

Sport participation and policy goals in an era of austerity

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By Dr Daniel Parnell, Senior Lecturer in Business Management at Manchester Metropolitan University and an expert in sport policy provides some reflections on his research co-authored research and special issue on sport policy and politics in an era of austerity.

Background

By its very definition austerity requires spending less money; the consequences of which hit the way in which public services are delivered. In Britain and many western countries, every aspect of public services has felt its hand, from education to health and to culture, it has penetrated deep into the coffers and psyche. But what is Austerity really? For Blyth (2013) austerity is a form of voluntary deflation in which the economy adjusts through the reduction of wages, prices and public spending in order to restore competitiveness, which is (supposedly) best achieved by the auditing of state budgets, debts and deficits. In simple terms, it involved shrinking of the state and a reduction in financial contributions to social care and other frontline services. But what of Sport? To date very little is known on the impact of austerity on sport participation. Which is ironic given that the Comprehensive Spending Review of 2010, noted that the public sector, a major stakeholder in sport would experience significantly reduced investment.

Sporting context

We do know that the reduction in public spending has had a number of impacts on sport and in-turn sport participation. Football pitch hire has increased, parallel to a reduction in maintenance. As a result, more games are postponed due to poor pitch conditions and in real terms we have **witnessed a period of decline in football participation**. Local swimming centres have faced **reduced operating times and closure** in the pursuit of centralised amalgamated facilities and in other cases transfer of ownership to private providers. Indeed, not all are losers in times of austerity. But wins come at the expense of low-income families and the socially excluded. This trend, of shifting public owned facilities towards private ownerships, has also been **observed in golf**.

New research on austerity and sport participation

Much of the research to date on the impact of sport, and policy changes has discussed the potential impact of austerity on a range of areas of sport, but little is known on the impact upon sport participation. A recent study by **Widdop and colleagues (2017)** examined sport participation levels across sociodemographic groups, between 2008-2014 (covering the onset of austerity and the London Olympics' 2012 with a participation legacy built in its policy) within the context of austerity measures taken by central government resulting in local government income and expenditure reductions. The findings highlight budgetary constraints by local government in non-discretionary services, including 'sport development and community recreation'. In the broader context, reduced finances and significant changes to public funding have meant many within sport are being **challenged to deliver more** with limited resources, **alongside having to provide evidence of their successes**. This appears to be influencing upon participation, especially within lower income communities. In this respect, the study found that policy goals associated with rising and widening participation were not met to any significant degree between 2008-2014 as engagement levels have changed little for lower income, 'hard-to-reach' groups, especially BAME groups. The study suggests this is in part due to austerity measures impacting upon local authority expenditure and the full piece of work **can be accessed here**.

Where next?

More research and evidence is necessary to bridge the gap between our understanding of the impact of austerity policies on sport participation and the creation of tangible, influencing action. There remains many unanswered questions related to the effects of austerity policy on sport participation and subsequent health consequences, community and grassroots sport, private and

third sector sport, management, sport consumption and elite sport – and the role of universities within this. Yet, whilst these gaps in knowledge require organisations to commission and researchers to complete, there also exists gaps in platforms for academics to influence. The next step must include a view to utilise our current evidence to inform and influence policy makers and policy.

End –

The research paper discussed in this article is part of a special edition by Dr Daniel Parnell (Manchester Metropolitan University), Dr Peter Millward (Liverpool John Moores University), Dr Paul Widdop, (Leeds Beckett University), Dr Neil King (Edgehill University) and Dr Anthony May (Coventry University), which will be published in the International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics in early 2018. The edition adds to [previous research on this topic](#) and seeks to extend our theoretical, policy and practitioner understanding of the impact of austerity measures on sport.