Examining the Impact of Disability Sport on Employment and Subsequent Policy Implications

Background and Justification of the Study

Traditionally, people with disabilities have been socially and economically suppressed, holding lesser stature positions in society, and (Page, Connor, & Peterson, 2001) this deficit is highly pronounced when considering employment rates of wheelchair users (Brault, 2012) which is stubbornly high. These employment rates are exceedingly important for community planners who for both economic and ethical reasons intend to integrate individuals with disabilities within a community. Two factors have been shown to improve the status and quality of life of people with disabilities: sport (DePauw & Gavron, 2005) and employment (Krause, 1992). Disability sport provides a number of benefits including strength and endurance (Schmid et al., 1998 increased self-esteem (Vermillion & Dodder, 2007), social integration (Hanson, Nabavi, & Yuen, 2001), and life satisfaction (van Koppenhagen et al., 2013). However, while the aforementioned benefits may promote a long-term, positive economic impact, public entities such as cities, states, and the federal government, with the capacity to support large-scale disability sport programs, may not see the potential return on investment because the changes do not immediately and directly impact the economy.

Employment is considered to be the most critical factor in assessing the quality of life for people with disabilities, as it addresses poverty, the most pressing challenge. (Krause, 1992). Among those with a spinal cord injury, who make up a large segment of wheelchair users, Krause et al. (1999) discovered that having a more severe injury decreases the likelihood of employment. A significant relationship between disability sport and employment would provide justification for additional resources for disability sport. Individuals with disabilities who were previously receiving social support (such as Medicare/Medicaid, Social Security and Disability Benefits, and free and reduced housing) could become tax payers. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate a possible link between participation in adaptive sports and the likelihood of being employed.

Methods

Data was collected at a national qualification wheelchair basketball tournament and the United States Wheelchair Rugby Championships. Due to the divisional structure of Nationals, participants came from both competitive and recreational teams. Wheelchair basketball players are typically paraplegic or amputees, and wheelchair rugby players are typically quadriplegic. Therefore, collecting data from these two sports provides a wide range of levels of mobility impairment. Data was collected from 140 individuals who are currently playing either wheelchair rugby or wheelchair basketball. We eliminated those ages 62 and older to focus on those who are in the traditional working age range. This exclusion reduced our sample size to 131. 82.4% of the respondents in our sample set had an SCI. In many disability sports, a numerical classification is assigned athletes to signify functional ability, or conversely, disability. To control for the severity of the mobility impairment, we used the players' athletic classifications.

Analysis

Discussion and Implications

In this study, we show that an additional year of participating in adaptive sports is associated with an increase in employment rate, at least up through the first ten years of playing sports. Results from this study indicate that policies aimed at removing barriers to playing adaptive sports may improve employment outcomes for individuals with physical disabilities. The main barriers include cost, travel time, and awareness of the sports. The costs associated with adaptive sports include specialized wheelchairs and travel to compete against other teams. Athletes usually incur at least some out-of-pocket expenses.