individual participation in sport

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ABSTRACT

Research question: In the 1990s trends in sports participation in England revealed that participation in individual sports was growing whilst participation in team sports was in decline. This paper examines whether this trend has continued more recently and, if so, the plausible explanations for this trend towards individual sports participation.

Research methods: The paper uses secondary analysis of the Active People Survey (APS) from APS1 (2005/2006) to APS9 (2014/2015). The APS is undertaken annually with a sample of 160,000 respondents. It includes data on sports participation by sport type as well as data on organised sports participation including club membership, participation in competitive sport and coaching.

Results and findings: The findings demonstrate an ongoing trend of growth in participation in individual sports and, at the same time, a decline in participation in organised team sports in England. This trend towards participation in individual sports is particularly striking when examined against the significant public funding invested into organised sports between 2008 and 2016.

Implications: Whilst the findings clearly show the continued shift in patterns of sports participation from team sports to individual, the explanations for this are limited to the application of logic. More empirical work is needed to understand the reasons for the decline in organised sports participation and the growth in individual activities. The data suggest that despite the growth in individual sports participation, community sport policy as a whole has been ineffective, with 43 of 45 government-funded sports showing either no change or decreased participation. These results emphasise the failure of top-down, nationally led, sport-specific plans for growing sports participation and underline problems with the overly normative notion of evidence-based policy and practice. The findings add support to the government's recent decision to revise community sport policy. Importantly, the new iteration of community sport policy must re-examine the challenge of growing organised sport, be clear about the opportunity offered by informal sport and assess the structures that might more effectively grow sports participation.

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Introduction

Despite a succession of government strategies in England to grow participation in sport¹ over the past decade, participation levels have remained generally static. Growing mass sports participation was a clearly stated and exaggerated,² legacy aspiration of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games (Bloyce & Smith, 2012). The most recent government strategy sets a target of an 'increase in the percentage of the population taking part in sport and physical activity at least twice in the last month' (Cabinet Office, 2015, p. 78), although it does not state a specific growth target. To provide a more detailed understanding of changing patterns of sports participation in England, we analyse the results of the Active People Survey (APS) between 2005/2006 and 2014/2015. These data allow analysis by specific activity, activity type, frequency and demography. In this paper, individual participation is defined as the range of activities that can be created through individual consumption (e.g. road running, recreational cycling, going to the gym) without requiring another person or team of people to co-produce the opportunity. Such activities tend to be thought of as being less structured or informal when compared with the structures, formality and requirements of team sports. Although it is reasonable to argue that individualised participation is more likely to take place informally (i.e. outside club settings), it is important to make clear that this is not an absolute dichotomy. Indeed, many people undertake their workout in private member gyms which generally represent fairly well structured, formal spaces. Similarly, not all informal sports participation is individualised. For example, teams of individuals may get together to play in an informal or spontaneously created situation. A more nuanced examination of these terms would be interesting but this is problematic not least because there is a lack of empirical data on the settings in which sport is played. The APS does provide participation rates in different sports as well as data on club membership but it does not cross tabulate responses to show, for example, how many people who play football play formally within club structures or informally kick-about with friends. For the sake of clarity, consistency and pragmatism, we will, from this point on, refer to individualised sports (e.g. road running, recreational cycling, going to the gym, etc.) and team sports (e.g. football, cricket, rugby union, etc.).

Our title is adapted from Putnam's work in which, 16 years ago, he used the example of bowling to epitomise a decrease in civic activity (cf. Putnam, 2000). Bowling was being conducted more 'alone' than in formal bowling structures (i.e. clubs and leagues). Such changes form part of a broader debate about the shift from a modernist to a post-modernist society in which structural factors are replaced by 'a more fluid identity politics' to explain leisure choices (Spracklen, 2011, p. 196). We will return to this debate when presenting theoretical positions that help explain the reasons for the changing trends in sports participation. We also discuss a range of implications that these trends carry for community sport policy and practice.

Previous analysis

The growth in participation in individual pursuits is neither a new trend nor one that is limited to England. The movement away from team sports and towards more individual participation in England can be traced back to the 1980–1990s. Coalter (1999) examined data from the General Household Survey (GHS) between 1987 and 1996 to show the

sports which experienced the greatest increase in participation. These were identified as keep fit, cycling, swimming and 'weights'. For Coalter the 'winners', or the major growth activities, were those that had the following characteristics: could be undertaken individually, convenience-laden – that is, could be undertaken flexibly or at will, non-competitive and related to a general concern with fitness and health, and reflected a particular 'lifestyle' being amongst the activities with the most frequent participants where the activity itself forms an important part in creating a healthy lifestyle identity (cf. Coalter, 1999). The sports to decline in this period were snooker, darts, squash and badminton. The rate of participation in adult team sports was static, with cricket declining slightly. The overall picture was of a 'relative decline in more "traditional" and partner sports, accompanied by increased participation in a more diversified range of activities' (Coalter, 1999, p. 36). A further study (Gratton, Rowe, & Veal, 2011) compared sports participation rates across seven European countries using newly available comparative data sets. It did not present trends in these countries in detail but it did report results from the English APS 2005–2010. Over this period growth sports for adult participation (defined as those aged 16+) were athletics (including all forms of running), gym³ and cycling; whereas aerobics, golf, swimming, badminton, tennis, cricket, rugby union and rugby league all experienced a decline (Gratton et al., 2011). The authors concluded that '[T]he European trend towards more informal participation in health and fitness-related sports and a decline in more traditional team sports is replicated in England' (p. 111). Similar trends towards individualised sports participation over a similar time period have been reported in other studies conducted in Belgium and Denmark (Borgers, Pilgaard, Vanreusel, & Scheerder, 2016) as well as the reported growth of informal fitness-based activities in Germany (Klostermann & Nagel, 2014), USA, Canada (Nicholson, Hoyer, & Houlihan, 2011) and Norway (Ulseth, 2004).

In terms of explaining these changing trends, Coalter (1999) provided a range of thought-provoking insights. One such explanation was the growth in women's participation, across all age groups – which especially accounted for the very broad category 'keep fit', encompassing aerobics, yoga and dance exercise. This increase in health-related activity was attributed to a growing concern with personal appearance and surface representation as part of the broader post-modern condition. On a more pragmatic level, the conversion of underutilised squash courts into fitness centres both reflected demand, and reduced supply. However, Coalter's figures should not be compared directly with the APS as the GHS used in Coalter's study relies on different categories and frequencies of participation. Adding to this analysis, Borgers et al. (2016) argued that the shift towards individualisation reflects post-modern and post-materialist values that are directly linked to the theory of institutional change. Here, the institutional response to changing socio-cultural values is the growth of 'sport light institutions' 'to provide more appropriate and accessible supply to meet the needs of a broader sporting population' (Borgers et al., 2016, p. 11). A more detailed analysis of the explanations for the changing trends in sports participation in England follows the methods section below.

Policy aims

The philosophical underpinning of government sport policy has, since 1960, fluctuated between the promotion of sports participation as a right of citizenship and sports

participation as a means to an end. The government's most recent sport strategy identifies sport as a means to the ends of: 'physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, social and community development and economic development' (Cabinet Office, 2015, p. 72). These priorities are measured by 'key performance indicators' which include not only increasing sports participation, but also increases in sports volunteering, diversity of the demographics of sport volunteers, the number of people attending live sporting events, Olympic and Paralympic medals won, economic impact of sports events and employment in the sports sector (Cabinet Office, 2015). In short, the latest iteration of government sport policy aims to increase sports participation as a means to achieve a disparate range of goals. Therefore, understanding changing patterns of sports participation is not only important in terms of designing and developing interventions to grow participation but also to consider how increased participation may relate to the broader policy goals. For example, if social and community development is a broader goal, a high-level outcome of this is increased levels of social trust and this may be more likely achieved through a collective sports experience (such as team sports) rather than participation as an individual.

Methods

This paper uses secondary analysis of the APS data. The APS is a nationwide survey designed to measure and track changes for a range of sport-related indicators, including sports participation, volunteering, club membership, coaching/instruction, competitive sport and the 'post-16 drop-off'.⁴ The survey is commissioned by Sport England, with the day-to-day operations, including data collection, data collation and analysis, managed by TNS BMRB. The APS uses a telephone-based survey with an annual sample of approximately 160,000 people (aged 14 years and over) being interviewed each year. Repeated cross-sectional data are available by year with nine annual waves of APS data being collected from 2005/2006 (APS1) up to 2014/2015 (APS9). The APS allows for both a national- and local-level analysis of sports participation and other indicators. This was achieved by completing at least 500 interviews in almost all of the Local Authorities in England⁵ on an annual basis. The statistical power of the survey allows for changes in the key indicators to be tracked and analysed on national and regional levels at quarterly intervals and for changes at the county and local authority level to be tracked and analysed on an annual basis. Further, the APS data were weighted to correct bias, to take account of population differences and to reflect the seasonal nature of sports participation. Weighting was undertaken using rim weights which formulates the 'best fit' for the data across variables by 'weighting the data by one weighting variable at a time and repeating the sequence, until the best fit is reached' (Sport England, 2013, p. 62). The range of weighting variables applied to the data included age, gender, household size, ethnicity, working status, socio-economic classification, geography (location) and sporting activity. These latter two weighted variables required a specific weighting regime in order to deliver against to geographical and sport-related requirements of the APS. In regard to geography, the weighting exercise not only had to ensure that the random sample of 500 reflected the local authority population but that this was in correct proportion to its population size relative to the larger geographies in which the local authority was part, specifically, the county and region. In terms of sports participation, the seasonal issue is particularly

important and it is necessary to ensure that summer and winter responses are given equal weight. This was achieved by applying a weight to distribute half the final sample size to the summer period and half to the winter period (Sport England, 2013).

Despite the attempts to ensure methodological rigour the APS has two notable limitations. First, it uses a random digit dialling methodology. This is based on landline numbers and excludes mobile-only households (Sport England, 2013). The implication here, particularly when considering the growing number⁶ of mobile-only households, is that there could be inherent sample bias. As a result, a random sample survey of mobile-phone users was undertaken in 2011/2012. This survey presented two key findings: (i) that landline and mobile-only respondents had similar participation levels for most sports, once demographic differences between the samples were controlled for, and (ii) that when comparing overall participation, respondents who had a mobile-phone only household did less sport than those with a landline. Thus, the actual level of sports participation recorded by the APS is likely overstated. The second limitation relates to the method of completion, specifically the survey being based on self-report responses. Numerous general methodological studies and, more specific studies on physical activity, have found self-report data to be wholly inaccurate and unreliable (cf. Prince et al., 2008). These studies reveal the problem of those who have difficulty recalling what they did over the extended past, those who imagine or exaggerate their participation to be much higher than it actually is and also those who completely underestimate their level of engagement. Therefore, although the survey may offer the largest, most powerful measure of sports participation worldwide, the data upon which it is based is subject to the inaccurate and, at times, whimsical memory of the human subject. To date, there has been no independent study to show how or if the APS self-report data accurately reflects the actual behaviour of respondents; however, as this limitation is consistent between APS1 and APS9, it does not affect the trends we report.

From September 2016, the APS will cease to exist and will be replaced by the Active Lives Survey (ALS) which is a joint project commissioned by Sport England, the Arts Council England, Public Health England and the Department for Transport; and administered by Ipsos Mori.⁷ The new survey will be conducted by post and online; therefore, the random sampling procedures will be selected from the Royal Mail's postal address file. The sample frame will be stratified by local authority area to ensure that a sample of 500 people per local authority is achieved (Sport England, 2016a). The specific measures used in the ALS were being finalised at the time of writing.

Results

Over its lifetime, the APS has demonstrated the continued trend from traditional, formal and structured team sports to individualised, 'lifestyle pursuits'. Figure 1 illustrates the changes in participation in the 10 most popular sports from the APS1 (2005/2006) to the most recent annual data (APS9, 2014/2015). The growth sports (fitness and conditioning, athletics comprising road running/jogging, gym and recreational cycling) all share similar characteristics in that they take place outside the structure of club sports, are convenient to organise requiring limited effort to set up or coordinate with others and are primarily undertaken on an individual basis. The sports experiencing decline over the same period are, in order of decline: swimming, football,

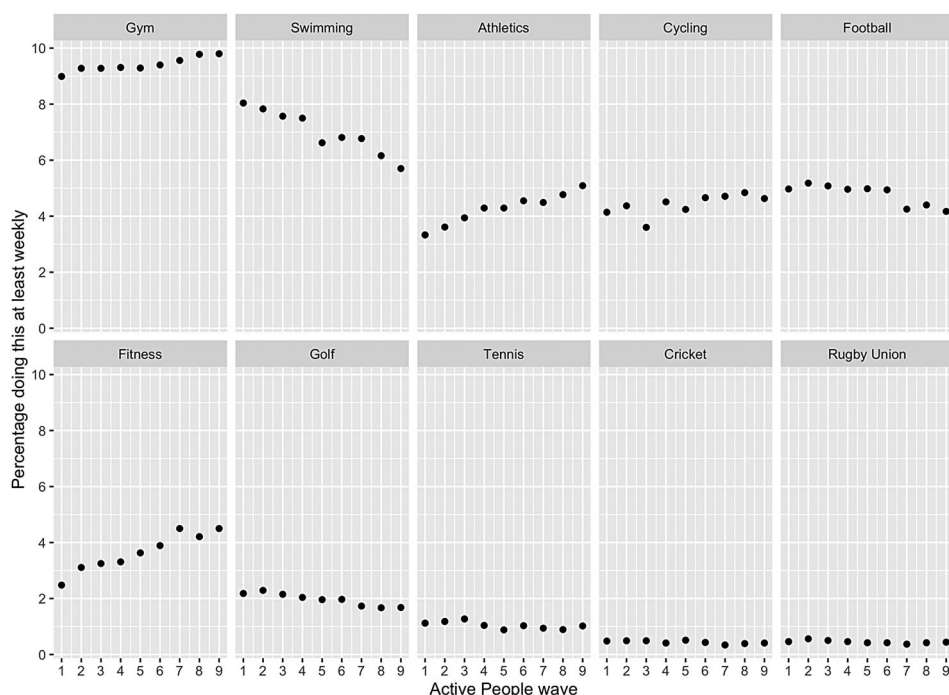


Figure 1. Changes in participation in the 10 most popular activities (minimum once a week participation).

golf, tennis, cricket and rugby union. Whilst the degree of decline varies significantly, these sports all, with the exception of swimming, represent more formal, structured sports that are usually undertaken in a team environment or, in the case of tennis, with at least one other individual. On examination, the trends replicate those presented by Coalter (1999) from 1987 to 1996. Swimming is an interesting outlier, although Gratton et al. (2011) noted a downward trend in their analysis of participation up to 2010. Explanations for this may lie in supply-based factors examined in further detail below.

APS data also allow a clustered analysis of the proportion of the population who participate in team sports when compared with individual sports. Team sports include traditional team-based sports such as cricket, football, rugby union, rugby league, basketball and volleyball, whereas activities that can be undertaken individually include running, cycling, gym, fitness/conditioning, swimming and golf. Figure 2 illustrates that participation in individual pursuits has slowed in recent years but it has experienced a statistically significant increase of 4.90 percentage points when compared to the baseline. Over the same period, team sports have witnessed a small but statistically significant decrease. In sum, the data, and in particular, the growing differential of 5.56 percentage points between individual and team sports, clearly show the trend towards the individualisation of sports participation over the past 10 years.

Given the decline in participation in organised sports, one might expect that the people who continue to participate are those who are more engaged with formal elements of those sports, such as club membership. However, Figure 3 shows the percentage of people within

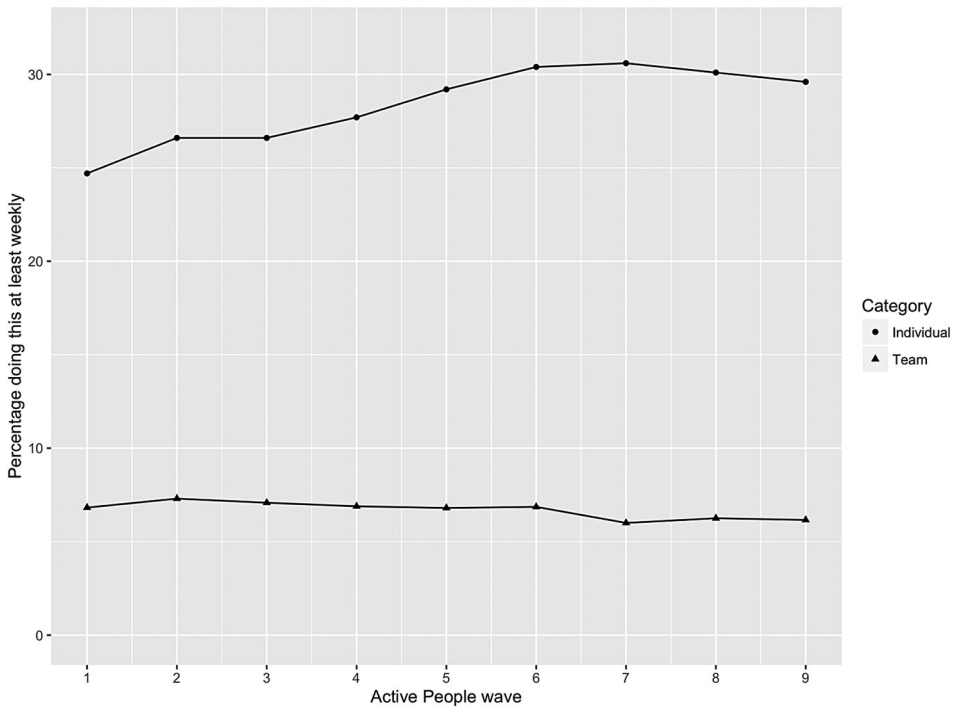


Figure 2. Changes in participation in team sports and individual sports (minimum once a week participation).

each sport who participate in clubs. Between 2007/2008 and 2013/2014 the actual levels of club-based participation in athletics, cycling and swimming remain relatively stable; this is the case whether the sports in question ordinarily entail higher or lower formal participation. Consequently, the increases in participation in athletics and cycling are likely due to informal participation in activities such as road running and recreational cycling. In contrast, the decrease in swimming appears to be due to decreased recreational swimming.

The APS data set also provides insight into the type of formal or organised participation. Formal sports participation is measured by three specific indicators: (i) the number of adults who have participated in sport as a member of a sports club in the past 28 days; (ii) the number of adults who have received tuition from a coach/instructor in the past 12 months and (iii) the number of adults who have taken part in competitive sport in the past 12 months. These data provide another means by which we can examine changes in sports participation and the extent to which the population continue to engage with organised sports. Interestingly, the data reveal statistically significant decreases in all three indicators. Figure 4 shows a more detailed view of the changes in the numbers of adults engaged in organised sports between 2005/2006 and 2014/2015. Over the survey period, the proportion of the English public who had played sport as a member of a sports club fell by 3.30 percentage points. This decline in participation in organised sports reflects the decline in the number of sports clubs in England from 106,423 in 2002 (Taylor et al., 2003) to 85,000 in 2009 (Nichols, Holmes, & Baum,

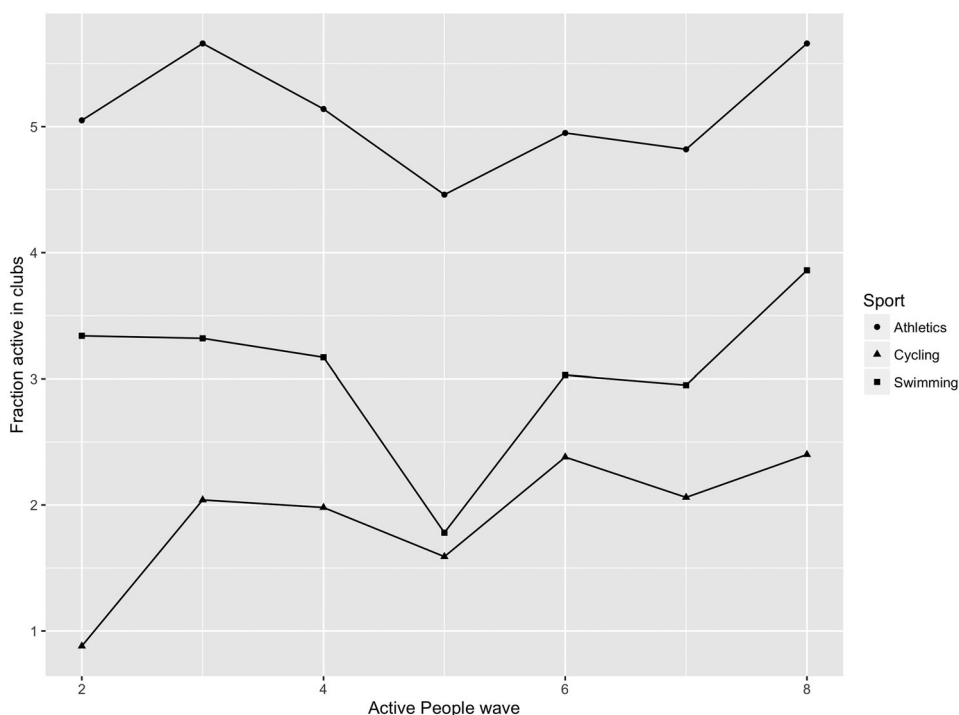


Figure 3. Changes in sports participation within a sports club environment.

2013). This relationship and the cause of the decline is intriguing; it could be that the reduced supply of club sport has adversely impacted organised participation or, more likely, that a declining demand for ‘organised sports’ has led to a reduction in the number of sports clubs. Other measures of ‘organised sports’ show a similar downward trend in participation.

Explanations

Whilst little has been written about changing trends in sports participation in England, even fewer researchers have proposed plausible reasons for these changing trends. An exception is Coalter (1999) who presented a range of theoretical insights to explain changes in participation from 1977 to 1999. We aim to add to Coalter’s analysis by revisiting what we see as the most convincing explanations and by adding to these in line with the evidence of changes in participation from 2005 to 2015, namely the decrease in civic activity which can be seen to flow from post-modern (and post-Fordist) trends, the closely related yet separate issues of the intensification of competition for leisure time and time squeeze, together with more normative concerns regarding an economic recession and the supply of sport. Importantly, whilst these factors may overlap and share significant relationships, a more comprehensive theory of participation is beyond the scope of this paper. Such a theory is much needed and would be further supported by significant growth in the empirical work focused on mass sports participation.

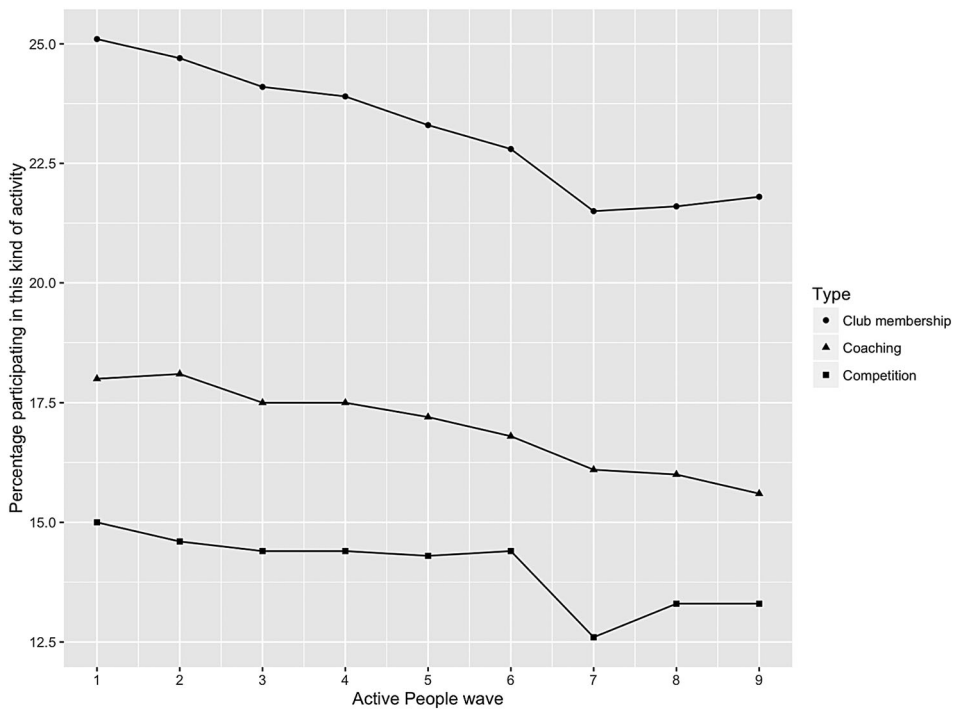


Figure 4. Changes in organised sport participation (club membership, coaching, competition).

Post-modernity and post-Fordism

It has been argued that, in the post-modern condition, collective identity and common interest is replaced by individualism and exacerbated by a concern with ‘body maintenance and its surface representation’ (Coalter, 1999, p. 29). Personal identities that were once predicated on class and gender are now as likely to be shaped by amorphous and ‘more fluid identity politics’ (Spracklen, 2011, p. 196). Developing this view, Blackshaw (2010, p. 120) uses Bauman’s notion of ‘liquid modernity’ to argue that, especially in leisure, individuals actively participate in the construction of the structures which shape their leisure choices and, in so doing, satisfy their hunger for meaning. Hargreaves (1993), for example, emphasises a more superficial concern with fashion and physique or creating and maintaining a certain look promoted by various media consumed by the individual in pursuing certain leisure choices. In this way, a growing number of people are actively engaged in the redesign of their identity or image, and such tendencies are likely to prioritise the pursuit of activities that allow them to create the identity and appearance they desire. Thus, the appeal of the traditional sports ‘club’ does not, for many, neatly align with the simple need to create the right look. This is not to argue that being part of a ‘sport club’ does not form an important part of some identities; rather, it plays this role for fewer people today than it did 30 years ago. The evidence for this argument lies in the decline in participation in traditional organised sports (i.e. football, rugby and cricket) and the growth in more individualised lifestyle pursuits (i.e. fitness, conditioning, gym, recreational cycling and recreational road running).

Alongside the developing post-modern condition we can also point to the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist economies to underline changes in leisure time and the implications for leisure choices. Fordism, in its broadest and most general conceptualisation, can be seen to represent a distinct type of capitalist labour process. This process emphasises standardised production, mass production/mass consumption and a social mode of economic regulation directing the organisation of labour, money, investment and 'links between the circuits of capital and the state' (Jessop, 1992, no pagination). In sport, we can see the remaining traces of Fordism through traditional, typically male, school-based or work-based sports teams. Such experiences and structures are regimented, hierarchical, authoritarian and gendered (Seaton in Coalter, 1999). More recent examples of Fordism's influence on sport include the standardised national curriculum for Physical Education, the various attempts to professionally conceptualise sport development (Houlihan & White, 2002), and the creation of club development programmes to support and promote clubs as ideal sites for sport production and performance. In contrast, the post-Fordist economy accentuates flexible specialisation, small batch production, and a much greater emphasis on research, development and marketing. In this way, products and services are branded and positioned to represent specific lifestyles and these connect with the habits, tastes and identities of different market segments (Amin, 2008). Within the post-Fordist world, many have both the desire and opportunity to be reflexive. We want to respond independently and spontaneously to the urge to physically challenge ourselves. Moreover, the nature of our busy schedules dictates that we identify 'physical challenges' that fit with our highly personalised lifestyle. For some, this could mean that the post-modern idea of appearance and aesthetic combines with the post-Fordist norm of individuality and flexibility to promote certain activities such as jogging, recreational cycling, and fitness and conditioning activities as more fitting or more appropriate forms of sport than the more conventional club-based sports. This argument extends beyond a rational demand-based analysis of sports participation but also to the supply of sport opportunities and the role of sharp commercial operators who, in the norms of the post-Fordist era, research and understand their target market(s) and know how to sell running shoes, bicycles, gym memberships and activity monitors to them. In short, it is in the era of post-Fordism where the marketer not only responds to consumer needs, but also plays a pivotal role in creating them (Kotler & Keller, 2015). It is reasonable to assume that the combination of insight-driven commerce and the need or desire for individualised, freely chosen forms of sport directly contribute to changing sports participation trends towards individual participation.

A decrease in civic activity

A decrease in civic activity can be seen to flow directly from the values associated with the post-modern condition. For example, Putnam noted that the trend away from bowling in a group represented a general fragmentation of collective activity reflecting a diminished stock of 'social capital'; described by Putnam as 'connections among individuals, social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (2000, p. 19). Putnam estimated that in the United States about 50% of the trend from collective to individual activity between 1972 and 1998 was accounted for by differences between generations as the young were disengaged from collective activity. In contrast, the older

generation's experience of the Great Depression and the Second World War engendered a particular set of values that encouraged civic engagement. The research suggests a similar shift in values in England whereby 'millennials' (those born in 1990 and after) place greater importance on independence, autonomy, hedonism and self-expression and less importance on conformity, tradition and maintaining the safety and stability of society (Her Majesty's Government, 2014). Whilst these changing values do not explicitly address changes in sports participation habits, they do indirectly support the idea that young people seek out opportunities that allow them to express themselves and embolden their identity. At the same time, these changes in values underline a general indifference towards traditional community structures or traditional forms of community engagement. This may well be due, at least in part, to relatively new technological forms that allow young people to substitute or complement real socialisation with virtual socialisation through electronic means. Green (2010) adds further support to this notion of changing values amongst young people noting that they are increasingly inclined to adopt sporting preferences that express their individuality. Here, the individualisation of sport merely reinforces the slow evolutionary change in the balance of the social habitus of a person from 'the we-identity towards the I-identity', where greater emphasis is placed on 'the I-identity of the individual person and the detachment of that person from the traditional groupings of people' (Elias, 2001, p. 179).

The APS data underline this individualisation amongst younger participants, with the most significant decline in traditional team sports being amongst the 16–24 years age category. In comparison, other age groups show a relatively stable level of engagement (see Figure 5). Therefore, whilst sport clubs may be an important community resource, their role or ability in bringing the community together, building social capital and facilitating its expression, may be one that is more clearly understood and valued by older rather than younger generations. Whether these values change over time and today's youth develop a growing appreciation for such structures as they age remains a question worthy of further exploration.

Increased competition for time and time squeeze

A further explanation for a trend towards individualised sports participation is the intensification of competition for leisure time and, within this, 'broad cultural changes in attitudes to health and fitness and the need for more flexible and individualized lifestyles' (Coalter, 1999, p. 34). Whilst linked to the issue of time squeeze, increased competition for time differs insofar as it focuses on the ever-increasing range of leisure choices that are fiercely promoted by commercial interests. The result is a saturated leisure market where individuals feel harried and 'trapped in the endless economic and experiential expectations created by the culture' (Robinson & Godbey, 1999, p. 317). Despite the proliferation of leisure-based products, services and experiences, home-based leisure and, in particular, television, remain dominant leisure pursuits. For example, the UK⁸ population watched an average of 3 hours and 51 minutes of television per day in 2015, an increase of 5% compared to daily television viewing in 2005 (Office of National Statistics, 2005; Thinkbox, 2016). In addition, the diversification of media platforms (e.g. On Demand services, Netflix, YouTube, etc.) together with smart TV technology will likely maintain television and digital media as one of the most popular leisure choices amongst the English

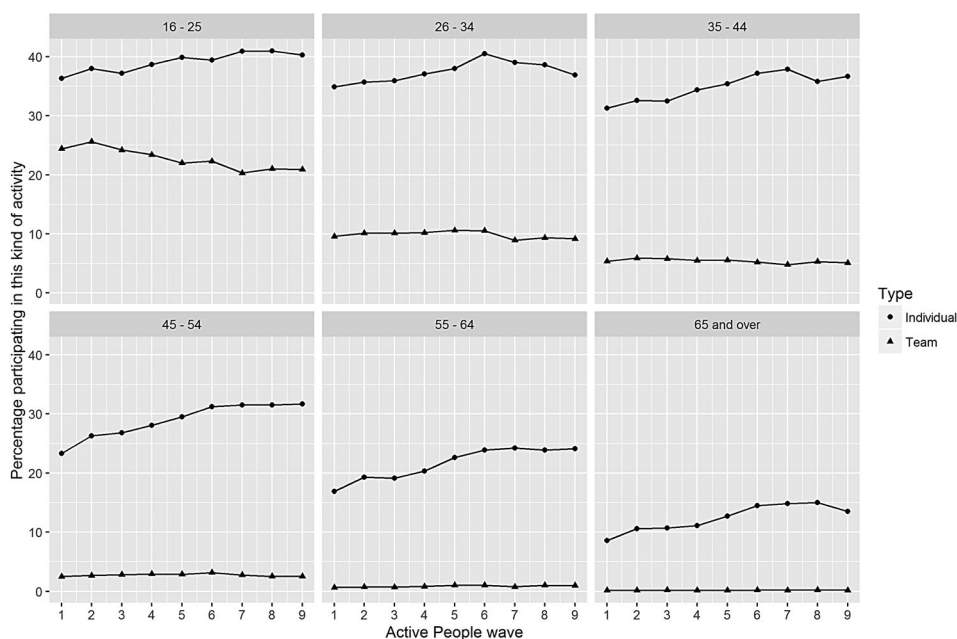


Figure 5. Changes in sports participation (individual and team sports) by age group.

population. In addition to television, a long list of activities continues to fill our leisure time, including eating and drinking, shopping, personal care, gardening and cleaning. In sum, civic engagement of any type is outcompeted by the myriad choices, constraints and priorities evident in peoples' lives (Such, 2013). Thus, in the broader context of limited time, essential needs that must be addressed and the proliferation of new and exciting forms of leisure have resulted in time being selectively apportioned. In other words, the time given to certain experiences is decided upon through a simplified cost (time/price) and benefit (outputs) analysis. In theory, time pressure and greater 'literacy' regarding health and fitness leads a number of people away from participating in time-intensive team sports and towards the more efficient and comparatively cheaper option of running, cycling, fitness activities or using the gym.

The issue of time clearly has a profound effect on leisure and the time we commit to sports participation. With the exception, perhaps, of the most dedicated sports club enthusiasts, time will play a key role in determining the sports we play, where we play them and with whom we play them. However, time appears to be a contested reality. Whilst the UK's working hours stabilised between 39 and 40 hours per week during the period 1997–2016 (Office of National Statistics, 2015a), other research shows that the majority of the workforce feel that they have never worked harder or longer (Chartered Institute Personnel and Development, 2014). Whilst there may be no consensus on whether we spend more or less time in paid work than we did in the past, it is difficult to challenge the notion that the nature of work and, in particular, the way in which we work has, for many, changed. Here, there are a number of factors that will likely affect our leisure time and how we choose to spend our leisure time. First, there has been significant growth in the number of women in paid employment over the past 20 years (Gershuny, 2011). An increase in female paid employment combined with a slight gender redistribution of unpaid work

in the household means that women are less likely to be supporting their male partner's leisure through their own unpaid work. Therefore, one can understand a decline in traditional team sports as reflecting the greater difficulty in co-ordinating the leisure time of enough individuals (usually men) to comprise two teams, competing for a considerable period of time, including travel to the same game. Second, the organisation of work has changed dramatically with flexible working hours and home-based working now considered norms. Of the total UK workforce, 2.4% chose, or are obliged to accept, zero hours contracts; meaning that they can only work at times suiting their employer, and these may be irregular (Office of National Statistics, 2015b). One in every three zero hours employees are under the age of 25. Such arrangements create a foggier dividing line between work and leisure and can limit a person's capacity to train or participate regularly in a team. Third, paid work is now more evenly distributed across the whole week (Gershuny, 2011). In short, this means that the condition of the late industrial revolution in the UK, when shared leisure time (normally Saturday afternoons and Sundays) facilitated the emergence of traditional team sports, no longer prevails. Fourth, as time scarcity theory proposes, as our culture advances, and, as part of this, our working arrangements are revised and immersed in our daily lives (i.e. undertaken at home), the amount of 'real free time' is eroded by other demands and distractions (Rojek, Shaw, & Veal, 2006). This is a point reinforced by the Taking Part survey where 38% of respondents cite 'lack of free time' as the dominant reason for decreased sport participation (cf. Department of Culture, Media & Sport, 2016). As our 'free time' is constantly squeezed – or at least we have the sense of having less time – we compensate by reducing participation and finding quicker, easier or more efficient ways of meeting our needs. Thus, the need to be active and to physically challenge ourselves can more easily be achieved through those activities that we can easily slot into our busy daily schedules (such as running and cycling) rather than those that require considerably more time for playing not to mention coordinating with other sports enthusiasts.

Economic recession

There is some evidence to suggest that sports participation is directly correlated with macroeconomic conditions, not least the recession effect whereby sports participation falls during times of economic recession (cf. Lunn, Layte, & Watson, 2009). However, the nature of the relationship is far more complex than a simple linear relationship between recession and participation, with significant variations depending on time, demographic group and sport activity. A detailed analysis of the Active People data set found that prolonged recession of nine months or more had a detrimental effect on participation, for all demographic groups except the retired, although the significance of the decline in participation varied considerably between different demographic groups and for some groups returned to higher than previous levels post-recession (Gratton & Kokolakis, 2012). The demographic groups found to be particularly adversely affected were males, 25–34-year olds and 55–64-year olds, and those in partially skilled, manual or student occupational groups. The sports found to experience the most significant decline during the recession were *expensive sports* (e.g. sailing, skiing and golf). However, whilst the authors note the increase in participation in cost-efficient pursuits such as jogging and road running (and one could add recreational cycling) during the recession, they do

not address the significant increase in gym or fitness/conditioning activities which tend to require costly membership fees and/or relatively high pay and play fees. Unfortunately, this analysis did not consider the relative 'recession effect' on individual or team sports. Such analysis may have provided insight into the possible effect of recession on time and the ability to engage in more time-consuming 'team sports' and/or the problem of ongoing membership costs (one-off fees and weekly dues) associated with team sports, although the rise in participation in gym and fitness/conditioning suggests that costs may be a secondary issue to either time/convenience or changing tastes in preference for individually focused workouts rather than team-based sports participation.

The supply of sport

This sub-section addresses four issues that are primarily concerned with the supply of sport: (i) institutional change; (ii) the effect of significant reductions to local authority budgets; (iii) a lack of creativity in the National Governing Body (NGB)-led supply of sport and (iv) changes in voluntary sport.

Borgers et al. (2016) use the lens of institutional change theory to explicate changing trends in sports participation. Behaviour directing sports participation is seen 'as a choice or expression of individual motives, attitudes and preferences or abilities that leads to participation in a particular organisational context' (Borgers et al., 2016, p. 3). For example, processes such as modernisation or individualisation emphasise increased autonomy, independence and individual responsibility (Giddens, 1991 in Borgers et al., 2016). As a result, engagements in individual pursuits are reaffirming and loyalty to traditional associations wanes with greater preference for looser, flexible, spontaneous or more demand-oriented relations (Borgers et al., 2016). The underlying premise of such theory is that sports participation trends are directly influenced by the interaction between broad social forces, organisational cultures and traditions, which in turn condition and are conditioned by individual action (Borgers et al., 2016).

In regard to the supply of sport facilities in England, it is important to make clear that the majority are provided, through discretionary power rather than statutory duty, by local government. Over the past six years, local government has faced significant financial cuts as a result of central government's austerity measures. These are not the normal 'efficiency cuts' to which authorities had become accustomed, but cuts of 45% of the total budget (Conn, 2015); the worst financial settlement in living memory (Hastings, Bailey, Gannon, Besemer, & Bramley, 2015). Cuts of this magnitude make it difficult for authorities to deliver their statutory function such as looking after vulnerable children and pensioners, let alone providing parks, swimming pools, sports halls and leisure centres. This perhaps, in part (given that almost all pools in England are provided by local authorities), explains the recent major decline in swimming, a decline that runs counter to the trend towards more individual participation. To recap, participation in swimming has decreased 2.3 percentage points between 2005/2006 and 2014/2015. This argument is not premised on pool closures alone, but on some fundamental changes in the way in which pools are operated, meaning restricted hours, increased fees and increased time allocated to swim lessons in order to raise revenues. Interestingly, the new Chairman and the recently appointed Chief Executive Officer of the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) considers these issues relevant but point to factors such as body image and lack of innovation as the

primary reasons why the sport is losing participants. Body image was largely used as the rationale to explain the loss of 181,700 female swimmers compared to 63,300 male swimmers over the period 2013/2014–2014/2015 (Rumsby, 2015). The new Chief Executive Officer of the ASA also argued that the sport had lost participants to other ‘smart’-sports where participants are able to engage more with their experience and look back at their time, distance, calories lost and, if they choose, assess their overall performance through wearable technology (Lowbridge, 2015).

The apparent lack of innovation and product development in the NGB-leadership of community sports participation from 2008 to 2016 is another supply-related issue requiring examination. This is not just about jumping on the ‘wearable technology’ bandwagon, but about NGBs’ ability to think differently about their sport, develop a more sophisticated understanding of the market and of their target markets, and to create new value propositions that keep them relevant and fit cleanly with their target markets’ changing needs and lifestyles. The data strongly suggest that this has not happened. For the close to £1 billion invested and 40+ sports receiving grants between £1 million and £30+ million (Sport England, 2008b, 2012), only 4 sports increased participation between 2005/2006 and 2014/2016; two of these sports received no funding (gym and fitness/conditioning) and the other two (athletics and cycling) have a much stronger relationship with the organised, club-based and competitive part of their sport rather than they have traditionally with the recreational pursuits to which their sport aligns.⁹

Finally, with regard to voluntary-run sports clubs, there are two specific challenges that potentially impact the supply of sport in relation to the policy target of growing community sports participation. First, the volunteers that oversee the clubs on a day-to-day basis have for some time now reported a number of problems that challenge the future viability of club-based volunteering. The research underscores a shortage of volunteers (Sport England, 1996; Sport and Recreation Alliance, 2013; Taylor et al., 2003); that the majority of tasks are completed by a relative number of ‘stalwart’ volunteers (Nichols, 2005); and that whilst there appears to be a trend towards episodic (i.e. one-off, limited to one task or defined time period) volunteering (Nichols et al., 2013), the number of people volunteering in sport has significantly reduced and there are likely to be major problems finding suitable replacements for these stalwart volunteers in future years (Taylor et al., 2003). Some of the key reasons for these problems included time pressures, changed attitudes to volunteering, the greater demands placed on volunteering and poor recruitment and retention systems (Taylor et al., 2003). This challenge exacerbates the capacity and motivation of voluntary-run clubs to grow participation in sport. The majority of voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) do not see themselves as a formal part of the implementation system for community sport (Harris, Mori, & Collins, 2009). Their priority is the survival of the club, focusing on day-to-day issues and member satisfaction (Koski, 2012; May, Harris, & Collins, 2013). The majority of volunteer-run clubs do not have the time or inclination to play a broader role in providing community-based sports opportunities or to proactively grow the sport or their membership (Harris et al., 2009; May et al., 2013). The majority of the clubs’ members tend to have a pre-existing interest in the sport (through previous participation, parental involvement, etc.) and/or a desire to join the club for other reasons (e.g. social membership, parent of a junior member) (Taylor et al., 2003). Given this context and the more general problems facing volunteers, the

overall ability and willingness of VSCs to extend sport opportunities beyond the club gates to those not already familiar with the sport is likely to be extremely limited.

Discussion and conclusion

Although trends towards increasing participation in individual activities go back to the 1980s and are thus not new, they raise important questions about socio-cultural change, the effect of this on attitudes towards sports participation and engagement with sport, as well as implications for so-called evidence-based policy and practice. Further, whilst this paper focuses on England and draws on research from elsewhere in Europe, it raises questions about the extent to which similar trends can be seen in other parts of the world and, if so, more explanation for such trends in different cultural contexts (Borgers et al., 2016; Gratton et al., 2011; Stenling, 2013).

We highlighted above what we consider the major influences in driving changes in sports participation. We argue that a combination of these explanations provides the most convincing insight. For the individual participant, the reasons for these changes are likely to be varied and interconnected. For example, for some, the choice to use the gym rather than play in the local football club may be about time and convenience; it represents a simple need to fit exercise into an already packed schedule. For others, the decision to engage in individual sports may be more about image, identity and their desire to commit time to achieving personal fitness goals rather than the collective goals of team sports. A large part of the challenge in attempting a theoretical explanation of the changing trends in sports participation is that the reasoning underpinning sports participation is highly personal and that individual lives are bound by hugely variable parameters. Thus, the reasons for the shift from team to individual sports participation represent a range of factors that impact differently on individuals.

Clearly, the participation trends of the past 30+ years also raise important questions about both the effectiveness and authenticity of the evidence-based policy orthodoxy (Harris & Houlihan, 2016). By this, we mean the very motivations and intentions behind the consistent call by central government and others (e.g. Sport England) for policy agents to use evidence to support policy decisions, whether these concern the making or implementation of policy. The APS data clearly demonstrate the government's failed attempts to increase mass sports participation and the continued funding of implementation agents despite this failure. The data show that the activities experiencing growth between 2005 and 2015 do not form any part of the policy implementation structure nor do they receive any funding from government for policy purposes. In contrast, the sports that did receive funding for the express purpose of implementing the government's sport policy experienced no change or a decline in participation. Many NGBs of sport continued to receive significant levels of public funding despite declining participation. The funding distributed to NGBs was allocated across two separate funding cycles. The first funding cycle ran from 2009 to 2013 and the second from 2013 to 2017 (Sport England, 2008b, 2012). The decline in organised sports participation and an increase in individual participation were clearly visible towards the end of the first phase of funding, yet significant public monies continued to be allocated to formal sports in the second phase of funding (see Table 1). A small number of sports had conditions attached to their second-phase funding, although the majority of sports received funding without

any condition or reference to their performance in the first phase (Gibson, 2015). Despite the apparent importance of evidence-based policy, for a period of 10+ years the government failed to use its own evidence to shape sport policy decisions. The continued investment of hundreds of millions of pounds into NGBs of sport, despite the historical data showing that such investment had no impact on participation whatsoever, demonstrates the inefficiency of public policy decisions and the contradictions of evidence-based policy (Bloyce & Smith, 2009; Goodwin & Grix, 2011; Harris, 2013; McDonald, 2005; Smith & Leech, 2010). An alternative view of the sport policy decisions taken over the period is that the decline in formal team sports justified investment to ensure the decline was not greater. However, this rationale was never made explicit nor did policy or strategy for community sport highlight such concerns. We argue that, at best, the government's decision to continue to fund NGBs to grow sports participation was based on the hope that NGBs can either steady the decline or, in some cases, learn from their previous experience and turnaround participation. At worst, the decision was directed by political imperative, disregarding the very notion of evidence-based policy, and ignoring the need for an independent and systematic examination of the structures that might more effectively grow sports participation. Either way, the data reinforce Coalter's original point that 'patterns of [sports] participation are strongly influenced by a wide range of factors beyond the direct control of sport policy makers and providers' (1999, p. 36). Policy success in community sport is not only reliant on the effective implementation of sport policy, but is also dependent on other public policies and broader socio-economic conditions that either facilitate or constrain sports participation goals.

With regard to the implications for the most recent government sport policy, the changing participation trends suggest that more might be gained by investing in individual or lifestyle sports. If successful this would contribute to physical and mental well-being outcomes. However, it may not enhance social and community development outcomes where participation in an organisation, such as a club, may make a greater contribution. This latter point remains a pivotal issue. It is possible for policy-makers to invest in individual or lifestyle pursuits where participation growth is arguably more likely (e.g. gym, road running, recreational cycling, and fitness and conditioning) but such a decision might result in limited support for traditional sport-specific structures that support participation, specifically volunteers, coaches and clubs. Indeed, the participation data underscore the need for new strategies to achieve participation growth, in traditional team sports. Such strategies require funding to be extended beyond the building of institutional capacity within NGBs of sport, with funding being specifically allocated to the delivery of participation initiatives, marketing campaigns and activity programmes that seek to increase participation in sport. This may seem like an obvious point but previous research has indicated that the majority of funding used for previous community sport policy was allocated to the creation of new NGB management posts with insufficient funds left for implementation (Harris, 2013). Alternatively, formal sports could embark on a process of de-institutionalisation to directly create or enable a new offer of lighter, less structured programmes and initiatives that aligns with the broader socio-cultural context and appeals to a broader population (Borgers et al., 2016).

This paper demonstrates the need for further empirical work to understand the range of factors that facilitate and constrain participation, not to mention drive the trend towards individual and informal sports participation. To this end, the ALS would be enhanced by

Table 1. Changes in participation and funding allocations by sport.

Sport	% 1×30pw 2008	% 1×30pw 2012	Change 2008–2012	Investment £M (first phase)	% 1×30pw 2013	% 1×30pw 2016	Change 2013–2016	Investment £M (second phase)	Change in participation (1×30) 2008–2016	Total investment £M (2008–2016)
Cricket	0.49	0.51	0.02	37.8	0.43	0.41	−0.02	27.5	−0.08	65.3
Cycling	4.37	4.24	−0.13	24.2	4.66	4.63	−0.03	32.0	32.00	56.2
Football	5.18	4.98	−0.20	25.6	4.94	4.17	−0.77	30.0	−1.01	55.6
Rugby Union	0.56	0.42	−0.14	28.8	0.42	0.44	0.02	20.0	−0.12	48.8
Rugby League	0.20	0.12	−0.08	30.7	0.12	0.12	0.00	17.5	−0.08	48.2
Netball	0.29	0.31	0.02	17.3	0.37	0.36	−0.01	25.3	0.07	42.6
Athletics	3.89	4.47	0.58	20.4	4.72	5.29	0.57	22.0	1.40	42.4
Tennis	1.18	0.88	−0.30	26.8	1.03	1.02	−0.01	17.4	−0.16	44.2
Swimming	7.83	6.62	−1.21	20.9	6.81	5.70	−1.11	20.0	−2.13	40.9
Badminton	1.29	1.20	−0.09	20.8	1.26	0.98	−0.28	18.0	−0.31	38.8
Squash and racketball	0.71	0.67	−0.04	12.6	0.61	0.51	−0.10	13.5	−0.20	26.1
Golf	2.29	1.96	−0.33	12.8	1.97	1.68	−0.29	13.0	−0.61	25.8
Hockey	0.24	0.19	−0.05	11.5	0.25	0.20	−0.05	12.0	−0.04	23.5
Table Tennis	0.18	0.32	0.14	9.3	0.23	0.21	−0.02	11.0	0.03	20.3
Sailing	0.22	0.12	−0.10	9.6	0.15	0.13	−0.02	9.3	−0.09	18.9
Canoeing	0.10	0.11	0.01	8.5	0.11	0.08	−0.03	10.2	−0.02	18.7
Rowing	0.21	0.19	−0.02	9.1	0.19	0.20	0.01	8.2	−0.01	17.3
Judo	0.05	0.03	−0.02	10.2	0.06	0.03	−0.03	6.1	−0.02	16.3
Basketball	0.45	0.36	−0.09	8.2	0.35	0.38	0.03	6.8	−0.07	15.0
Boxing	0.26	0.35	0.09	4.7	0.33	0.38	0.05	5.8	0.12	10.5
Volleyball	0.12	0.07	−0.05	5.6	0.06	0.06	0.00	4.6	−0.06	10.2
Mountaineering	0.21	0.26	0.05	1.3	0.23	0.19	−0.04	3.0	−0.02	4.3
Rounders	0.06	0.04	−0.02	2.2	0.04	0.03	−0.01	2.2	−0.03	4.4
Bowls	0.86	0.58	−0.28	0.8	0.61	0.50	−0.11	2.0	−0.36	2.8
Fencing	0.04	0.03	−0.01	1.0	0.03	0.03	0.00	1.6	−0.01	2.6
Snowsport	0.29	0.25	−0.04	1.0	0.19	0.26	0.07	1.5	−0.03	2.5
Taekwondo	0.06	0.06	0.00	0.8	0.05	0.05	0.00	1.2	−0.01	2.0
Weightlifting	0.29	0.17	−0.12	0.6	0.20	0.22	0.02	1.0	−0.07	1.6

adding ‘why’ questions to reveal the reasons that underpin peoples’ engagement (or otherwise) in sport. Alternatively, the survey could be complemented by a programme of qualitative research designed to gain insight into people’s sporting habits. Whilst such a portfolio of data would take time to develop and would no doubt be challenging to implement, it would provide a rich set of data to improve our understanding of sports participation and thus improve future sport policy implementation. Furthermore, a programme of international research to explore international trends in sports participation as well as the range of factors that could explain those trends would be helpful in determining whether trends seen in England and Europe are specific to the continent or part of a broader, global shift towards individualisation.

The results presented in this paper not only demonstrate the continued shift towards informal sports participation over the past 10 years, they also underline the overall failure of the NGB-led community sport policy system to grow mass sports participation and highlight the problems with the government’s overly normative notion of evidence-based policy. Clearly, what evidence is used and when is a matter of political discretion. These findings support the government’s recent decision to revise community sport policy, but policy could be more effectively implemented if policy agents more carefully examine the challenge of growing organised sports, are clear about the opportunity offered by individual or informal sports, and systematically re-assess the structures that might more effectively grow community sports participation.

Notes

1. See, for example, Cabinet Office (2015), DCMS (2000, 2001, 2002, 2012) and Sport England (2004, 2008a, 2016b).
2. Exaggerated insofar as the government recognised that to secure widespread public support, the benefits of hosting the Games must be perceived to outweigh the costs this is despite the ‘available evidence’ for such benefits being limited (Bloyce & Smith, 2012).
3. In this paper, gym refers to exercise using weights and/or cardio-vascular equipment.
4. The post-16 drop-off refers to a significant number of people who drop out of sports participation after leaving high school at 16.
5. The two exceptions are the City of London (100 interviews) and the Isles of Scilly (150 interviews).
6. The proportion of mobile-only households, while generally increasing, fell from 16% in quarter 1, 2014 to 15% in quarter 1, 2015 (see Ofcom, 2016).
7. The Active People and Active Lives Surveys will be conducted simultaneously from October 2015 to September 2016.
8. These data include TV viewership in England but are only presented at the UK level. More specific data for England alone are not available.
9. For the purpose of the APS, these recreational cycling and jogging are counted as sport participation and are attributed to the recognised NGB for that sport. Thus, jogging and recreational cycling are counted and attributed to England Athletics and British Cycling, respectively.

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