



Research Update



Get up and go!

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Background

In the context of an increasing focus on the public health of the nation, which includes a rising concern with obesity, it has been suggested that sport and physical activity can act as preventative or corrective mechanisms. However, in understanding this argument, it is important to highlight the differences between these terms. Sport involves institutionalised, competitive activities requiring rigorous physical output, whilst exercise and physical activity are more moderate, usually voluntary and, it is argued, better for health.

This Research Update uses data from the 2009 **Northern Ireland Life and Times** (NILT) Survey to explore sport and physical activity among the public in Northern Ireland during their leisure time. These questions form part of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), wherein the same module of questions is asked in over 40 countries worldwide. This was the first time that a full module of questions within NILT and within the ISSP explored how we spend our leisure time, and how important these activities are in our lives.

Leisure activities

Respondents were asked how often they partook in a list of activities in their free time and there was a wide variety of responses. Looking firstly at more passive activities, nearly three quarters of respondents (73%) said that they watched TV, DVD or videos



every day, whilst only two per cent said that they played cards or board games daily. On the other hand, in relation to taking part in physical activity such as sports, going to the gym or for a walk, only one in five (22%) said that they did so on a daily basis, with a further 27 per cent saying that they did so several times a week. In contrast to this, nearly one in five (19%) said that they never take part in physical activities. When the same question was asked in 2007 within the British Social Attitudes (BSA) Survey, only 11 per cent said that they never took part in physical activities, compared with a higher proportion - 23 per cent - in the Republic of Ireland. It is important to note here that the question relates to physical activity which includes, but is not limited to, sport.

Who does it?

As we might expect, participation in physical exercise is not uniform across the population. Whilst there was no significant variation between the level of participation of men and women, Figure 1 shows that this was not the case for age. Whilst one third of the youngest age group (33%) take part in physical exercise daily, this is twice the proportion of the oldest age group (15%). Conversely, whilst only five per cent of those aged 18-24 years never take part in physical exercise, the proportion of those aged 65 years or over not taking physical exercise is 45 per cent.

We undertook multivariate analysis which allowed us to identify which

groups of respondents were more physically active, and included a wide range of characteristics such as age, sex, employment status, education and household income, as well as other leisure activities.

The results of this analysis suggest a number of variables that are significantly related to regular (that is, several times a week or more) participation in physical activities such as sports, going to the gym or going for a walk. The groups most likely to participate in regular physical exercise also had active social networks, that is, they were involved in other leisure activities including:

- Those who also get together regularly with friends
- Those who also get together regularly with relatives
- Those who also listen to music
- Those who go to watch sporting events.

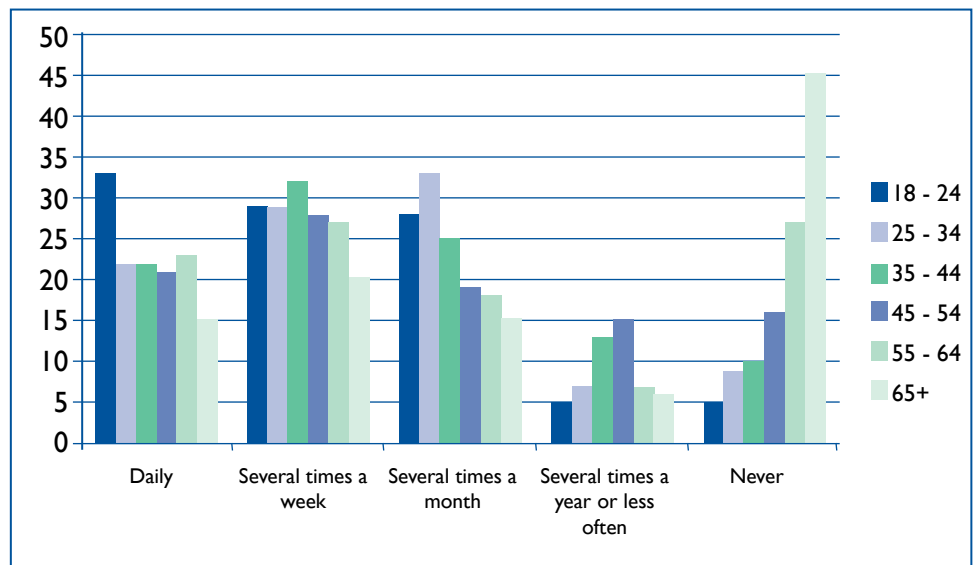
This pattern of responses confirms BSA and other research which suggests that participation in physical activity tends to reflect those with higher social capital. Social capital can be defined as the social dimension of class, and the relationships that make up social capital are said to have bonding or bridging effects.

The NILT results also reflect the impact of a narrower definition of class - that is, socio-economic status - in that having a higher household income was associated with more frequent participation. This is not surprising given the plethora of studies which indicate that class divisions spill over into people's sports and leisure lives.

How do they do it?

The 53 per cent of respondents who say that they take part in sport or physical activity were asked to identify the sport or physical activity that they do most frequently. Table I shows the

Figure 1: Frequency of participation in physical exercise (%)



most common activities identified, with fitness and swimming being the popular.

Although we have already seen that there are no differences between the

Table I: Participation in sport or physical activity (activities selected by 4% or more)

Activity	%
Fitness	14
Swimming	13
Football/soccer	11
Walking	9
Golf	7
Cycling	6
Gaelic football	5
Jogging	4

levels of activity of males and females, there were differences between the types of activities of these two groups. For males, the most frequent sports were soccer (22%) and golf (11%), whilst females participated more in fitness (20%) and cycling (6%). This pattern supports much previous research on gender and sports.

Why do they do it?

Having identified the frequency and types of physical activity, it is useful to explore reasons why they do it, and what they get out of it. Of those who take part in physical activities, the vast majority said that they get some enjoyment out of it: only eight per cent say that they get no or not much enjoyment, whilst 44 per cent say that they get a great deal. As we might imagine, those who undertake physical activity most regularly are more likely to say that they get a great deal of enjoyment. Males were more likely than females to say that they got a great deal of enjoyment (49% and 40% respectively). Respondents in the 25-34 years age group were least likely to say that they got a great deal of enjoyment (at 39%) compared with 48 per cent of those aged 18-24 years, although these differences were not statistically significant.

However, given that 44 per cent of those doing physical activity get a great deal of enjoyment out of it, we could ask why 56 per cent have different levels of enjoyment? We can explore this by looking at how important respondents rated each of four reasons

Table 2: Reasons for taking part in sports or games (excludes those who say that this question does not apply)

	%				
	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not important	Can't choose
For physical or mental health	52	33	7	3	4
To meet other people	30	38	20	9	4
To compete against others	13	24	28	31	4
To look good	11	26	23	37	3

why they take part in sports or games. As shown in Table 2, health reasons were important for most respondents: 85 per cent said that they did sport or games for their physical or mental health, thereby taking on individual responsibility for their health.

Meeting people was an important reason for 68 per cent of respondents. The competitive element and looking good were less important reasons, albeit each factor was identified by around one third of respondents.

Men were more likely to take part in sports or games for different reasons than females. Nearly one half of men (47%) said that competition against others was very or somewhat important, compared with 28 per cent of females. Conversely, to look good was very or somewhat important to 43 per cent of females compared to a smaller proportion of males (30%).

There were age-related differences, however. For example, the youngest age group (18-24 years old) was most likely to say that each of the four factors were very or somewhat important to them. Thus, 91 per cent said this about physical or mental health, compared with 76 per cent of respondents aged 65 years or older. In relation to competing against others, the figures are 53 per cent and 31 per cent respectively.

Respondents were also asked about their general health, and around one

half of respondents (49%) described their health as excellent or very good. Those respondents who participated in regular physical exercise were more likely to say that their health is better than those who do not participate in regular exercise. Whilst this might suggest that exercise is the cause of improved physical health, it may also be that healthier people are more physically active in the first place.

Attitudes to sport

Respondents were asked about their attitudes to the role of sport within society, and overall, sport was viewed positively. Only three out of ten respondents (29%) thought that there was too much sport on TV, with more women than men agreeing or strongly agreeing with this (35% and 22% respectively). The vast majority of respondents (87%) agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in sports develops children's character. The cohesive potential of sport was recognised, with more than two thirds of respondents (69%) saying that sports bring different groups and races inside Northern Ireland closer together. However, respondents were less definite in relation to international sport – only one third (37%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that international sport competitions create more tension between countries than good feelings. Finally, one half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Northern Ireland's government should spend more money on sports.

Conclusion

Most NILT respondents say that they take part in some sort of sport or physical activity, although two in ten never do so. The reasons for participation in exercise are varied, although health factors predominate. The fact that only 44 per cent of those exercising regularly say that they get a great deal of enjoyment out of this might reflect the effect of healthism, that is, people are exercising only because it is 'good for them', although the public health messages are generally being accepted. Nevertheless, nearly one half of those aged 65 years or older say that they never take part in physical activity. This warrants greater attention not least because of the changing demographics of the Northern Irish population.

Attitudes to sport were less clear, particularly in relation to the perceived role of sport in society. Whilst sport was seen in a positive light in that it brings different groups together, international sport was often seen as creating tension.

In summary then, sport, exercise and physical activity are a regular feature of our lives, and overall, these are viewed quite positively. The paradox is that the build up to the 2012 Olympics will whet our appetite for sport, whilst the upcoming spending cuts (predicted to be around £6m) are likely to affect our ability to 'get up and go'.

Key Points:

- 73 per cent of respondents watched TV or DVDs every day.
- 22 per cent of respondents took part in physical activity every day, with a further 27 per cent doing so several times a week. 19 per cent never do so.
- The group most likely to be physically active also had more active social networks.
- For males, the most popular sports were soccer (22%) and golf (11%), whilst females participated more in fitness (20%) and cycling (6%).
- 44 per cent of those who exercise say that they get a great deal of enjoyment out of it.
- The vast majority of those who exercise (85%) do so for their physical or general health, whilst two thirds (68%) do so to meet people.
- Most respondents (69%) think that sports bring together different groups and races in Northern Ireland. However, 37% disagreed that international sport competitions create tension between countries.
- One half of respondents think that Northern Ireland's government should spend more money on sports.

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The **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2009, 1228 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by Central Survey Unit.

The survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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