

The status of active after-school clubs among primary school children in England (UK) after the COVID-19 lockdowns: implications for policy and practice

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Abstract

Background

Children's physical activity in England is more dependent on active clubs after the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is unclear how the COVID-19 pandemic and related cost-of-living crisis have impacted on active club participation, costs and provision. This mixed-methods natural experiment explored school-based and community-based active clubs after lockdowns, using a unique combination of data sources to highlight implications for policy and practice post-COVID-19.

Methods

Cross-sectional questionnaire data on school and community active clubs were collected from 10-11-year-old children pre-COVID-19 in 2017-18 (N = 1,296; 50 schools), in 2021 (N = 393; 23 schools), and 2022 (N = 463; 27 schools). Club participation and attendance frequency were modelled using logistic and Poisson mixed effects models, adjusted for child age, gender and household education. In 2021 and 2022, parents reported expenditure on community-based clubs and schools provided data on school-based club provision, with data summarised descriptively. Qualitative data were collected in 2021 and 2022, with one-to-one interviews with school staff (N = 18) and parents (N = 43), and twelve child focus groups (N = 92), and analysed using the framework method.

Results

School-based active club participation was higher in 2022 compared to pre-pandemic (50% /43%), while community-based club participation was lower (74%/80%). Children attended 0.3 fewer clubs per week. Those from lower education households were less likely to participate in both types of active clubs, and girls less likely to attend community clubs. In 2022, the median cost of community and school club sessions were £6.67 and £3.88 respectively, with 52% of school-based clubs free to parents. Schools offered an average of 3.4 active clubs per week for 10-11-year-olds in 2022, with 34% partly/wholly subsidised. Qualitative analysis highlighted the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and COVID-19 pandemic on family resources, encouraging a shift to more affordable and convenient school-based active clubs, which negatively impacted the community-based active club environment. However, many schools struggled to meet this increased demand.

Conclusions

Findings emphasise the importance for policymakers to support schools to meet increased demand for clubs and community clubs to increase affordable and convenient physical activity opportunities. Targeted support is needed to prevent socioeconomic and gender inequalities.

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