

Physical activity and quality of life



Introduction

Life satisfaction is defined as a cognitive appraisal of a person's life. It is an important policy area in the UK, as life satisfaction measures are used to assess the population's quality of life. Measures of life satisfaction can be used to target policies effectively, determine the effects of policy changes, and compare quality of life across and within countries.

A recent report by the Office of National Statistics found that in Great Britain, women reported higher life satisfaction than men, but they also reported higher levels of anxiety. There have been mixed findings

regarding wellbeing and gender around the world, although on the whole the women are typically more satisfied with their lives than men.

This briefing paper uses data from Next Steps (previously known as the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England) to compare life satisfaction of men and women at age 20. In particular, it explores factors related to life satisfaction, such as physical activity. As exercise is known to help improve both physical and mental health, and subjective wellbeing, there are clearly potential policy implications to encourage physical activity.

Key findings

After controlling for cohort members' family social class, income, education, health, ethnicity and employment status, it was found that:

- At age 20, men were more likely to exercise – an 89 per cent chance compared to 72 per cent for women¹.
- Women were slightly more likely than men to report feeling satisfied with their lives at this age – an 82 per cent chance compared to 79 per cent for men.

- Regularly exercising at age 20 increases the likelihood of reporting feeling satisfied with one's life for both men and women.

Those who exercised regularly had an 81 per cent chance of reporting feeling satisfied with their lives, compared to only 76 per cent for people who exercise less than once a week.

- The gender gap in life satisfaction may be reduced by physical activity, and exercising at least once a week at age 20 has a greater positive impact on men's life satisfaction than women's.
- The longer people have been exercising regularly, the more likely they are to report feeling satisfied with their lives. This increase in life satisfaction is greater for men than women, but it does not close the gender gap in life satisfaction entirely.

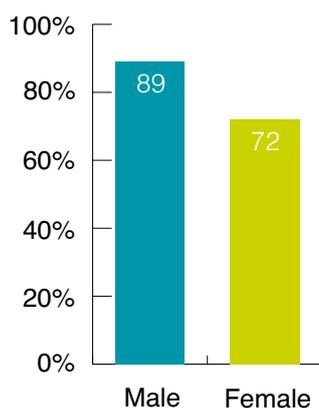
Findings²

Physical activity drives the gender gap

There was no significant difference in life satisfaction between men and women when controlling for family social class, income, education, health, ethnicity and employment status (not shown).

However, once frequency of exercise at age 20 is taken into account,

FIGURE 1:
Likelihood of exercising at least once a week at age 20, by gender



women were significantly more likely to be satisfied than men. At age 20, women's chances of being satisfied with their lives were 3 percentage points higher than men's.

This emerging gender difference is likely driven by differences in physical activity.

Figure 1 shows that at age 20, men were far more likely to exercise at least once a week than women. Figure 2 shows that exercise is positively linked with life satisfaction. Those who were exercising more regularly at age 20 had an 81 per cent chance of being satisfied with life, while those who exercised irregularly had a 76 per cent chance.

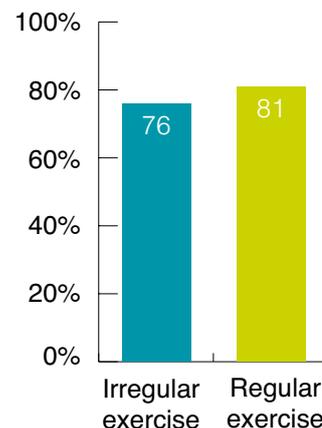
How often you exercise matters

Figure 3 shows that those who got weekly exercise at age 20 were more satisfied with their lives than those who were physically active less often. The benefits of weekly physical

activity were also greater for men than women.

Moreover, the results suggest that exercise reduces the life satisfaction gender gap. While there is a 6 percentage point difference between men and women who do not exercise regularly, there is only a 2 percentage point difference between men and women who do.

FIGURE 2:
Likelihood of reporting feeling satisfied with life at age 20 after controlling for gender, by frequency of exercise



Measuring life satisfaction and physical activity

This briefing paper uses information from 5,487 men and women born in 1989-90 who are taking part in Next Steps. It relates their reports of life satisfaction at age 20 to information collected about their lives and their physical activity from ages 14 to 20.

Life satisfaction

At age 20, participants were asked to rate how satisfied they were with their lives so far, on a 5-point scale ranging from 'very satisfied' to 'very dissatisfied'.

Cohort members were grouped into those who were satisfied, including 'very satisfied' and 'satisfied' responses, and those who were not satisfied, including 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied', 'dissatisfied' and 'very dissatisfied'.

Physical activity

Cohort members have been asked how often they take part in physical activity at ages 14, 15, 17, 19, and 20. The response options were: 'most days', 'more than once a week', 'once a week', 'less than once a week', 'hardly ever' and 'never'.

Men and women were grouped into two categories: those who reported

exercising at least once a week and those who exercised less than once a week. Approximately 80 per cent of respondents were in the first category of regular exercisers at age 20.

If a cohort member had exercised at least once a week consistently through their teenage and early adult years, they were categorised as 'persistent' exercisers. Those who reported exercising weekly for three or four years were categorised as 'regular' exercisers, and those who only exercised weekly for two years or less were grouped as 'infrequent' exercisers.

FIGURE 3:
Likelihood of reporting feeling satisfied with life at age 20, by gender and frequency of exercise

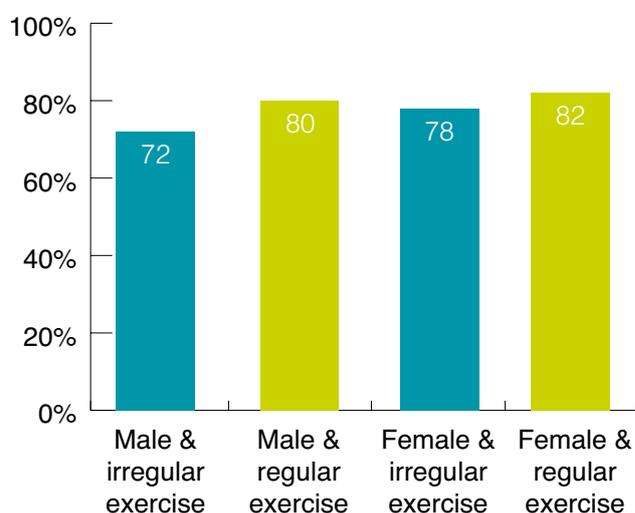
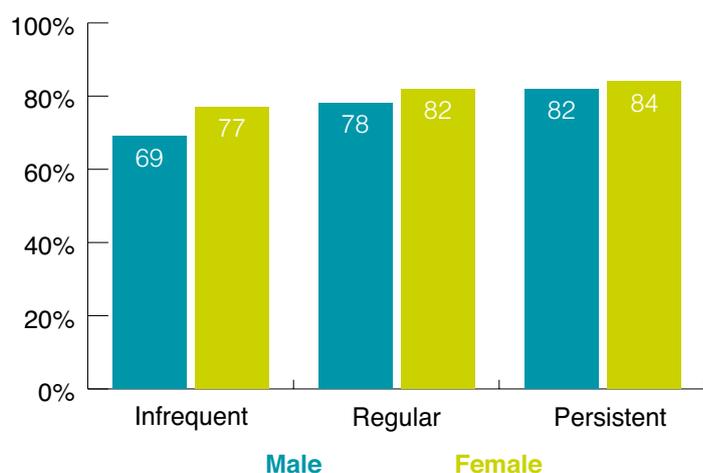


FIGURE 4:
Life satisfaction by frequency of exercise across adolescence and gender



Long-term exercise habits

Figure 4 indicates that men and women who reported exercising persistently throughout adolescence were more likely to report feeling satisfied at age 20 than those who exercised only regularly or infrequently during adolescence.

This difference was larger for men than women. The likelihood of infrequent exercisers reporting feeling satisfied with their lives at age 20 was 69 per cent for men and 77 per cent for women. This increased by 9 percentage points for men when they exercise regularly, but only 5 percentage points for women.

Discussion

Not only does exercise bring physical benefits to the body, but it is also shown to be positively associated with mental health, self-esteem and wellbeing. Sport and exercise also provide a means to build and maintain social relationships, which may in turn improve life satisfaction.

Previous research has highlighted some possible explanations for the gender difference in physical activity. Sport has typically been seen as a masculine activity, and men have been found to be consistently more active than women across the life course. There is also some evidence that girls are less likely to be encouraged to play sports in schools.

The greater benefits of physical activity for men may be explained by the strain of breaking gender norms. There may be a double disadvantage for inactive men, first as a result of not receiving the health benefits of physical activity, and second as a result of the strain of not conforming to how men 'should' be.

Footnote

- 1 100 per cent is the maximum probability that something will happen.
- 2 All findings are based on the unweighted sample and control for ethnicity, family social class, family income, family education, the young person's current activity and young person's health problem or disability.

Implications

This paper contributes to the body of research highlighting the importance of exercise. Policymakers should raise awareness of the large gender differences in sports participation, and improve young people's opportunities to participate in sports.

Childhood and adolescence are key points in forming lifelong exercise habits. Policy could focus on reducing the perception that

sport is masculine and ensure that both genders are equally encouraged to take part in sports.

However, policies that target these age groups need to be carefully implemented. Previous research suggests that if young people feel exercise is forced upon them, this deters them from taking part in sports as adults. Instead, young people could be encouraged to take

ownership over their physical activity by providing them with a choice over types of exercise they do.

More research is needed into how and why physical activity is connected to life satisfaction. Future work should investigate the types of physical activity that best improve life satisfaction, for example whether team sports are more beneficial than individual sports.

About Next Steps

Next Steps (previously known as the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England) is following the lives of around 16,000 people born in 1989-90.

The study began in 2004, when the cohort members were aged 13/14, and collected information about their education and employment, economic circumstances, family life, physical and emotional health and wellbeing, social participation, and attitudes for seven consecutive years.

In 2015, 7,707 cohort members took part in the Age 25 Sweep. This eighth sweep of the cohort broadened the scientific remit and value of the study, collecting information on health, education, employment, family formation, and wellbeing.

Data from the study have been linked to National Pupil Database records, which include the cohort members' individual scores at Key Stage 2, 3 and 4. Other administrative linkages are also planned.

Research based on Next Steps has had a significant impact on UK policy, in areas such as educational funding, bullying and educational trajectories. It will continue to provide a vital source of evidence for policymakers and researchers addressing social challenges for years to come.

The first seven waves of the study were managed and funded by the Department for Education. In 2013, Next Steps was transferred to the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies. The Age 25 Sweep was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

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