**Engagement with Special Olympics by the general public in 17 countries world-wide.**

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**Abstract**

Over five million athletes with intellectual disability (ID) currently participate in Special Olympics (SO) worldwide with the broader aim of promoting their inclusion in society. The public’s knowledge of SO was determined in 17 selected countries globally and the characteristics of those most actively involved identified. Online, self-completion surveys were completed by 36,508 nationally representative respondents. Around 1 in 7 people globally reported an active involvement with SO and a further third were aware of it through the media. Engagement was greater among respondents who had experience in volunteering, playing sports and frequent personal contact with people with ID. Only one quarter of respondents correctly distinguished SO from Paralympics and the Olympic Games. There is scope to make the public more aware of, and better informed about SO. Further research examines the relationships between engagement with SO and public attitudes towards the inclusion of persons with ID in wider society.

## Introduction

## Special Olympics (SO) celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2018. It is now present in 193 countries with over five million athletes with intellectual disability (ID), plus over one million volunteers - such as coaches - and close to a million sports partners without ID who are involved in Unified Sports (Special Olympics, 2019). Currently some 30-plus, Olympic-style individual and team sports are offered internationally, including individual sports such as figure skating, cycling and gymnastics, and as well as team sports of which football, floor hockey and volleyball are the most popular. Adaptations are made to sports to match the athletes’ levels of competence and as in Paralympics, divisioning is used in competitions to equate players on their performance in that sport (https://resources.specialolympics.org/sports-essentials/divisioning). Also sports suited to persons with more severe impairments are provided, such as Bocce which involves bowling a ball close to a target.

## Traditionally SO was exclusively for persons with ID or associated disabilities who are often excluded from playing recreational sports and fewer still participate in competitive sports (Darcy and Dowse, 2013: Robertson et al., 2017). The goal of SO was not only to provide opportunities for them to experience sports but also to advance their social inclusion with non-disabled coaches and volunteers as well as their peers with similar impairments. Nonetheless, the segregated nature of SO sports ran counter to wider efforts that were emerging from the 1990s onwards to include people with disabilities in mainstream schools, ordinary housing and paid employment (World Health Organisation, 2011). Moreover critics queried the age appropriateness of certain sports, the paternalistic relationships between volunteers and athletes, and the lack of opportunities for athletes to train alongside non-disabled peers and to progress to mainstream sports (Storey, 2008; Counsell & Agran, 2013). Even so, a growing body of evidence has identified the range of benefits which participation in SO brings to the athletes; notably in terms of improved physical, psychological, emotional and social outcomes (Tint, Thomson, & Weiss, 2017). In addition families, coaches and volunteers also report personal gains from their participation in SO (Harada, Siperstein, Parker & Lenox, 2011). More fundamentally, others have questioned why the promotion of inclusion with non-disabled persons should be valued over building social networks among people with similar disabilities when this has been the basis for marginalized groups to advocate and attain societal rights (Cummins & Lau, 2003; Kiuppis, 2018).

## Nevertheless in an attempt to promote greater societal inclusion for people with ID, SO has promoted the concept of Unified Sports in which athletes with ID are paired with non-disabled partners of comparable sporting competence for training and competitions in which they have a common interest and talent. As well as making the sport more challenging and exciting for both sets of players, the aim is to promote friendships among them and breakdown stereotypes. The hope is that the social networks inherent in more inclusive sports would extend beyond the playing field into the local community. There is some evidence that is happening (McConkey et al., 2013).

## Moreover, Special Olympics has widened the range of programs beyond sports that it provides for people with ID, such as health programs, youth leadership, family leadership and Unified Champion Schools. Although these programs began in the US, they exist also in other countries through support from various philanthropic foundations. The overall intention is to enable and empower people with ID to advocate for greater social inclusion but matched by changing societal attitudes which often stigmatise and marginalize people with disabilities (Scior, 2011). Hence the 2016-2020 Global Strategic Plan of Special Olympics states that “attitude change must be a deliberate outcome of Special Olympics” and highlights the role of public attitudes in promoting inclusion in friendships, communities, health, education, and jobs. These reflect the aspirations contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (United Nations, 2006) which has yet to be ratified in the United States; one of very few countries to fail to do so. Indeed given its international reach, Special Olympics is well placed to advocate for the rights of persons with intellectual disability by using sport as a means for changing attitudes through bringing people into personal contact (Seewooruttun & Scior, 2014) and enhancing the social inclusion of persons with intellectual disability in schools, health services and employment.

## But for SO to succeed they must also change the mindset of the public and encourage their active participation as volunteers across all their programs. Indeed Special Olympics has shown evidence of at least a short-term impact on changing public perceptions by emphasizing the talents and sporting achievements of their athletes through media coverage of national and international games, (Ferrara, Burns & Mills, 2015). However, these transient events may yield little in terms of making the public more actively engaged with, and concerned about, their fellow citizens with ID (Brittain & Beacom, 2016). More sustained exposure and active engagement through participation in sports for example, seems necessary. (Li & Wu, 2019).

In 2018, Special Olympics commissioned public opinion surveys in 17 countries from around the world to gauge the general public’s awareness of, and engagement with Special Olympics. Countries were chosen in which Special Olympics had a sustained presence and where events had been held so that the public would have had a greater opportunity to become aware of, and involved with the organization. Data from this study would provide a benchmark against which changes in awareness of Special Olympics could be measured in future years as the organization commits to greater efforts towards social inclusion. It would also provide an opportunity to determine if the personal characteristics associated with more positive attitudes to people with intellectual disability – such as gender, age, educational level and personal contact with people with intellectual disability (Scior, 2011) – also influence public engagement with Special Olympics. Moreover, people interested in sports or who have children or are involved in voluntary endeavours may be more aware of Special Olympics. This information would assist Special Olympics in identifying possible allies among the general public and assist with more targeted recruitment of volunteers and donors.

In sum: the aims of the study were:

* To determine the public’s awareness of Special Olympics in 17 countries globally.
* To document the ways in which the public engagement had engaged with Special Olympics and the characteristics of people who were most actively involved with it.
* To assess the public’s knowledge about the range of activities provided by Special Olympics and any misperceptions they held about it.

## Materials and Method

### *Procedure*

Special Olympics personnel, with advice from an Advisory Panel of international researchers, developed a questionnaire to assess people’s knowledge of Special Olympics activities. The questions asked were: Have you heard of Special Olympics? (with responses Yes, No, Don’t know). Those who answered Yes were then asked: “Below is a list of statements that may or may not describe Special Olympics. Please select true, false, or don’t know for each statement.” (followed by a list of 10 statements – see Table 4). A further questions asked: “What experiences have you had with Special Olympics? Check all that apply.” (followed by a list of 11 statements – see Table 2).

The questions relating to Special Olympics came after a series of questions about attitudes towards to people with intellectual disability (see Slater et al, 2020). In addition, various other demographics details were sought about the respondents; notably their contact with persons with ID, their participation in sports and in volunteering, and in paid employment (see Table 1).

The survey was available in the language(s) appropriate to the country.

Special Olympics partnered with a market research firm Kantar Millward Brown to implement online, self-completion surveys across different countries. SOI staff selected the locations in which samples would be recruited bearing in mind the countries in which Kantar had panels. Surveys were conducted in eight US cities (Boston, Chicago, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Francisco, Seattle and Washington, D.C.) plus a national sample across all states. Special Olympics had a greater presence in the chosen cities. For this paper, all the US surveys were combined into one country.

Nine European countries were also selected similarly: Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Malta, Poland, Romania and the United Kingdom.

Seven countries were selected from other SO Regions based on the availability of online panels and recommendations from SO Regional staff. They were: Latin America (Mexico and Panama), Africa (South Africa) , Middle-East & North Africa (UAE) and Asia Pacific (India, Japan, China).

Kantar, or their associates in certain countries, were responsible for the recruitment of participants, the presentation of the questions online and recording responses. Sample size in each US city and country was approximately 1,500, with the exception of the smallest country Malta which had 500 respondents. To attain the desired sample sizes in each city or country, repeated waves of invitations were sent out to members of their panel in each location until the sample sizes were reached. The final sample was balanced by gender ratios and age of respondents in each participating country and no other selection criteria were used.

Panel members were not given any information about the content of the questionnaire when invited to participate in the survey but they first had to confirm their gender, age and provide a Zip Code (or equivalent). Overall 7% of initial respondents dropped out at this point with a further 5% failing to complete the survey.

The respondents had to record a response before they could move on to the next question. Hence there was no missing data on the main variables included in the questionnaire.

***Ethical Approval***

In line with standard market research practice, formal ethical approval was not obtained for this study. However, Kantar fully subscribed to the industry’s code of practice that included anonymous responses and the right to freely participate or choose not to take part at any time. The only incentive provided was the award of points to Kantar panel members for taking part in a survey. They were not given any type of extra or direct incentive which would make this survey any more ‘appealing’ than any other survey.

***Participants***

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the participants across the total sample of 36,508 respondents. The country samples were representative nationally in terms of gender and age. However the high percentage of university educated respondents may reflect the bias arising from using online panels for the surveys.

*Insert Table 1 about here*

***Data analysis***

Data cleaning was undertaken by Kantar and their associates and the complete dataset was made available to the authors as an anonymised SPSS file. Descriptive statistics were first calculated for each individual item followed by bivariate analyses using chi square tests between items relating to Special Olympics and possible predictor variables. Discriminant analyses were used to identify the variables that best discriminated persons who were more actively engaged with Special Olympics.

## Results

***Experience with Special Olympics***

Respondents were first asked if they had heard of Special Olympics and across the 36,508 respondents, 79.3% chose ‘yes’ with 17.1% choosing ‘no’ and 3.7% ‘don’t know’.

Respondents who indicated they were aware of Special Olympics were then asked to indicate the experiences they had with Special Olympics by choosing from the options shown in Table 2, which also summarises the number and percentage of respondents who selected each option.

*Insert Table 2 about here*

From these responses two subgroupings of respondents were created based on their involvement with SO: Active involvement and Supporter.

*Active Involvement* included respondents who had been a volunteer, coach, official, a Unified partner, or competed as an athlete. Respondents were also included in this category if they had attended a SO event or if a friend or relative participated in SO or Unified Champion Schools. In all, 4,975 (17.2%) respondents fell into this category.

*Supporter* included those respondents who had watched Special Olympics on TV, read about it or donated to it. In all, 12,972 (44.8%) respondents fell into this category.

An additional 10,990(38.0%) respondents indicated they were aware of Special Olympics but did not choose any of the available response options.

However the percentages of the above subgroups reduced when they were calculated across the total sample of 36,508 respondents that includes those who were unaware of Special Olympics or did not know of it, namely: Active Involvement 13.8%: Supporter 35.8%: No involvement 33.2%: Unaware 17.9%.

***Discriminant analysis***

Discriminant analysis was used to identify the characteristics of respondents who were actively involved with Special Olympics compared to those who were supporters or who had no involvement but were aware of it. Bivariate chi square analyses identified that all the demographic variables in Table 1 except gender had a significant relationship with the involvement groupings (p<0.01). These variables were entered into the discriminant analysis. Cases in which there was missing data on one or more of the predictor variables were excluded from the analysis but they were small in number (n=241: 0.7%).

Table 3 lists the variables in the model that distinguished those respondents who were actively engaged with Special Olympics compared to all other respondents. The variables are ranked in order from those that were most related to the discriminant function. These are expressed as correlations to the Discriminant function – the larger the number the stronger the relationship.

*Insert Table 3 about here*

Not surprisingly, the three best discriminating variables - volunteer involvement, having frequent personal contact with a person who had intellectual disability and playing sports - were all variables that could arise from respondents’ engagement with Special Olympics although the survey questions for these variables were not particular to Special Olympics.

The further discriminants were the respondent having a disability or being the parent of a child, having a university education, younger people (under 35 years), being employed, and working in health and social care. However these personal characteristics were not as strongly related to the discrimination between the two groupings.

Although the geographical region did contribute to the discriminant with more active involvement in the US and less in European countries, this was weak compared to the other variables. Thus the characteristics of people who have an active involvement with Special Olympics appear to be common across the variety of nations included in this study.

***Supporters of Special Olympics***

A similar discriminant analysis was conducted to compare supporters of Special Olympics to those who had no engagement but were aware of it. However this discriminant model was much weaker (Wilk’s Lamba 0.914) and accounted for a much smaller proportion of variance (9%) and a lower proportion of correct responses (62%). With those cautions in mind, the items that best discriminated supporters from those with no involvement with Special Olympics were reported above: playing sports (0.696), engaged in volunteering (0.508) and having frequent personal contact with a person with intellectual disability (0.507). Details of this analysis are available upon request.

***Knowledge of Special Olympics***

Respondents who indicated they had heard of Special Olympics were also presented with 11 statements relating to Special Olympics: six of which generally apply and five which do not apply. For each statement, respondents were asked to select one of three options: ‘true, false and don’t know’ and Table 4 shows the percentages selecting each option.

*Insert Table 4 about here*

Respondents were grouped into those who were ‘well informed’ about Special Olympics and those who were misinformed based on statistical significance. Those that were well informed correctly identified seven or more of the statements as either true or false as appropriate. Likewise those with scores of 1 or less were considered misinformed (probability p<0.05). Overall, 4,238 (11.6%) of respondents who were aware of Special Olympics were classed as well informed with 2,728 (9.0%) as misinformed. Hence the majority of respondents (80%) fell within the range of chance responding.

Chi-square tests indicated that respondents who were actively involved with Special Olympics were significantly better informed than those were supporters or only aware of it, with rates of being “well informed” of 23% compared to 12% respectively (chi sq=380.1, *p*<0.001). Conversely, the latter group were more likely to be misinformed than those actively involved, 10% compared to 2%, respectively (chi sq *=* 358.9, *p*<0.001).

Respondents often confused Special Olympics with Paralympics and with the main Olympic Games. As such, it was important to further explore this to understand the awareness of Special Olympics as a distinct organization. In all 9,556 respondents (26.2% of the total surveyed) distinguished Special Olympics correctly from either Paralympics and Olympic Games but 20,718 (56.7%) considered Special Olympics to be part of either Paralympics and/or the Olympics. Seventeen percent had not heard of Special Olympics at all.

The highest percentage (42%) of those who correctly identified Special Olympics was in the United States. Within Europe, the percentages ranged from 7.5% in Finland to 25.6% in Ireland. In the other regions, China had the lowest percentage (3.8%) and South Africa the highest (13.9%).

**Discussion**

This transnational study is the largest undertaken to examine public engagement with and knowledge of Special Olympics. Globally around one in seven of the general population claimed some form of active involvement with SO; notably those with experience of volunteering, playing sports, and who have frequent personal contact with people who have intellectual disability. These characteristics were stronger discriminators than other personal characteristics or the country location.

Similarly another third of the general population across all countries could be considered ‘supporters’ who had read about or watched SO in the media and they too were more likely to play sports, volunteer, and having personal contact with people with intellectual disability. Hence the relationships between these variables could be mutually supportive in that Special Olympics not only attracts the interest of people who volunteer, play sports and who have contact with people with intellectual disability but their support for Special Olympics may encourage them to further engage in these activities.

Although these levels of engagement are impressive for a volunteer-led, grassroots organization, nevertheless, half of the respondents internationally had no involvement or awareness of SO and the percentages were higher outside of the United States. In other countries beyond those sampled in this study, the proportions of the general public who are unaware of Special Olympics will likely be higher given the countries that were chosen for this study.

More concerning though is the low proportion of respondents who were well informed about Special Olympics, even among those who reported an active involvement. Although small, a significant proportion were also misinformed about the various activities of SO and as others have noted, lacked an understanding of people with ID (Bishop, 2017). Hence there is an opportunity for SO to better inform the general public internationally about their work beyond sports - particularly on health and social inclusion - and to rectify possible confusions with other organizations such as Paralympics (Brittain, 2016). Yet these confusions may become less relevant as inclusion in sports evolves: for example with more Special Olympic athletes included in the Paralympics and these in turn may become embodied into mainstream Olympic Games (Kell, Kell & Price, 2008). In this instance, the perceptions of the stakeholders who are presently involved in Paralympics and Olympic Games to the participation of athletes with intellectual disability becomes more crucial rather than those of the general public. To date, no formal studies appear to have explored this issue (Brittain, 2016).

Several limitations about the study need to be noted. The first is that respondents were required to have internet access to complete the survey. Although internet availability is increasing internationally, coverage is still not universal. As such, while respondents are representative of the national population in terms of gender and age, they may not be reflective of the general population as a whole. Additionally, the US cities and countries selected included those in which Special Olympics arguably had a higher profile which could have contributed to greater awareness. Finally, most of the countries fell within the World Bank definition of ‘high income’ with no representation from low income nations which could influence the generalizability of results to lower income nations.

That said, the strength of the study lies in the sample size and diversity of countries included. Moreover the pattern of responses and the relationships identified are more insightful than the percentage responses to specific items about Special Olympics. Further analysis of the international dataset has examined the contribution that engagement with Special Olympics has on public attitudes to the rights of people with intellectual disability and to their inclusion with local communities (Slater et al., 2020). In particular, people who were actively engaged with or were a supporter of Special Olympics gave higher ratings to the capability of people with intellectual disability and were more comfortable with the prospect of meeting such a person; both of which were associated with greater support for the rights and community inclusion of these persons. However the lack of a direct effect on public attitudes to the rights and inclusion of people with intellectual disability, suggests that Special Olympics needs to become more explicit in promoting their rights and inclusion beyond participation in sports.

Future studies could focus on specific groups within society whose attitudes and perceptions may more directly inhibit the participation of people with ID in sports and other community leisure pursuits: notably health and social care professionals, mainstream sports coaches and non-disabled players in recreational sporting activities.

**Conclusions**

Special Olympics is arguably the largest and best known multinational organization for intellectual disability and as such it is well placed to promote the social inclusion of persons with intellectual disability through its sports and allied programs. Around 1 in 7 people in the countries surveyed report an active involvement with Special Olympics and a further third were aware of it through the media. Engagement with SO was greater among respondents who had experience in volunteering, playing sports and had frequent personal contact with people with ID. However only one quarter of respondents correctly distinguished Special Olympics from Paralympics and the Olympic Games so there is scope to make the public more aware of, and better informed about Special Olympics. Further research can explore the impact that engagement with Special Olympics has on public attitudes to social inclusion of persons with ID in wider society.

*(3,395 words excluding tables and references)*

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