Beyond the Host Nation: An Exploration of Trickle-Down Effects in the “Hometowns” of Canadian Athletes Who Medaled at London 2012

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Trickle-down effects (TDE) refer to a mega-sport event’s capacity to increase sport and/or physical activity levels within host populations (Taks et al., 2014). These effects have been linked with athletic performances/medals (Hogan & Norton, 2000), and may be most prominent among younger populations (Wicker & Sotiriadou, 2013). To date, explorations of TDE have only focused on the extent to which participation increases within host nations (e.g., Kokolakakis et al., 2018). We investigate whether TDE can be observed outside host nations in the hometowns of athletes that win medals. People from outside a host nation can be inspired to participate as they watch athletes win medals (Potwarka et al., 2017). Moreover, local media cover stories of hometown athletes that compete and win medals. Our purpose was to explore evidence of TDE among youth residing in the hometowns (health regions) of Canadian athletes who won medals at the London 2012 Olympic Games.

A total of 50 athletes from 26 health regions in Canada won medals at London 2012. Leisure-time physical activity (LTPA) rates of females and males, aged 12-19, were extracted from the Canadian Community Health Survey 2009-2010 (pre-Olympic period; n = 1,007,499); 2011-2012 (Olympic period; n = 1,041,552); and 2013-2014 (post-Olympic period; n = 1,037,017). Respondents were classified as “moderately active to active” based on an index of average daily PA over the past three months (1.5 kcal/kg/day or more was defined as being “moderately active to active”). Time-series analyses were employed to test if there had been significant changes over time in the proportions of females and males classified as being “moderately active to active” in each of the 26 health regions.

Proportions of female youth classified as moderately active to active increased significantly in Toronto center between 2011-2012 (72.%) and 2013-2014 (86.7%) (z = 2.05, p <.05); and in Victoria between 2009-2010 (44.2%) and 2011-2012 (71.3%) (z = 2.05, p <.05). Proportions of male youth classified as moderately active to active increased significantly in Vancouver from 2011-2012 (74.8%) to 2013-2014 (87.2%) (z = 2.05, p <.05); the South East health region from 2009-2010 (71.7%) to 2011-2012 (87.1%) (z = 2.05, p <.05); and in Lambton from 2009-2010 (64.7%) to 2011-2012 (91.8%) (z = 2.05, p <.05). Although not statistically significant, increases in LTPA were observed in an additional 16 of the 26 health regions over at least one of the time-periods under investigation.

Results suggest that potential TDE were most prominent in medalists’ hometowns that were large densely populated urban areas, and much smaller, less densely populated rural areas. Interestingly, multiple medalists lived in each of the large urban regions that experienced significant increases in LTPA (Toronto, Vancouver, Victoria). However, only one medalist lived in each of the small rural regions that experienced significant increases in LTPA (South east, Lambton). Unlike previous research (Wicker & Frick, 2016), no clear athlete-youth gender patterns emerged in the data. Future research should test the causal relationship between the experience of consuming the Games in these health regions and changes in LTPA.