What factors predict participation in a mass community physical activity programme?

The case of the five Sheffield “parkruns”

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Background

• “Parkruns” are weekly community based 5k running/walking events run by volunteers.

• Nationally, over 100,000 people participate every Saturday morning

• In Sheffield alone, over 1200 people currently participate every week

• BUT…..the five events run in Sheffield attract very different numbers of participants

• This study explored factors that affect participation across the five Sheffield parkrun events
Methods (1)

- Structured observations were performed at the five ParkRun events in Sheffield, and combined with quantitative data on participants and neighbourhood characteristics for each location.

- Two observers completed a structured observation at each of the ParkRuns in Sheffield to further understand factors such as:
  - Features of the local environment location and ParkRun course
  - Attendees - who they are and what they do
  - Organisation of the event at different phases
  - Participant Experience
Methods (2)

- To supplement the observational data, a snapshot of the participation statistics was recorded on the same day using the data on the ParkRun website.
- Data collected for each of the five ParkRuns included –
  - Total participation rates
  - Affiliation to a Running Club
  - Total number of volunteers
  - Age and gender distribution
  - ‘New’ Park Runners
  - Social media activity
Quantitative – Index of Multiple Deprivation

Most deprived

1  820  4,103

Sheffield Castle
Participants: 65

Sheffield Concord
Participants: 100

Least deprived

20,027  26,069  29,866  32,844

Hillsborough
Participants: 263

Sheffield Hallam
Participants: 668

Graves
Participants: 234
Quantitative – Age & Gender
Qualitative results

• Although, the parkruns differed little procedurally, a large difference in participant experience was observed between the events.

• A number of factors caused these differences
  – Number of participants
  – Parkrun location
  – Parkrun setting
  – Volunteers
  – Participants
Qualitative results

• The key differences noticed between the larger and smaller parkruns were
  – The larger parkruns had an increased degree of anonymity and sense of competition for runners
  – Whereas the smaller parkruns had a greater sense of community and social engagement
Implications for practice

• There is a risk that these types of events are “inequalities generating interventions”, because those who could benefit most do not participate.

• It is not enough to encourage the setting up of “Parkrun” and similar mass participation events in deprived neighbourhoods, without understanding what would encourage the local community to participate.

• We need to explore different ways to attract more participants to events like parkrun whilst preserving the perceived benefits of smaller, non-competitive events, that may promote community ownership and engagement.
Any questions?

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Issues for discussion

What more do you think could be done to…….

• Increase participation (especially underrepresented groups such as BME communities)?

• Increase volunteering?

• Increase wider community involvement?

• Ensure regular events are sustainable?