School for Public Health Research

Evaluating the health inequalities impact of free access to leisure

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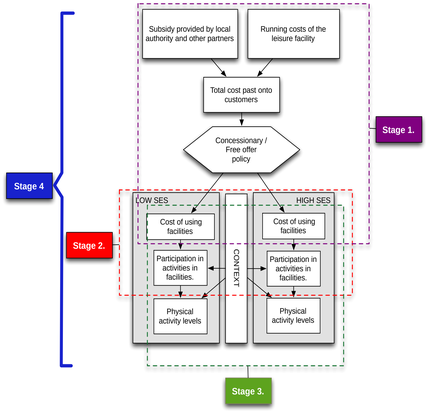
Key issues

The amount of physical activity (PA) that people undertake is important for preventing a whole range of health conditions. There is a gradient in levels of participation with lower socio-economic groups less likely to be physically active than higher socio-economic groups. Reducing or eliminating the cost to the public of using leisure facilities is one potential tool that local authorities (LA) have to reduce such inequalities.

Methods

We treated LA leisure pricing policies as a 'natural experiment' and used a combination of qualitative and quasi-experimental techniques to investigate their health inequalities impact.



Public perspectives on cost

A total of 83 adults living in 4 participating LAs were recruited at leisure centres and through community contacts. This included users and non-users of facilities, who paid in different ways (e.g. free access, pre-paid membership, pay as you go) or who used facilities at different times of the day (peak/off peak).

"I mean some of the ladies from other sessions say that if they'd never been free they would never have started exercising. It encouraged them to take part in something" (Community facilitator)

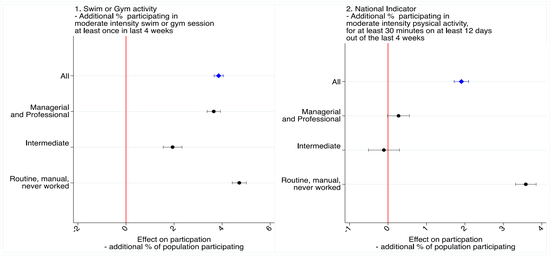
"Because the swimming is free it's an incentive for me to swim more often and sometimes I've done that 3-4 times a week. Not always, I generally do a couple of times a week but sometimes I have done sort of every other day and then the sort of £4 starts to add up a little bit don't it." (Male leisure user)

Conclusions

Many LAs are considering whether to invest ring-fenced public health budgets in leisure. This research provides evidence to inform such decisions. It found free access substantially increased participation in swim and gym activities. Larger effects were identified for swimming in children and in more deprived groups. Pricing policies that include components of free access and offer more flexible payment options are most likely to contribute to reducing inequalities in PA in disadvantaged groups.

The impact of a scheme introduced in Blackburn with Darwen (re:fresh) that provided universal free access to most activities in leisure centres. Using Interrupted Times Series and Difference in Difference analysis we found the scheme led to a 49% increase in gym and swimming activity (95%CI: 36% to 64%), an additional 3.9% of the population participating in moderate intensity gym or swim sessions in a month (95%CI 3.6 to 4.1) and an additional 1.9% of the population having at least 3 x 30 minutes of moderate physical activity per week (95%CI 1.7 to 2.1). Effects were greatest in the most disadvantaged socioeconomic groups (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The effect, by socioeconomic group of scheme introduced in Blackburn with Darwen (re:fresh) that provided free access to most activities in leisure centres. Shows the additional % of the population participating due to the scheme.



Evaluating the impact of free holiday swimming in Blackpool. Using a Difference-in-Differences analysis to compare the change in participation rates during school holidays over age groups in Blackpool to a similar local authority that did not offer free swimming, we found that the free swimming offer resulted in an additional 10% of children swimming at least once in the school holidays each year (95% CI 8 to 11%) and a total of 33 swimming attendances per 100 children (95%CI 28 to 38). Effects were greatest in the most disadvantaged socioeconomic group.

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