

Investigating use of the outdoors across adult population groups in Scotland



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Background

Spending time outdoors in natural environments is associated with a range of physical and mental health and wellbeing benefits. Yet in 2016 just under half of Scottish adults made at least one recreational visit a week to the outdoors.

This Research Summary presents the results of analysis which investigated disparities in outdoor recreation participation rates across adult population groups in Scotland.

The study investigated people's use of the outdoors on at least a weekly basis. The 'outdoors' refers to open spaces in the countryside as well as in towns and cities, such as woodland, parks, farmland, paths, beaches etc.

Research questions

Our aim was to investigate population-scale differences in engagement with the outdoors across different subgroups in the Scottish adult population. The focus was on groups defined by protected characteristics (as per the Equality Act 2010), and in relation to area deprivation and urban-rural classification. Three research questions were addressed:

1. Are there statistically significant differences between population subgroups in terms of the proportion of people using the outdoors at least once a week?
2. Can any differences between subgroups be explained by geographic/area-level factors (i.e. area deprivation and urban-rural classification)?
3. To what extent do other individual characteristics (e.g. education, employment status, household type, perceptions of the local area) explain frequency of visits to the outdoors?

What we did

We conducted statistical modelling to examine the relationships between use of the outdoors and several personal characteristics (e.g. age, sex, ethnicity) and area-level factors (area deprivation and urban-rural classification). The statistical approach allowed us to disentangle the effects of the different factors.

We produced a 'main' model to address the first two research questions and an 'exploratory' model to examine the third question. The analysis used data from the Scottish Household Survey 2014 and 2016.

Key findings

The main models show that use of the outdoors at least once a week was significantly associated with several individual and area-level characteristics. The population groups least likely to report using the outdoors on a weekly basis (across 2014 and 2016) are listed in Box 1.

Box 1. Population groups least likely to report using the outdoors once a week or more were:

- People with a disability
- Muslims
- Residents in Scotland's most deprived areas
- Black and other non-white minority ethnic groups
- People aged 76 and over

Those who have never been married and those who are separated/divorced/widowed were also less likely to visit at least once a week.

There were mixed findings between the 2014 and 2016 data for some age groups, gender and those of Christian faith. Use of the outdoors was not related to sexual orientation.

There was some evidence that those living outside Scotland's urban areas (particularly in remote rural areas and remote small towns) are more likely to visit the outdoors at least once a week. Area deprivation and urban-rural classification did not explain associations between membership of protected groups and use of the outdoors at least once a week.

Exploratory models highlighted additional characteristics which were positively associated with at least weekly recreational use of the outdoors in both 2014 and 2016. These were:

- part-time working;
- being educated to degree-level;
- having greenspace within a 5 minute walk from home;
- rating one's neighbourhood as a very good place to live;
- high neighbourhood social capital scores;
- having lived at current address for less than three years; and
- walking for travel on at least one occasion in the past week.

Despite identifying several significant predictors of outdoor participation, the explanatory power of the models was low. This emphasises that there are likely to be many other variables which influence use of the outdoors to a greater degree than those we were able to include in this study.

Conclusions and recommendations

The study provides evidence of differences in use of the outdoors between population subgroups, many of which were consistent across two non-consecutive years. Based on these findings we offer the following policy recommendations:

1. Programmes promoting use of the outdoors should encourage the inclusion of key target groups.

Findings identify a number of groups who are using the outdoors less frequently, pointing toward potential priority target groups for programmes promoting outdoor recreation. The reasons for lower participation by certain particular groups tend to be multiple and complex. Promoting participation in such groups must therefore go further than targeted marketing; the particular experiences and needs of target groups must be taken into account.

2. The Scottish Government should continue to support population-scale research on outdoor recreation participation, its determinants and potential outcomes.

The relatively low explanatory power of the models suggests that we need to look at other factors beyond those for which we have Scottish Household Survey data in order to better understand outdoor engagement at the population scale. Topic-based social surveys such as Scotland's People and Nature Survey (SPANS) offer significant opportunities in this respect. The research also highlights the value of repeated surveys providing a time series of data.

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Further information:

Colley, K. & Irvine, K. N. (2018) Investigating use of the outdoors across adult population groups in Scotland. Final report to the Scottish Government. November 2018. <https://www.hutton.ac.uk/research/groups/social-economic-and-geographical-sciences/SEGS-research-notes>

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