Barriers to Sport Participation by Economically Disadvantaged Families in the Niagara Region

Kyler Nurmsoo, Brock University
Laura Cousens (Advisor), Brock University

Socio-cultural  Friday, May 25, 2012  20-minute oral presentation
                (including questions)  (North)

Abstract 2012-228  3:15 PM

In Canada, sport participation is directly related to family income (Arai & Burke, 2007; Bloom, Grant, & Watt, 2005; Ifedi, 2008). In 2005, fewer than 20% of Canadian households that earned less than $30,000 per year regularly participated in sport (Ifedi, 2008). Contrastingly, more than 40% of households that earned over $80,000 per year participated in sport, including 55% who participated when annual family income was above $100,000 (Bloom, Grant, & Watt, 2005). This is particularly alarming in the Niagara Region of Ontario because since 2000, low income has increased annually to the point that in 2004, 14% of residents had incomes that fell below the low income cut-off line (Arai & Burke, 2007). Perhaps more concerning is that "children under 18 years appear to be at the greatest risk" (Arai & Burke, 2007, p. 8) to be in low income situations. Within the Niagara Region, 16.5% of children lived in low income families in 2005 (Kilty, 2008).

The purpose of this research was to analyze the barriers preventing parents in the Niagara Region living below the low income cut-off line from registering their child or children in sport programs. In order to determine this, two research questions were identified. First, what are the barriers preventing low income parents from registering their child or children in sport programs, and second, how do local organizations with sport participation funding programs access individuals who cannot afford to participate in sport.

This research utilized mixed methods to explore the barriers preventing parents in the Niagara Region living below the low income cut-off line from registering their child or children in sport programs. Surveys were collected from low income parents that included forty-five questions spread across four sections; general information, sport participation, barriers to sport participation, and sport funding program awareness. Seventy-nine surveys were collected from February–March 2011. The data collected from these surveys was inputted into and analyzed using SPSS. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of local organizations with sport participation funding programs. The interviews were, on average, fifty minutes long including a briefing of informed consent and interview structure with each interviewee. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were then coded to uncover common themes between the organizations.

The findings revealed that children in low income families do not meet suggested daily physical activity levels of participation. Low income parents face a number of significant barriers that prevent them from registering their child or children in sport programs. Not surprising given the researched demographic, the highest barrier to participation was financial constraints. However, the second highest barrier to participation, transportation, featured the highest standard deviation of the twelve barriers surveyed. This suggests that families who do not have access to transportation rate this barrier as being on par with or higher than financial constraints. The surveys revealed that low income parents are generally unaware of the existence of sport participation funding programs, and those who are aware did not normally attempt to access this funding.

The interview component of this research also revealed a number of common themes among the participant organizations. For instance, the self-evaluation of brand recognition by the organizations interviewed directly related to the awareness of funding programs exhibited through the parent surveys. Similarly, organizations with sport participation funding programs faced the common problem of general awareness of their funding programs. The organizations revealed their common desire to have more families and individuals access their funding programs, citing an excess of available funds to subsidize registration fees.

The primary conclusion drawn from this research was that while financial constraints are the highest barrier preventing parents in the Niagara Region living below the low income cut-off line from registering their child or
children in sport programs, funding is available to subsidize registration fees. However, the organizations that distribute this funding are not sufficiently visible to families and therefore are not being optimally utilized.