

Moving the Goal Posts: poverty and access to sport for young people

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Summary

- Of the 9.1 million young people aged 14 to 24 living in the UK, approximately 2.7 million (30 per cent) are living in poverty. Area-based deprivation has a knock-on effect on the local environment and is correlated to higher crime, poorer educational outcomes, health problems, higher levels of disability and poorer social conditions. Sports participation rates are significantly lower among young people living in poorer areas.
- The sports charity Street Games commissioned the London School of Economics to undertake an in-depth study on the impact on poverty and access to sport. The LSE research team visited five deprived areas in England and Wales and spoke to approximately 135 young people between the ages of 14 and 25 to understand their experiences of accessing sport in their area and to identify the barriers to involvement.
- The research found that young people living in areas of deprivation enjoy sport and would like more opportunities to take part in informal sports where they do not have to worry about their ability. The biggest barrier for over school age young people was cost. Young adults aged 18 to 25 were particularly disadvantaged as low incomes, reduced benefits and debt meant that taking part in sport was no longer affordable. Parents were worried about the conditions of the area and the level of supervision.
- While the research found that poor area conditions had a significant impact on participation in sport, it also highlighted a number of effective and successful services and organisations that are playing a vital role in helping young people in poverty access sport and improve their life chances.
- The report makes recommendations for more organised but informal sporting activities. It calls for more targeted and government backed area-based

improvement programmes focussed on a wider set of social outcomes including employment, education, crime and housing.

- This policy briefing summarises the key findings and recommendations in the report, highlights some of the case studies in the report and comments on the role of local authorities in helping young people in poverty to access sport. The briefing will be of interest to councils and their local partners, and particularly to officers and members with an interest in sport, leisure, public health and physical activity.

Introduction

Ahead of the launch of the Government's new strategy and framework for sport, the sports charity [Street Games](#) has published the findings of an in-depth study on the impact of poverty on access to sport, produced by the London School of Economics Housing and Communities research department on behalf of the charity.

The report, [Moving the Goal Posts: Poverty and Access to Sport for Young People](#), found that young people in areas of poverty are significantly less likely to participate in sport because of the cost of taking part. An Executive Summary is available to download [HERE](#).

With access to free and low cost sport ending when young people leave school or college, the research found that young adults aged 18 to 25 were particularly disadvantaged as low incomes and reduced benefits meant that taking part in sport was no longer affordable or a priority to them. "Leaving school is a cliff edge for sport and for general involvement in social activities and clubs," the report says. "Post school, social networks become looser and friends prefer "hanging out", drinking together, smoking and in many cases taking drugs."

The research found that young people like and enjoy sport and would like more opportunities to take part in informal sport without having to worry about their abilities, buy kits, take part in strict regimes or tie themselves in to a high level of commitment.

The findings were based on an in-depth analysis of sports participation in five areas of deprivation in England and Wales through interviews with young people, parents and professionals. The areas studied were: East Ham, London; Burngreave, Sheffield; St Paul's, Bristol; Gurnos, Merthyr Tydfil; and Lache, Chester.

In its recommendations the report calls for:

- more organised but informal sporting activities;

- targeted and government-backed area-based improvement programmes focussed on a wider set of social outcomes including employment, education, crime, and housing;
- closer supervision of parks and play areas to give parents more confidence in informal activities;
- specific activities for girls and boys, with alternatives to team sports and investment in 'solo' sports like jogging; and
- bite-size training opportunities to encourage more young people to get involved as volunteers as they get older.

This policy briefing summarises the key findings and recommendations in the report, highlights some of the case studies in the report and comments on the role of local authorities in helping young people in poverty to access sport.

Briefing in full

The impact of poverty on participation in sport

The research is in many ways as much a study of young people's experiences of poverty as it is of their participation in sport, with a particular focus on the knock-on effects of area based and concentrated deprivation on the local environment and the experiences of young people and their families.

Under the Government's current measure of poverty (households with an income below 60 per cent of the UK's average), 1 in 6 of the population live in poverty (12.9 million). Of the 9.1 million young people aged 14-24 living in the UK, approximately 2.7 million, or 30 per cent, are living in poverty. There are a further 740,000 young people between 60 and 70 per cent of the UK median income who are likely to experience many of the challenges associated with poverty.

The report makes the important point that since young people in poverty have poorer physical and mental health outcomes than their more affluent peers, they are more likely to gain from the health benefits of regular participation in sport. However, sports participation rates are significantly lower among young people living in poorer areas. The latest [Active People Survey](#) shows that 25.9 per cent of people in the lowest socio-economic groups play sport once a week. This compares to more affluent socio-economic groups where 39.1 per cent of people are now active. [Research by UK Active](#) meanwhile, found that 13 out of the 15 most inactive local authorities all sit in the 'most deprived' or 'more deprived' socio-economic quantiles. The most deprived areas are on average 33 per cent inactive compared to 25 per cent in the least deprived areas.

Promoting access to sport and physical activity in areas of concentrated deprivation is therefore both a key challenge for the Government, but also an opportunity to maximise the impact of sport and increase overall levels of physical activity.

The report reviews a range of evidence from existing studies on the impact of concentrated poverty. The headline messages from the report's review of poverty in the UK are set out below:

- Area-based deprivation has a knock-on effect on the local environment and is correlated to higher crime, poorer educational outcomes, health problems, higher levels of disability and poorer social conditions.
- Poorer areas are usually dominated by rented housing and in particular social rented housing.
- The groups most affected by area-based deprivation are lone parent families, young single people from a poor background who have experienced family break up, ethnic minorities, low skilled workers, and young people and working age people over 50 who are not steady in work.
- Child poverty is heavily concentrated in the poorest areas.
- In-work poverty affects 6 million people and nearly two thirds of poor children live in working households with an income that is not enough to keep the family out of poverty.
- Those in poverty and in work are often on temporary, part-time or zero hours contracts while the price of living has increased.
- Concentrated poverty in particular areas limits the level of outdoor activity and is a barrier to young people accessing local facilities and clubs due to fear of trouble and peer pressures.
- Families on low incomes and affected by debt often makes the small costs of participation in sport unaffordable.
- Young adults aged 18-25 in areas of poverty who have started working rather than continue in further and higher education have been impacted by falling wages, reduced benefits, increased training costs and less job security. They no longer have access to free and low cost sport and leisure in school or access the facilities enjoyed by their peers at college or university.
- When young people in poverty do access sport and leisure it helps them develop confidence and motivation, social and team skills, and also motivates them to strive and succeed.

Key Findings

The LSE research team visited five deprived areas in England and Wales (East Ham, London; Burngreave, Sheffield; St Paul's, Bristol; Gurnos, Merthyr Tydfil; and Lache, Chester) and spoke to approximately 135 young people between the ages of 14 and 25, local parents and key stakeholders to understand their experiences of accessing sport in their area and identify the barriers to involvement. The key findings are summarised below. Readers are encouraged to consult the full report to appreciate the richness of the comments received from the interviewees.

Young People

The research found that young people in poverty enjoy sport and outdoors activities and see the benefits for their physical and mental wellbeing, but would like to take part in more informal sports where they do not have to worry about their abilities or the structures and requirements of competitive sport or PE.

The provision of more organised, but informal sporting activities is a key recommendation in the report and the following quotes from youth workers interviewed as part of the research explain what is meant by informal sport well.

“In PE lessons at school, they have to change. People have issues around body confidence, and sometimes they won’t be happy about what they’re wearing. Parents and families may not be able to afford the latest trainers or branded shorts and tshirts. At our sessions they don’t have to wear ‘sports’ gear. As long as they’re wearing some kind of trainers, any jeans or tshirt or comfortable clothes are fine. They come already changed, or at most have sports clothes under their outer layer of clothing, so there are no concerns about that... It’s a fairly relaxed session and they’re free to come and go as they like. This informality just isn’t practical at school.”

Youth and Community Sports Manager, Community Links (Newham).

“We do all the normal sports [...] but sometimes that’s just not good enough when you’re trying to get the young people who won’t turn up to this stuff. We take a frisbee out on the streets, get them involved in a game, and then have some sort of added educational element. We usually hand out free condoms. Sport really is a great avenue to do this, but they wouldn’t turn up to a football tournament at 7:30pm on a specific date. It has to be extremely informal. We go to them. They don’t come to us.”

Youth Worker, Forsynthia Youth Project (Methyr Tydfil, Gurnos):

The research acknowledged the important role that schools play in keeping young people active through free and low cost sports activities, as well as through extended school services. It was also found that good sport teachers, and other local leaders and volunteers offered valuable role models and could motivate young people to participate in sport.

Boys were found to look up to sporting role models, whereas girls were more worried about their image and figure. Girls favoured female-only activities whereas the young men preferred to play sport with their friends and other males. The most popular informal exercise for young men was informal football kickabout and the most popular exercise for young women was jogging. Girls said the social aspect of sport was important and would consider joining new activities if their friends went along with them. Girls felt that they were not treated equally by boys because of their gender.

The biggest barrier for over school age young people participating in sport was cost. They told the researchers that they like gyms and would go if it was not for the cost.

The research report described leaving school as a “cliff edge for sport and for general involvement in social activities and clubs.” Young people who leave school no longer have access to the sports facilities that their peers enjoy and this coupled with the effects of poverty mean they are less likely to access sport. Lifestyle barriers kick in and the activities they report as their most common forms of leisure include “hanging out”, drinking together, smoking and in many cases taking drugs. Older teenagers placed a high priority on working and job security. The research found that young parenting also acts as a limit on young people’s involvement.

Youth clubs were found to play an important role in encouraging young people to take up volunteering in sport, which leads to them becoming active in informal and formal games.

Parents

The research found that parents had a number of worries and concerns that acted as a barrier to young people participating in sport. Parents worried about:

- area conditions and the level of supervision;
- clubs catering for a wide age band (they did not want younger children mixing with older children); and
- negative influences on their children.

“Parents are keen for their children to succeed both academically and through involvement in extracurricular activities,” the report said. “They like their children being involved in sport and think it helps, but aren’t always pro-active in organising things. Also they constantly worry about safety, peer pressure, older influences, drugs, etc.”

Some parents expressed an interest in volunteering, but could not commit due to childcare responsibilities and irregular working hours. They are grateful when other parents take on organising roles in successful clubs.

The local area

The research team found that the biggest public service problem was a lack of supervision of parks open spaces and streets. “Open areas are not well maintained, and parents are fearful of letting their children use public spaces,” the report said. The research also said that charges for leisure centres and sports facilities were too high for young adults over the age of 18.

The research found there was a stigma attached to large council estates as well as ethnically diverse city centres. Drugs, alcohol and anti-social behaviour were a common problem in the areas analysed. In some areas low level gang activity was deterring young people spending time outdoors and deterring parents for letting their children join informal street games.

The definition of local community was too narrow which limited young people’s involvement. The report said: “If sports facilities, clubs and parks are even half a mile away, this may be considered too far, the wrong postcode, or threatening. Area-based activity within concentrated poverty areas is therefore extremely important.”

There was also a general lack of awareness amongst young people of what sporting activities were available to them locally.

Barriers to participation

The report identifies three sets of barriers that prevent young people in deprived areas accessing sport:

- **Individual barriers:** peer influence; debt and cost; sports clubs being ‘too formal’; fear of judgement; fear of dropping out of if they feel they are not ‘talented’ or good enough; influence of parental support or lack of it; lack of role models; and boredom.
- **Community level barriers:** limited opportunities when young people leave school; nothing in their ‘own patch’; perceptions of safety; drug use; a lack of awareness about what is available; and a lack of volunteers and community leaders.
- **Lifestyle barriers:** seeing friends and connecting on-line; hanging out with friends, girlfriends/boyfriends; not having local friends who want to do sport.

Case studies

While the research found that poor area conditions had a significant impact on participation in sport, it also highlighted a number of effective and successful initiatives, services and organisations that are playing a vital role in helping young people in poverty access sport and improve their life chances.

This briefing summarises some of these examples below to help local authority commissioners identify what works in promoting participation in sport in areas of poverty. LGiU would encourage readers with more time to consult the full report to appreciate the context of these interventions and the richness of the comments received from the young people, parents and professionals interacting with these services.

Lache Football Club (Lache, Chester)

The club has been successful at turning around the lives of young men, in particular football players who missed out on “going pro or semi pro”. The club relies on local volunteers who give up their time and skills. The sessions are provided free so that anyone from Lache can participate. The Chairman of the club told the researchers that even charging £1 to £2 would see the numbers instantly drop. The club has therefore attracted young people who cannot afford anything else and do not attend other social activities.

‘Box fit’ (Methyr Tydfil, Gurnos)

[Methyr Tydfil Youth Service](#) has created a hub at a local secondary school to deliver sports sessions and is also working with a housing association to organise Street Games activities. There has been a positive response to female-only ‘Box fit’ sessions for girls aged 11 to 18 in which exercises are run in the dark with disco lighting. The informal style and social approach combined with minimal lighting to reduce self-consciousness has appealed to teenage girls.

[Forsynthia Youth Project](#) (Methyr Tydfil, Gurnos)

The youth centre offers somewhere to go for young people with behavioural and mental health problems. The success of the project is based on the provision of informal sport.

Full Circle Youth and Family Project (St. Pauls, Bristol)

A community-based resource centre that gives children and young people an opportunity to get away from their day to day environment and go on residential trips. Their activities have been effective at keeping young people off the streets and ensuring they have positive role models to look up to. Black and minority ethnic residents of St Pauls make up the majority of the service users. The youth project has had to cut back on provision and activities despite there being a greater need for services, and the staff are worried about the effects of future cuts.

Sheffield Futures (Sheffield)

The charity supports young people and adults to achieve their full potential in learning, employment and life in general. Sheffield Futures has a unique model stemming from the Connexions service. The charity has community youth teams based in different areas of the city. They are a combination of city council representatives, police, health workers, prevention workers, counselling staff and Sheffield Futures staff. These teams aim to help young people stay in school, work and training and steer young people away from crime and anti-social behaviour. Providing activities at free and low cost, and having staff who understand the local area were identified as key success factors.

Every Child a Sports Person (Newham)

The programme offers all year 7 young people in Newham a range of additional sports opportunities both within the curriculum and outside of school to support their personal development and build Community resilience. A key principle of the partnership is to facilitate closer working between schools and clubs as well as engaging with clubs to give them a wider target audience to potentially attract new members.

Community Links (Newham)

A multipurpose charity that helps disadvantaged local people in Newham, now one of the UK's largest local charities. A range of sports activities are run for young people in which youth workers include sessions on sexual health and gang and gun crime awareness alongside regular activities such as playing pool. Much of the sports programmes' funding comes from corporate sponsors as local authority funding has reduced. Estate based work has been successful in building relationships of trust with families. Informality is again a key factor for success.

Recommendations

The research report makes five main recommendations:

1. “Having **more organised but informal activities** would help many more young people become involved in physical activity. One of the big successes for the young people who are most disengaged and demotivated is to take them away for outdoor pursuits and residential sessions which have a transforming effect on their behaviour, attitude and motivation. The role that outdoor pursuits can play in helping the most troubled young people is currently undervalued.”
2. “**Close supervision** of streets, parks, play areas, open spaces and clubs, is very important, particularly if informal sport is to take off and parents are to have confidence in activities, and young people themselves are going to get involved. Generally, they fear trouble and lack of supervision”
3. “There need to be **specific activities for girls**, and boys need to be directly motivated to get in to sport by making it less rigidly formal on a team basis. More effort needs to be invested in “solo” sports – jogging, cycling, swimming, skateboarding, walking - that lots of young people, male and female, enjoy, can do and talk about doing, but only like to do in social groups. These sports can be organised as group activities on an informal basis.”
4. “**Training for sport** could be offered in shorter bites so that more young people can become volunteers and helpers as they get older. This could be a way of keeping them involved.”
5. “**Targeted and government-backed area-based improvement programmes** to improve conditions make a measurable difference to all area problems – jobs, education, crime, housing, environment, social and community conditions. They should be urgently reinstated.”

The report also commented on the “shrinking amount of outdoor space” for informal games, and suggested that unsupervised public spaces should be brought back under council management.

Comment

The publication of [Moving the Goalposts](#) is timely as the Government prepares to launch its new strategy and framework for sport, with Sport England following suit and revising its delivery framework in the New Year. The Government is expected to overhaul the way funding is distributed to grassroots sports bodies, creating a framework in which resources are better directed at increasing overall levels of physical activity and promoting life chances, rather than rewarding participation for its own sake.

The research study reminds us of the powerful impact that community sport has not on the physical health of local populations but also on education outcomes, employment, crime and safety, and raising the overall condition local communities. It highlights the barriers that prevent young people living in areas of poverty accessing sport, but also gives us a glimpse of what is possible when targeted interventions tailored to the needs of local communities break down those barriers and turn around

young lives. The research highlights the need for a more needs-led, area-based and consumer-focussed approach to community sport.

The research provides a positive endorsement of the work that schools and colleges are doing to provide young people with access to free and low cost sport, as well as the impact that local authorities have when they provide free and subsidised sport and leisure to young people. But local commissioners should take note of the clear gap in sports provision for young people not in education, training and employment, and young adults aged 18 to 25.

The insight that the research provides on the barriers to girls' participation in sport is also noteworthy, and reminds commissioners of the need to develop a mixed-economy of provision that is tailored to individual needs, such as a sport that has a social element and solo sports. Encouragingly, the latest Active People Survey data reveals that significant progress has been made in narrowing the gap between men and women's participation. A key finding was that the number of women playing sport and getting active once a week, every week, has increased by 148,700 since June 2015. Linked to this, the number of women playing sport and being active is increasing at a faster rate than that of male participation. The overall gender gap has narrowed slightly, from 1.78 million to 1.73 million.

The report's overall recommendations chime with the local government sector response to the Government's consultation on the new sports strategy. Local authorities, equipped with their unique helicopter oversight of the needs of local communities coupled with increasingly more established commissioning arrangements with health and social care, have an important role to play in each of the recommended areas highlighted above. Central Government has an important enabling role and should, as the [LGA](#) have called for, do more to devolve sports funding directly to local grassroots sport programmes.

With the effectiveness of school sports provision highlighted in the research, local authorities should also look to develop effective joint arrangements with schools to ensure young people in poverty can access high quality sports grounds and facilities.

The report also identifies the importance of investing in sport as part of councils' wider preventative agendas with sport and physical activity as an important early intervention that can turn around lives and reduce demand on other key services.

Related Briefing:

[Briefing: Where next for local delivery of the Olympic legacy and community sport?](#)

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