BALTIC JOURNAL OF SPORT & HEALTH SCIENCES
6(Supplement 2); 2025; p. 7; eISSN 2538-8347
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33607/bjshs.v6iSupplement2.2113

Exploring the Demographic Gaps in 'Ireland Lights Up' for a More Sustainable Approach

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Purpose: Sports clubs are increasingly recognised as valuable settings for health promotion, extending their impact beyond traditional sporting populations. Walking initiatives like 'Ireland Lights Up' (ILU) engage communities in physical activity, but evidence on their long-term impact remains limited. Despite the growing adoption of the health-promoting sports club (HPSC) model, research evaluating the reach of walking initiatives in these settings, particularly in terms of participant characteristics, is lacking. This study will assess the demographic characteristics of individuals involved in ILU, comparing participants, non-participants, and the target population, with a focus on underserved groups. Additionally, it will explore participant and stakeholder perceptions and expectations related to reach.

Methods: Utilising a hybrid type-two effectiveness–implementation design, based on the RE-AIM framework, qualitative data were collected through observational site visits in implementing clubs (n = 10) and snapshot semi-structured interviews with participants (n = 30). Quantitative data were obtained through participant questionnaires distributed to all ILU-participating clubs over a five-week period (n = 1,226).

Results: Findings indicate that 84% of ILU participants are club members, with the majority female (76.5%) and living in rural areas (80%). Participant ethnicity is 99.5% White, with a median age of 47, and 80% of participants have attained third-level or postgraduate education. Satisfaction levels for ILU were high with a mean of 8.48 (standard deviation = 1.94). A notable finding was that loneliness is significantly higher in younger adults than older adults over 65 ($p < 0.05$). Qualitative findings suggest key themes of social connection through community, motivation, accountability, and perceived safety of the initiative.

Conclusion: ILU provides significant social, physical, and mental health benefits to those who participate, particularly club members, women, and rural populations. However, underserved populations, including ethnic minorities, lower-income groups, and men are not being adequately reached. This suggests potential barriers to participation, such as limited awareness or perceived lack of inclusivity. Further research is needed to identify targeted strategies for recruiting and retaining populations currently 'not yet reached' by initiatives such as ILU. These may include tailored approaches, partnerships with community organisations, engaging local leaders, and cultural adaptations to ensure the initiative is accessible to more diverse populations.

Support/Funding Source: Funded by SETU PhD Scholarship Programme.

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