

Physical Activity in the UK:

How do we compare – and how can we tell?

Introduction

It is becoming increasingly recognised that levels of physical inactivity in the UK are not only too low, but are also potentially contributing to the growing health crisis.

As a result, there have been successive government strategies and national initiatives to increase participation in physical activity of any kind - whether exercise, sport or just general activity such as walking and cycling.

These have often run alongside parallel efforts sector bodies, such as NGBs, to increase interest in their particular sports.

However, despite the sector’s best efforts, there has been limited rise in physical activity participation.

There are many reasons for this, which go beyond the remit of sport and physical activity. Participation is a behaviour, and is therefore affected by many cultural, social, physical and psychological factors.

However, one question that is also relevant in analysing this challenge is how we compare to other similar nations. Are we any more or less active than other countries? Do we have more inactive people than similar nations?

In other words, is this a problem specific to the UK or are other countries also facing these issues?

We therefore thought it might be interesting to carry out a comparison with similar countries. This would give an indication as whether this is a problem specific to the UK, or whether it is part of a wider cultural and social problem which exists in other developed countries with similar social and cultural structures. .

**A global problem?**

Increased emphasis on obesity and physical inactivity from global bodies (such as the World Health Organisation) would indicate that low levels of physical activity are a common problem in many countries.

Whilst finding detailed information is difficult, nearly 196 countries now have at least one survey on physical activity. In 2013 alone, papers on physical activity were published from 105 countries, indicating that this is a problem that is increasingly being recognised across the globe.

There are therefore a number of data sources which are available and can be used to assist research in this area.

**Global data sources**

In putting together this comparison, a number of different sources were used, as follows:

* **National Domestic Surveys –** as stated above, most countries now have trialled or implemented surveys on physical activity. These are either “stand alone” reference documents from the sector itself (eg the USA’s Physical Activity Council’s “ Participation Report”) or they form part of a government led survey on health (eg England’s Health Survey for England, or the Canadian Health Measures Survey).
* **Europe-wide Survey –** the Eurobarometer Survey on Sport and Physical Activity is carried out every 7 years and provides data and trend analysis on sport and physical activity across the 28 EU Member States.
* **Global Surveys:**
  + **The Global Observatory for Physical Activity -** the Global Observatory for Physical Activity (GOPA) was established in 2014, in part as a response to a growing worldwide awareness of physical inactivity.

Among other activities, GOPA collects and collates information on physical inactivity in all countries across the world. This information is then released in the form of “Physical Activity Country Cards”, which are country-specific profiles of physical activity, with a common set of indicators and sources of information.

GOPA then observes and follows each country’s status, to help encourage and improve physical activity levels.

* + **The World Health Organisation –** the WHO produces information and fact sheets on physical activity, which includes specific country Factsheets and Profiles. It also produces publications in conjunction with other bodies, such as the European Commission.

**Key findings**

The table overleaf summarises the key findings from a collation of the different types of survey.

**Current national position**

The Health Survey for England 2012 classed **22.5%** of adults as “inactive”[[1]](#footnote-1).

In 2014, UKActive publshed an extensive analysis of the data from Sport England’s Active People Survey for the period up to January 2013. Their analysis found that **25%** of over 16 year olds in England could be classed as “physically inactive”[[2]](#footnote-2).

The Eurobarometer Survey provides data only for the UK as a whole[[3]](#footnote-3). This states that **35%** of UK adults never exercise or play sport, whilst **23%** do not engage in other physical activity.

**Comparisons against other European Countries**

As can be seen from the Eurobarometer Survey results[[4]](#footnote-4), the UK’s percentage of those who never exercise or play sport (35%) is better the European average (of 42%).

It is also better than the percentage in France, Spain and Italy. Of the five selected EU Member States, only Germany has a lower percentage than the UK (29%).

Likewise, only 23% of the UK population never takes part in other physical activity, comparably favourably both to the European average (30%) and to those of France, Spain and Italy. Again, of the five selected Member States, only Germany scores better (14%).

For Spain, the WHO / EC Country profile puts the percentage of Spain’s population who are “sedentary”[[5]](#footnote-5) as significantly higher than England, at **41.3%.**

For France, Germany and Italy there were no direct figures for the percentage of the population who might be inactive.

However, the WHO / EC Physical Activity Factsheets for Germany states that **39%** of adults reached the recommended physical activity levels in 2012. The equivalent Factsheet for France states that, **45%** of adults reached the recommended physical activity levels in 2006-2007[[6]](#footnote-6).

For Italy, no direct figures on inactivity were available. However, the WHO Physical Activity & Health in Europe: Evidence for Action document[[7]](#footnote-7) shows that **26%** of adults in Italy were classed as “sufficiently active”.

It would not be accurate to assume that the inverse percentage of these figures denote those who are inactive, but it does give an idea of the proportion which might be.

**Comparison against global countries**

The UK compares favourably to the USA in terms of the percentage of adults who are inactive.

The USA Physical Activity Council 2015 Participation Report[[8]](#footnote-8) shows that **28.3%** of the population were defined as “inactive”[[9]](#footnote-9). (Worryingly, this included children down to the age of 6).

The Australian Health Survey 2011-2013 found that **20%** of adults were classed as “inactive”[[10]](#footnote-10).

In contrast, New Zealand was found to have a much lower percentage than both the USA or the UK, with only **14%** being physically inactive[[11]](#footnote-11).

The national domestic survey for Canada does not directly measure inactivity, but instead focus on the percentage who are deemed to be active. The Canadian Health Measures Survey 2012-2013 found that only 20% of adults met the recommended amount of physical activity set out in the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines[[12]](#footnote-12).

As with Italy, France and Germany, this figure does not mean that the inverse percentage (80%) are inactive, but it does give some indication of the proportion which might be inactive.

**Comparisons using GOPA “Country Cards”**

As stated above, GOPA Country Cards do not measure “inactivity” *per se* – instead, for each country, they provide data on the “prevalence of activity”. This is defined as ***the* *percentage of the population who are achieving the recommended or sufficient amounts of physical activity per week*.**

Looking at how England[[13]](#footnote-13) compares to the other selected nations in this definition, it would appear that England ranks slightly below average, at 59%. (The average across all nine countries would be 63%).

This is significantly lower than the highest country ranking (Germany at 79%), but higher than the two lowest, Australia and New Zealand (at 43% and 52% respectively).

**SUMMARY OVERVIEW OF SURVEYS**



**Conclusions**

For the reasons specified below, it is inadvisable to draw too many concrete deductions from the above data. However, some broad conclusions can be made:

* **Firstly,** inactivity in the general population is clearly not just a UK problem. We are not alone in facing this challenge - similar developed nations record comparable or higher levels of inactivity.
* **Secondly,** and encouragingly, the UK is by no means the least active nation. It compares favourably to countries in its direct peer group region of Europe, and to similar global nations in North America and Australasia.
* **Thirdly,** and perhaps most significantly, no clear conclusions can be drawn until clear, consistent and unifying metrics are adopted. A single data collection system, with a clear objective and consistent survey mechanisms, rolled out across the globe, is required to adequately assess and analyse where each country stands in such a vital but complex area.

**A final thought**

As stated above, physical inactivity is a behaviour and is therefore affected by many factors. The reasons for increasing physical inactivity, particularly in economically advanced and developed nations, will therefore be many and complex.

However, one theory is that the economic nature of developed nations in itself reduces physical activity. For example, a common model looking at the economic development of nations splits the process into three broad stages: Agriculture, Industry and Services. As nations develop, they progress from a society based largely on Agriculture to an economy powered by Industry. Finally, the proportion of their resources spent on Industry decreases, and employment in Services becomes much larger.

One result of this is that the population becomes less active – simply because their everyday employment is spent in less active roles (Services are more sedentary and less physically active than either Agriculture or Industry).

This means that we can no longer assume that people will be active through their jobs. As a result, to retain a certain level of activity in their lifestyle, they have to choose to be active in their leisure time.

But at the same time, the technological advanced nature of developed societies promotes sedentary behaviour, particularly in relation to leisure time, with the majority of people choosing to relax through their television, tablets or video games.

So governments find themselves faced with a “double whammy”, where both the employment and leisure time of their populations encourages sedentary behaviour.

Furthermore, if this is a side effect of economic development, it may be the first time that governments have had to face this problem.

No wonder it’s hard to find a solution.

**Alex Scott-Bayfield MA (Hons), MCIMPSA, FRSA  
Director, Sportsgroup**

**December 2015**

**A quick word on global comparisons**

Despite the increasing amounts of information, straightforward comparisons between countries on physical activity levels are not easy.

* **Firstly,** despite the increased work by many organisations in this area, it is nearly impossible to get data for every country. The vast majority of papers and data in this area come from a small number of countries, and only a minority of countries maintain continuous surveillance.
* **Secondly**, survey objectives, data collection and methodologies vary hugely from country to country. This is particularly the case when it comes to what data is being collected. For example:
  + **National Domestic Surveys** differ in what data they are collecting. The surveys can range from the specific percentage of the population reaching the recommended WHO physical activity levels, to simply recording those who are doing less than 30 mins physical activity per week.
  + The **Eurobarometer Survey** looks at *how many citizens NEVER exercise, play sport, or do other kinds of physical activity.* Thus this provides a specific percentage of how many citizens are inactive for each country.
  + The **GOPA statistics** look at the “prevalence of physical activity”, defined as *the* *percentage of the population who are achieving the recommended or sufficient amounts of physical activity per week*. This gives a percentage of how many citizens are deemed to be ACTIVE, but not of those who are inactive.
* **Thirdly,** many countries have different definitions of “physically active” or “inactive”. For example, some countries define “physically active” as meeting the WHO requirement for amount of physical activity per week. However, some have their own national guidelines, or their own definitions for “inactive”.

In addition, they often have different definitions of “adult”, with some meaning “18 years and older”, some meaning “16 years and older” and some meaning “15 years and older” .

* **Fourthly,** no two countries are identical, whether in terms of population size, land area, economic standing or social make up. For this paper, we have selected a number of countries which we feel are the most similar to the UK in terms of social and cultural values, and most comparable to the UK in relevant aspects, such as population size, GDP and economic development.

However, as stated above, participation in physical activity will always be affected by many issues including social conventions, cultural backgrounds and demographic make up. There could therefore be many reasons where two countries, however similar on paper, will not have the same levels of participation. This makes drawing any broad conclusions difficult.

* **Finally,** any survey will always have a problem with accuracy – this is true of even the smallest local surveys. So it is even more so in a global survey which ranges across different societies, cultures, and languages.

This is particularly the case where a survey is relying on “self-reporting” – or asking participants to provide their opinion of how much exercise they do – rather than objective measures. (An example of this is the Health Survey for England. In the 2008 HSE, physical activity was measured by means of a questionnaire. 39% of men and 29% of women reported that they met the recommended minimum level of physical activity. However, when accelerometers were used on a group to measure their physical activity objectively, the real percentages were actually 6% and 4%. )

It is therefore important to remember that without a common baseline, a uniform measuring system or consistent metrics, there will always be problems with the accuracy and reliability of surveys.

1. Health Survey for England 2012, Chapter 2, para 2.3.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. UKActive, Turning the Tide of inactivity, 2014, p11 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As stated above, the Eurobarometer Survey does not split the findings into the Home Nations, unlike others. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Eurobarometer Report 412, Sport & Physical Activity Survey, March 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. WHO/EC Country Profile on Nutrition, Physical Activity & Obesity p3 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. WHO/EC Germany Physical Activity Factsheet. WHO/EC France Physical Activity Factsheet [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. WHO Physical Activity & Health in Europe: Evidence for Action document, p9 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See <http://physicalactivitycouncil.com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Defined as “those participants who report no physical activity in 2014 or participation in sports/fitness activities which require minimal or no physical exertion”. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Australian Health Survey: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/D4495467B7F7EB01CA257BAC0015F593?opendocument> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Health and Independence Report 2015, New Zealand Ministry of Health [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Statistics Canada: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-625-x/2015001/article/14135-eng.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. GOPA does not provide a Country Card for the UK as a whole, but splits them amoung the Home Nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)