Sport drop-out during Adolescence: is it real, or an artefact of sampling behaviour?

Rochelle Eime, Jack Harvey and Melanie Charity

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**Background:** Understanding sport participation and drop-out are important for sport management.

Many children sample or play multiple sports before specialising. Therefore, the significant drop-out during adolescence could be due to this sampling phenomenon. That is, children play multiple sports and are counted multiple times across different sports, and then specialise or play fewer as they move through adolescence.

**Aims/Methods:** The aim of this study was to examine whether the drop-off in sport participation during adolescence is due to this ‘sampling to specialisation’ effect or due to a drop-out from sport altogether.

We analysed participants (n=907,150) who were registered with one of 11 state sporting associations. The number of players were estimated using demographic matching, comparing numbers of registrations and number of individual players across age, sex and region.

**Results:** The effect of individuals playing multiple sports was highest for those aged 5-14, and then declined as specialisation increased. However, this study confirms that the drop-off in community sport during adolescence persists, and it is not just attributed to the sampling-specialisation behaviour.

From the peak of participation in the 10-14 year age group, the participation rate halves for the next age group 15-19 years.

**Conclusion:** Sampling is positive for skill development in children and young people, and for continued participation, however many individuals during adolescence drop-out of sport. This study confirms that the drop-off in sport during adolescence and into early adulthood is real, and is not simply the effect of sampling.

Considering the magnitude of the drop-out rates in sport, sport policy should specifically prioritise retention in sport, and not simply focus on increasing annual total participation numbers. This requires a longitudinal approach to the monitoring and reporting of participation data.

**Contact:**
Professor Rochelle Eime: r.eime@federation.edu.au
sportandrecreationspatial.com.au