

London 2012 and the physical activity legacy: to question legacy claims is to risk being labelled ‘unpatriotic’

lse blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/london-2012-and-the-physical-activity-legacy-to-question-legacy-claims-is-to-risk-being-labelled-unpatriotic/

12/23/2013

*Those who ask difficult and critical questions about the participation legacy of the London Games, risk being grouped with anti-Olympic protesters and regarded as pessimistic cynics or simply moaners. However, just as nothing about the staging of the event was left to chance, a meticulous evidence-based approach should be applied to realising a physical activity legacy argue **Kathy Armour, Jonathan Grix and Nikos Ntoumanis.***



The debate around London 2012’s participation legacy is reminiscent of much writing on the Olympic Games: positive, celebratory and uncritical. Those who ask difficult and critical questions about the Games, particularly about the participation legacy, risk being grouped with anti-Olympic protesters and regarded as pessimistic cynics or simply moaners. Indeed, in the build up to the Games, those who doubted the ambitious participation legacy claims were regarded with suspicion and as almost unpatriotic.



So, what was supposed to happen following the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics? In the spirit of the festive season, we might summarise it as follows:



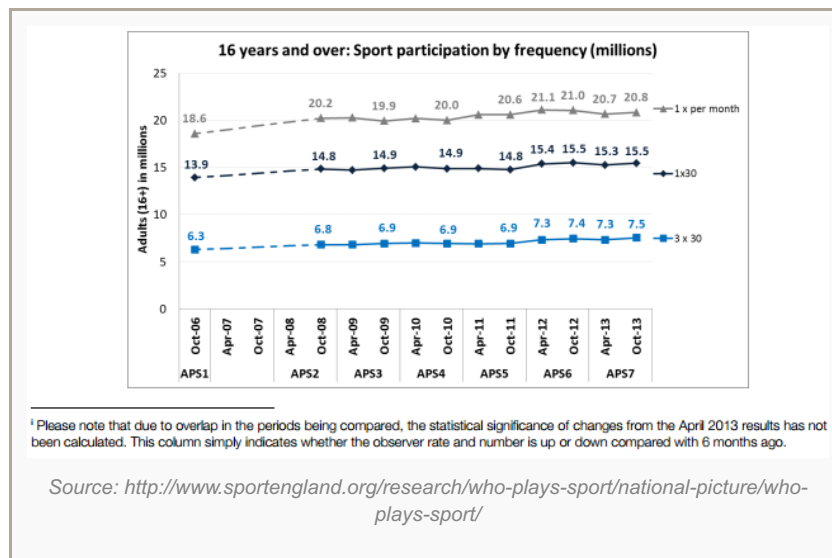
And the London 2012 Olympics decreed that henceforth the nation would do exercise. The glory of humankind was displayed for all to see, and Olympic fairy dust scattered the land. And the nation was to be inspired to emulate: ‘Behold the wondrous athletes, drop your TV remotes, forget your past experiences, and Rise Up and Be Active!’

It is certainly true that the UK, more than any previous host nation, set out to leverage a tangible participation legacy from the Games, particularly for young people. It is also true that there are organisations across the land doing their best to encourage people to be physically active; for example, Sport England, the Youth Sport Trust, the Association for PE, and numerous governing bodies of sport. And yet they are battling against the odds

The fact the legacy didn’t work out as intended should not surprise anyone. The evidence of previous sports mega-events was there for all to see, and the research evidence on what turns people on – or off – exercise, and what is most likely to sustain their participation, is robust and unequivocal.

First the legacy facts: the Sport England [Active People Survey](#) (APS) released this month is the largest survey of sports participation among people in England over 16 years of age. Its key measure is the percentage of the population participating in sport at moderate intensity for 30 minutes on one or more days in a week. The latest results indicate no noticeable trends since the pre-Olympics period. Approximately 15.5m people (36% of the population) are estimated to have achieved the 1 x 30 minute target during the period October 2012-October 2013. This represents an increase of about 1.3% compared to the period of April 2012-April 2013, but a decrease of about 0.4% compared to October 2011-October 2012 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



Looking at participation rates in funded sports, the October 2012-October 2013 vs. April 2012-April 2013 comparison indicates an increase in 12 sports but a decrease in 19 sports. The first and third most successful sports (in terms of GB medals) in the 2012 Olympics, namely cycling and athletics, showed small increases in participation rates over the same comparison period but rowing, the second most successful sport, showed a decrease of about 15%. Looking at the 16-25 age-group, some in the media have reported a drop in participation, although looking at the data over the last four to five years there appears to be very little change, with very small upward and downward fluctuations. An exception is disability sport, where there is evidence of an upward trend in participation with a 4% increase in participation when comparing October 2012 –October 2013, and a 2% increase when comparing October 2012-October 2013 with April 2012-April 2013. This is good news for a portion of the population that has the very lowest levels of participation.

There is another important consideration in all this. The APS results are based on self-reported data, and it is well-established that such data significantly overestimate physical activity levels compared to data obtained using specialized recording equipment. An example is the 2008 Health Survey for England which showed that 39% of men self-reported meeting the Government’s physical activity recommendations, while objective data suggested the correct percentage was closer to 6%. What we can conclude is that despite claim and counter claim, the case for a participation legacy has no substantive support, and that the findings of the APS are probably wildly over optimistic.

Next the historical evidence: given *the* key legacy from the London Olympics was to be an increase in sport and physical activity participation (to ‘*inspire a generation*’), it might be expected that this aspiration was rooted firmly in historical precedent. If that was the case, however, such evidence has yet to be discovered as even a cursory glance at previous sports mega-events testifies. The Sydney Olympic Games (2000) offers an interesting case study. As a self-styled ‘sporting nation’, Australia also assumed that a spectacular sports event would have a knock-on physical activity effect for the masses, especially young people. The decade following the Games told a very different story, with *increased* levels of inactivity and obesity among the very people who were supposed to be inspired by the Olympics. As a result, the Government has now moved away from a strong policy focus on elite-level success towards more grass-roots investment in community and school sport. Athens is another interesting case. The only visible legacy from the 2004 Olympics is a park full of underused and inappropriate facilities, and a contribution to Greece’s financial crisis.

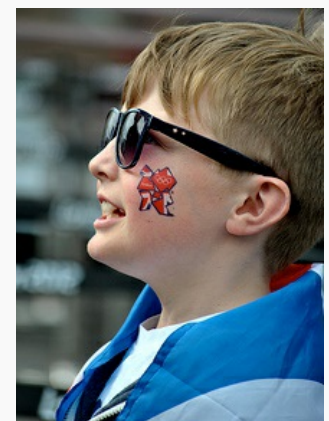


Image credit: Sonali Campion

Finally, the research evidence on what is most likely to work to increase the nation’s participation in physical

activity. Despite the intuitive belief that a glamorous sports mega-event will inspire us all to ‘rise up and be active’ we know that this is simply not the case. Instead, the solutions are rather more long term and fundamental in nature. For example, we need to consider individuals’ lifelong physical activity encounters to analyse where they have positive/appropriate physical activity learning experiences, and where they have been left feeling negative, worried or even humiliated. Failure – or lack of competence – in a sport or exercise setting tends to be very public, so teachers, coaches and exercise instructors need to be talented, informed experts with access to top quality career-long professional development. They also need to work together in the interests of learners through the life course because we know that humiliation in one physical activity setting is eminently transferable to another. To be fully informed, it is essential that physical activity practitioners are able to deploy, for example, the latest psychological evidence about motivation, adherence and resilience; that they are using the most up to date evidence on motor development, physiology and biomechanics; and that they have the pedagogical skills to take into account all those features of a learner that will undoubtedly impact upon their ability to succeed (e.g. age, ability/disability, gender, cultural factors and access to facilities). The list is long but people are complex, and decisions to exercise or not, and to remain physically active – or to give up – are similarly complex. It would be nice to believe that a sports mega-event could simply sweep aside all these considerations but that would surely be naïve.

What about schools? Well, here again the picture regarding evidence is interesting. The previous Labour government invested heavily in physical education and school sport, reasoning that all children attend school so this is one way to ensure they are (at least minimally) physically active. They were certainly successful in some respects including mandating that children in state schools were offered a minimum of 2 hours physical education per week, increasing the range of activities on offer, and raising the profile of sport and physical activity among head teachers. This latter point was particularly important because historical evidence shows that when head teachers in state schools are left to determine their own curriculum allocation for PE, the amount of time drops. Upon coming into office in 2010, however, the Coalition government swept away all that had been achieved since 2000. Instead, this government favours traditional competitive sport for all. Yet, here again, the evidence is clear. Offering a narrow diet of traditional competitive sport will not inspire the majority of children and young people to be active; indeed we know that it turns them off. This leaves all those agencies that are trying to promote physical activity to pick up the pieces later in life, and to try to reverse the damage done at school.

In conclusion...don’t shoot the messenger! Given our professional interests we, more than anyone perhaps, are interested in promoting physical activity. We should also make clear that we enjoyed every aspect of London 2012. It was, as we expected, a truly wondrous event; a miracle of meticulous planning drawing on some of the best talent in the land and learning from the experience of previous Olympics. Nothing about the staging of the event was left to chance and it was a triumph for the nation. All we are suggesting is that we apply a similar evidence-based approach to realising a physical activity legacy.

Happy (physically active?) holidays!

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Authors

Kathleen Armour is Head of School in the School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Birmingham.. Kathy has a particular interest in the role of sport in the lives of disaffected, disengaged and disadvantaged young people, and in the pedagogies that teachers need to develop over their careers in order to use sport effectively.



Jonathan Grix is Associate Professor in Sport Policy and Politics at the University of Birmingham. His recent work has highlighted the political nature of sport and how the study of sport can be used to understand wider machinations in the political system. Jonathan’s key area of focus is on government involvement in sport and the use of sport by governments.

Nikos Ntoumanis is Professor of Exercise and Sport Psychology at the University of Birmingham. He is interested in personal and contextual factors that optimise motivation and promote performance, psychological well-being and health-conducive behaviours in various physical activity settings.

