

Parkrun: a new model of physical activity for large populations?

HAAKE, Steve <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4449-6680>>

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parkrun participants on a Saturday morning
Courtesy parkrun

parkrun: a new model of physical activity for large populations?

Prof Steve Haake discusses parkrun and what makes it so successful.

I'm always surprised if people haven't heard of parkrun. It's such an important part of my weekend routine that I have to remind myself that it's not that way for everyone; after all, only around 2.7% of the UK population have participated in a parkrun. I say 'only' a little tongue-in-cheek because this actually represents about 1.8 million people and there are about 8,000 new people taking part every week. That's over 400,000 people per year and just in the UK. parkrun is now in 20 countries worldwide with more planned for the future. parkrun is set to become the world's largest public health intervention, which reflects what its organisers see as its important role in the world. They no longer see it as just a race, or even a run. They now see it as a way to create a healthy and happy world.

So just what is parkrun? What are its secret ingredients that make it so popular? And just how successful is it?

The parkrun model

The parkrun model is pretty simple: it's a free, timed 5 km walk or run in a park on a Saturday morning at 9 am, or 9.30 am if you live in Scotland or Northern Ireland. People register online and get a unique parkrun number, which they print out as a barcode to take with them to parkrun. Participants can be anything from aged 4 upwards, although there is also a junior parkrun of 2 kilometres for 4-14 year olds. Participants can walk or run as much of the 5 kilometres as they wish, although only finishers enter a taped-

off funnel at the end. At this point, a volunteer timer clicks a stopwatch to indicate they have passed the finish line and, as the participant exits the funnel, another volunteer hands them a finishing token with a position number on it. The participant hands the token and their personal barcode to a third volunteer who scans them both with a handheld reader about the shape and size of a modern electronic car key; the token links the position to the person and, after the parkrun finishes, the times are uploaded and linked to the positions. Within a couple of hours, hundreds of thousands of parkrun participants receive a message with their time, position and other information such as number of parkruns completed and age grading. A website lists the results for all parkruns everywhere across the world.

The method of timing might seem clunky and old fashioned compared to automatic systems such as Champion Chip and other RFID systems, but it's retained for an important reason: it makes you queue. This points to one of the first clues to parkrun's success - the queuing stops people walking away immediately afterwards and nudges them towards social interaction. The fact that events are also seen as a family affair where children are actively encouraged to take parts enhances the feeling of community.

Figure 1 shows the demographic of first-time parkrun participants during 2016. The first thing to notice is that there are two bulges in the data: the first is a narrow peak at about age 12; the second is a wide maximum between about age 25 and 45. More boys participate in parkrun than girls and more women participate than men. There is, of course, a link between these two age ranges since children under the age of 14 can only participate with a parent running 'within an arm's length'.

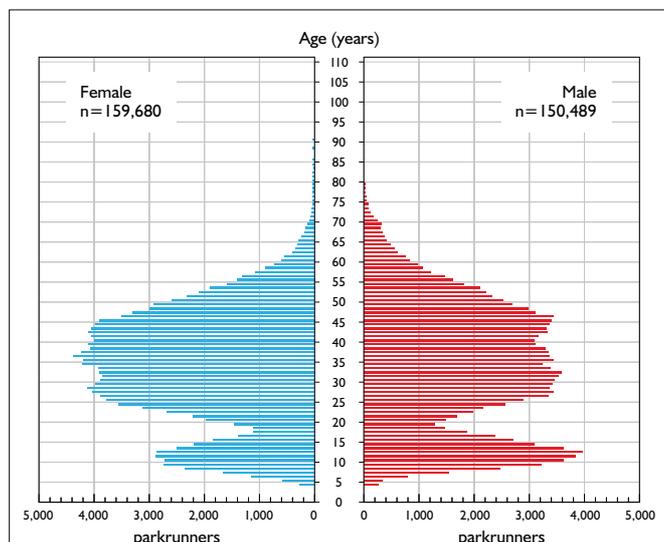
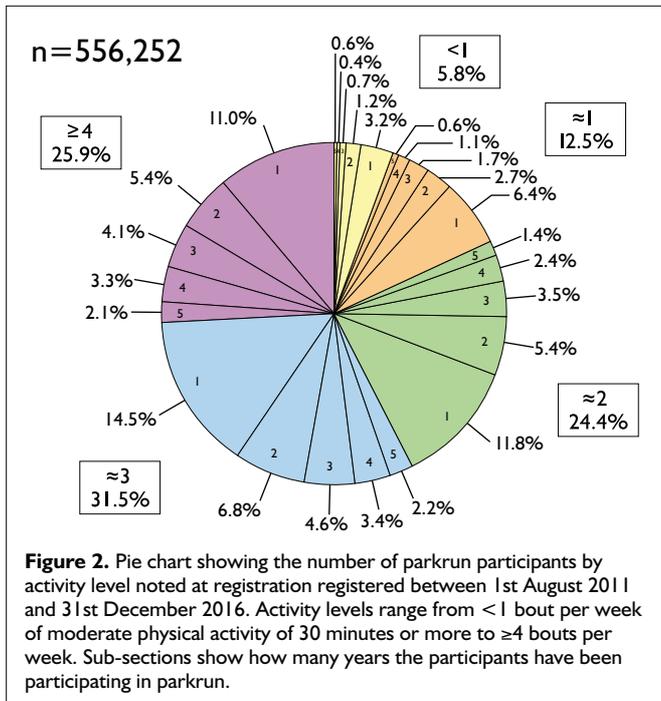


Figure 1. Demographic of first-time parkrunners from 1 January to 31 December 2016.

parkrun's attraction for the least active

Physical activity level was first assessed at registration on 1 August 2011 to provide a snapshot of physical activity status at registration and to allow a comparison with Sport England-related data on inactivity. Registrants are asked the following single item question: Over the last 4 weeks, how often have you done at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise (enough to raise your breathing rate)? The optional responses range from <1 to ≥4.

Figure 2 shows the number of parkrun participants by activity level at registration (those who participated at least once). The subcategories indicate the number of years the participants have been attending parkrun. The two least active categories of <1 and ≈1 made up 18.3% of all parkrunners at the end of 2016 while those who were already most active (≥4) made up 25.9% of participants. Interestingly, parkrun creates long-term loyalty with people of all activity levels with more than half participating for more than a year.



parkrun is sometimes criticised for only engaging with those who would have run anyway. While the numbers show that participation does increase with activity level at registration, those who were least active at registration represented over 100,000 people by the end of 2016. Importantly, about half continued to participate in parkrun for more than 12 months. Further analysis shows that those in the <1 and ≈1 activity categories are increasing at the expense of those in the ≈3 and ≈4 activity categories.

parkrun research

parkrun research is beginning to appear in the literature. The earliest work was carried out by Clare Stevinson and Mary Hickson (Stevinson & Hickson, 2013) with later work including Gareth Wiltshire. They found that non-runners had a greater improvement in their 5 km times and were more likely to report health benefits. In terms of the characteristics that make parkrun appealing, they found that the things that were important were accessibility, inclusiveness, ethos, opportunity for achievement, social support, the outdoor natural setting, and the integration of volunteering (Stevinson *et al.*, 2015). parkrun is now of such significance that it has a Research Board to administer the numerous research projects that are submitted to parkrun each year (awrcparkrunresearch.wordpress.com). The Board will also be strategic, with some of the current themes including children and young people, inactive groups, volunteering and economic analysis. parkrun doesn't offer funding for research but has something equally good: a database with 36 million timed runs (or walks), anonymised demographic data and the opportunity to email potential research cohorts directly. ■

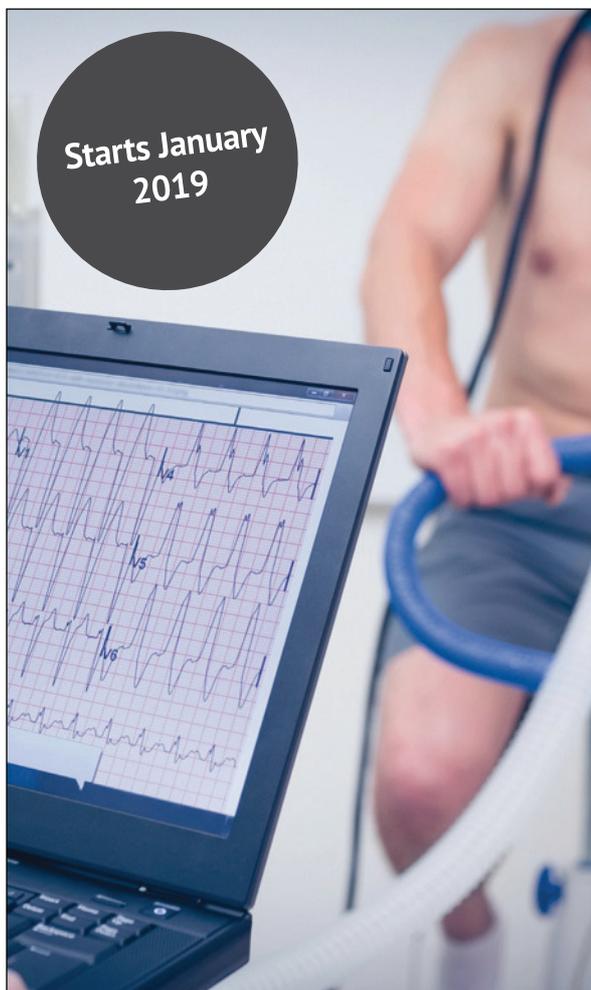


Prof Steve Haake

Steve is at Sheffield Hallam University and is Chair of the parkrun Research Board.

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