

Policy and program considerations for increasing sport participation among members of underrepresented groups in Canada

Purpose

Sport should be available and responsive to the needs of all Canadian residents who want to participate. Sport participation benefits individuals and society overall through improved physical, psychological and social well-being, increased civic pride, engagement and cohesion, and increased economic development and prosperity. However, some women and girls, Indigenous Peoples, persons with a disability, recent immigrants, new citizens, socio-economically disadvantaged Canadians, older adults, members of the LGBTQ community, and Canadians living in rural, remote and isolated regions do not participate at the same rates as their mainstream counterparts. Inclusive policies and programming benefit members of these groups and other Canadian residents who may feel excluded from sport.

A review of current academic and gray literature was undertaken to provide a common evidence-base for collaborative policy and program development work aimed at increasing participation in sport, particularly among underrepresented groups. While these groups are diverse, there are many similarities in terms of the barriers and challenges they experience. This summary provides key findings of the report along with ideas for actions for policy makers and programmers to improve access and inclusion for members of underrepresented groups.

See the full report: Cragg, S., C. Costas-Bradstreet, J. Arkell & K. Lofstrom. *Policy and program considerations for increasing sport participation among members of under-represented groups in Canada*. Interprovincial Sport and Recreation Council, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. 2016.

Canada provides some of the best sport and recreation opportunities in the world. For most Canadian residents, the decision to participate in sport is based on the quality of the experience. Sport participation includes experiential aspects related to inclusion and community integration including those of belongingness, engagement, meaning, mastery and challenge. To encourage participation at all levels sport leaders and organizations need to deliver fun, socially inclusive sport programs that support a healthy active lifestyle for all those living in Canada.

Provide opportunities to develop physical literacy and cultural capital at any age

Members of underrepresented groups may not have had opportunities to develop physical literacy at a young age, due to:

- socio-economic disadvantage,
- physical or health limitations,
- past residency in other countries (e.g., living in a refugee camp or in a country where sport is a privilege of the very few),
- cultural norms (e.g., particular sports are not played in their culture of origin, or women are not encouraged to participate) or
- marginalization due to other reasons (e.g., homophobia, ablebodyism, racism).

This missed opportunity creates a significant barrier to entry for those who wish to join a sport.

Potential participants may feel awkward as they do not have the basic skills and they may be excluded from teams whose focus is winning. However, having physical literacy levels below those of one's peers are only part of the sport shortfalls that exclude some Canadian residents. Consistent early participation and experience create cultural capital (familiarity with the rules or strategies, fitting fit in with the culture of the team). The very nature of their marginalization from main stream sport participation creates a vicious cycle of exclusion, as low levels of physical literacy and cultural capital place their abilities below those of their peers and result in further exclusion. Many come to the conclusion that sport is 'not their thing.'

Providing opportunities to gain basic skills to people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds, whether it is their desire to become accomplished athletes or just to feel comfortable playing with their peers, is paramount to ensuring their consideration of sport as an option for them.

In addition to lacking sufficient physical literacy and cultural capital, barriers can include fear of judgement and the attitudes of others, lack of relevant role models, lack of access to facilities, equipment, transportation, or information, and economic and time constraints.



Identify and customize the right combination of solutions

No single action will increase sport participation alone. For example, offering subsidies without providing a welcoming environment will not entice people to come or to stay. A holistic approach to increasing sport participation is needed. This involves addressing the whole person, including:

- emphasizing the health benefits of sport;
- involving community members in promoting participation and supporting participants; and
- building linkages with community partners, both by involving them in promoting sport opportunities and by including sport in their broader programming.

It is imperative that policy makers and practitioners work with members of each target group they are hoping to serve, to gain an understanding of the group's culture, challenges and preferred solutions, and then tailoring a critical mass of identified solutions to the local context.

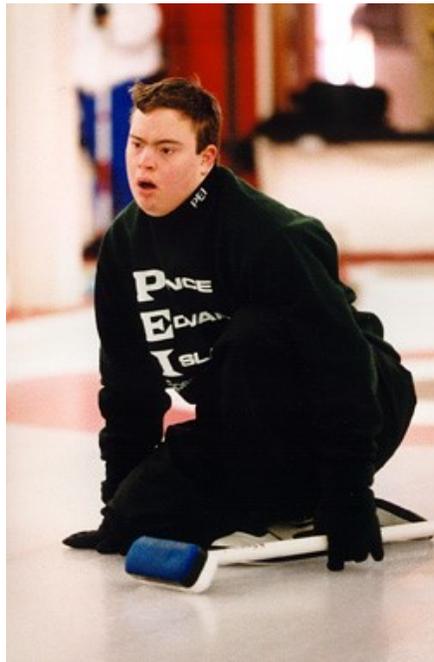
Honouring reasons for participation

Understanding, acknowledging and honouring reasons for participating in a sport, rather than promoting athletic development standards on those who are not looking for that type or experience will further promote inclusiveness and participation. Accommodating all levels of skill and competition and supporting choice of participation level provides the variety of experiences sought by different individuals.

Next Steps

There is ample academic and gray literature describing the barriers to participation and solutions. There are also many great programs and policy activity underway across Canada that have not been published that need to be identified and catalogued. This information, along with that of existing reports on serving underrepresented groups needs to be actively shared and promoted. Now is the time to find ways to share identified approaches broadly and support their implementation. Efforts should be evaluated and monitored to gauge their impact, identify ways to improve, identify good practice and continue to share what works with programmers and policy makers across the nation.

Three girls sign up for the same class. They are excited about trying this new sport together and spending time with each other. After the first session, one girl is told she is 'too good' for this class and must take a more advanced class on a different day. All three girls drop out. As their reasons for participation were not honoured, neither the long-term athlete development goals nor the participation goals are achieved.



Friends of an individual who uses a wheelchair all want to play sledge hockey with him. The arena provides sufficient sledges for two teams. Friends all play the sport together through this example of reverse integration and the social and inclusiveness goals are achieved.

Ideas for Action

The full report provides specific actions for sport policy and programmers to take to improve sport participation among Canadian residents in the areas of:

- ✓ Developing programs to introduce basic skills and improve physical literacy for all ages, abilities and skill levels;
- ✓ Recognizing the overlap between physical activity, recreation and sport;
- ✓ Working with intersectoral partners including health, recreation, education, transportation, planning, justice, social services, settlement organizations, daycares and libraries;
- ✓ Providing professional development and mentorship opportunities to leaders and administrators;
- ✓ Encouraging peer leadership and mentorship;
- ✓ Increasing access to sports by opening many types of buildings and facilities, ensuring physical and operational access;
- ✓ Ensuring facilities are maintained and meet accessibility codes;
- ✓ Attracting participants with social and cultural experiences that compliment the sporting experience;
- ✓ Involving those for whom programs are being developed in deciding what will meet their needs and how;
- ✓ Leveraging the knowledge and talents of members of underrepresented groups in the creation of sport experiences (for example, encouraging new immigrants to share the sport experiences of their country of origin with both other new immigrants and Canadian-born citizens of the same cultural background);
- ✓ Working with community groups and intersectoral partners to integrate sport activities into a broad range of programming within and beyond sport and recreation mandates;
- ✓ Providing for reverse integration where mainstream residents can participate in adapted or culturally specific sport opportunities;
- ✓ Celebrating and promoting diversity and ensuring that sports participation experiences are positive, social, fun, inclusive, welcoming, non-judgemental and free of harassment and inappropriate language; and
- ✓ Removing economic, social, transportation, equipment and other barriers.