

Article Title

The community inclusion of athletes with intellectual disability: a transnational study of the impact of participating in Special Olympics

Article Citation

McConkey R & Menke S (2020). The community inclusion of athletes with intellectual disability: a transnational study of the impact of participating in Special Olympics. *Sport in Society*, DOI: 10.1080/17430437.2020.1807515

Adaptive Sports/Recreation Topic Categories

- Participation in Sports/Recreation

Study Type

- Cross-sectional study

Summary

People with intellectual disability (ID) experience social exclusion in many aspects of community life. Many recent efforts have been focused on promoting the inclusion of individuals with disabilities like the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Special Olympics (SO) has always aimed to promote inclusion of people with ID through sports. Recently SO has introduced 'Unified Sports' where athletes with ID are matched with non-disabled people. This study aimed to address three main questions: How do the levels of community inclusion reported by Special Olympic athletes compare to their non-disabled partners in Unified Sports? Do athletes involved in Unified Sports experience greater community inclusion than athletes taking part in traditional, segregated Special Olympic activities? Does the extent of athletes' inclusion in sports affect their inclusion within local communities?

690 athletes with ID in traditional SO (with other peers with ID), 293 athletes in 'Unified Sports' SO, and 226 non-disabled partners in 'Unified Sports' were recruited. A 10-item measure of community inclusion and a 10-item measure of sports inclusion were completed by the participants. There were no significant differences in community inclusion experienced by athletes in Unified Sports or traditional SO activities, but both demonstrated significantly greater social exclusion ($p < 0.001$) and sports exclusion ($p < 0.05$) than their non-disabled partners. Additionally, the odds that non-disabled partners were more likely to report greater community inclusion than athletes in Unified Sports or traditional SO games were over four times greater. Those who experienced greater inclusion in sports were over three times greater odds to have higher community inclusion than those who had lower inclusion in sports. Furthermore, community inclusion of respondents varied significantly on characteristics such as age, self-rated health, living with parents, country region and when they had joined SO. Regression analysis also demonstrated that athletes < 20 years reported greater community inclusion than those aged ≥ 30 years, and those living with parents were less likely to be included in communities.

Although the study confirmed that people with ID experience more social exclusion than those who are non-disabled, the expected advantage for athletes in 'Unified Sports' to experience greater community inclusion than those in traditional SO was not found.

Article strengths

- This study identified variables that were associated with greater community inclusion
- This study confirmed that people with ID experience more community and sports exclusion than those without disabilities
- Large sample size
- Use of validated measure of community inclusion with established reliability

Article Weakness

- A convenience sample of athletes who participated in national and international events may introduce sampling bias
- The community inclusion questionnaire items made mention of friends, but did not distinguish whether friends were people with disabilities or people with no disability
- Unspecified psychometrics for the measure of sports inclusion

Take Home Messages

- Athletes with ID experience greater community and sports exclusion compared to those without disabilities
- Inclusion in sport contributes to the wider community inclusion of both athletes with and without intellectual disabilities.
- Sports can be a way in which social networks and community participation of people with ID can be enhanced
- Further research is needed to identify the most effective conditions in producing social inclusion; including the athletes' characteristics and the attitudes/values of the coaches as well as the strategies they use

Impacts on Clinical Practice

- Participation in sports should be considered to enhance inclusion of individuals with disabilities
- Age and living situation (with parents) should be considered when thinking about community inclusion of individuals with disabilities