



THE SHOT PAPERS

THE CENSUS.

SPORT'S MISSING NUMBERS.

A national governing body reports around 400,000 players. The people who run that sport week to week told us, independently and repeatedly, that millions actually play it. Nobody can prove either number, and public money is allocated on the one nobody believes. This paper is about why sport cannot count its own players, what funding blind costs, and what an honest count would take.

FOR GOVERNING BODIES · FUNDERS · GOVERNMENT

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THE ARGUMENT IN ONE PAGE

Grassroots sport is funded on numbers nobody believes. Governing bodies can only see the players who register with them, most play never registers anywhere, and the surveys that fill the gap sample the nation rather than count the sport. Until participation is counted honestly, every strategy, grant and facility case is built on an estimate wearing a suit.

SIX FINDINGS

1. **The register is not the sport.** A governing body's membership database records who affiliated, not who played. The two can differ by an order of magnitude, and in at least one sport we know, they do.
2. **The invisible majority.** Pay-and-play sessions, informal leagues, park games and school play leave no trace in any official count. The unaffiliated player does not exist on paper.
3. **Surveys sample, they do not count.** Active Lives is the most honest instrument British sport has, and it is still a sample: it can describe the nation but cannot size one sport, one league or one town.
4. **Nothing adds up.** Every body defines a player differently, so the same child is counted twice by two organisations and missed entirely by a third. National totals built from these parts are arithmetic on sand.
5. **The money follows the wrong numbers.** Participation inequality costs an estimated £19.6 billion a year of social value in England, and the funding meant to close it is allocated on registers that cannot see where the gap actually is.
6. **The targets cannot be verified.** The FA's own strategy commits to 220,000 new players by 2028. It is a serious target from a serious body, and with today's data nobody, including the FA, will be able to prove whether it was hit.

A sport whose governing body reports around 400,000 players is played, by every honest estimate we have heard from inside it, by millions. Every pound allocated to that sport is allocated blind.

The answer is not another survey. It is treating participation data as public infrastructure: counted as a by-product of sport actually happening, opt-in, privacy-first, owned by the individual, published in aggregate. The final sections set out that principle and how we are building towards it.

1 THE MOMENT

Over the past year I have had the same conversation with different people inside one sport, and every time it ends at the same absurd number.

I am not going to name the sport or the governing body, and the people who told me this were speaking honestly about an organisation they care about, so I will not identify them either. What they told me, independently of each other, in different rooms and different months, was this: the body's official figure for their sport is around 400,000 players. And every single one of them, people who run leagues, develop clubs and stand on the sidelines every week, believes the true playing population is in the millions.

Not a rounding error. Not a definitional quibble. An order of magnitude, and then some.

The gap is not a scandal, it is a structure. The official figure counts affiliated, registered players: the ones in sanctioned leagues, on official rosters, paying an affiliation fee. Everyone else, the pay-and-play sessions, the community leagues organised entirely on group chats, the school lunchtime games, the informal weekly meet-ups that have run for twenty years without ever telling anyone, is invisible. The people inside the sport can see them, because they walk past them every week. The database cannot.

Then comes the part that stops the conversation. That 400,000 is not a harmless undercount sitting in a filing cabinet. It is the number the sport takes into every funding negotiation, every facility case, every conversation with government. Grant money is allocated on it. Strategy is set against it. A sport several times larger than its own paperwork negotiates for resources at a fraction of its real size, and the funders across the table have no way of knowing.

I should be straight about the status of this story: it was told to us in conversations, not audited by us. But that is precisely the point. Nobody can audit it. There is no count to check it against. A claim of 400,000 and a claim of millions are equally unfalsifiable, and public money flows anyway.

This is not one rogue governing body with bad spreadsheets. It is the normal condition of grassroots sport: the play is real, the numbers are not, and everyone funds blind.

2 THE PROBLEM IN NUMBERS

Britain already knows what honest measurement looks like. It also knows what mismeasurement costs. The two facts sit side by side in the same national dataset.

49.1%

of children meet the 60-minutes-a-day activity guideline

Sport England Active Lives CYP, 2024-25

51 → 39%

children agreeing "sport matters to me", primary to secondary

Sport England Active Lives CYP, 2024-25

£19.6bn

estimated annual social value lost to participation inequality

Sport England, 2023/24

220,000

new players targeted by the FA's grassroots strategy by 2028

The FA, 2024

THE GOLD STANDARD: ACTIVE LIVES

Sport England's Active Lives surveys are, to my mind, the most honest instrument in British sport. Large samples, published methodology, and a willingness to report numbers that make uncomfortable reading: only 49.1% of children meet the daily activity guideline, and the share of children who agree "sport matters to me" falls from 51% at primary school to 39% at secondary. Nobody massaged those figures into a better story. That is what measurement in the public interest looks like, and this paper's argument is not against it. It is that even the gold standard is a survey, and a survey is a photograph of a sample, not a count of the population.

WHAT MISMEASUREMENT COSTS

The same social value research puts community sport and physical activity in England at £122.9 billion a year of social value, and estimates that inequality of participation costs £19.6 billion a year of it. Take that second number seriously and follow the logic: closing the gap requires knowing where it is, street by street, sport by sport, age band by age band. No register shows that. No national sample resolves to that. The money aimed at the £19.6 billion problem is targeted using data that cannot locate the problem.

TARGETS NOBODY CAN VERIFY

The FA's Grassroots Football Strategy 2024-2028 commits to 220,000 new players and 15,000 new teams by 2028. I use it here as a compliment, not a criticism: it is a properly ambitious, published, dated target from the best-resourced governing body in the country. And even there, verification depends on registration data that misses most informal play. If the biggest body in British sport cannot fully verify its own headline number, the smaller bodies, with a fraction of the resources, have no chance.

3 WHY THE CURRENT ANSWERS FAIL

Sport's numbers are produced by four instruments, and each one fails for its own structural reason. None of them is fixed by trying harder.

REGISTERS COUNT MEMBERS, NOT PLAYERS

A governing body's database is a record of affiliation, not activity. It knows who paid a fee and joined a sanctioned league; it does not know who played. It has no way of noticing the player who never affiliated, and only a slow, lagging way of noticing the one who registered in September and stopped coming in November. A register is an administrative artefact that gets used as a census because it is the only thing that looks like one.

UNAFFILIATED PLAY IS INVISIBLE BY DESIGN

The five-a-side booking, the park run-around, the community league on a group chat, the school lunchtime game: this is where an enormous share of actual play happens, and none of it touches any governing body's systems. The honest reading is that nobody knows the share, because measuring the unmeasured is exactly the problem. The people inside the sport in Part One were not guessing that unaffiliated play exists; they were watching it, every week, at a scale their own body's numbers said was impossible.

SURVEYS SAMPLE, THEY DO NOT COUNT

Active Lives can tell the country truths about itself that no register can, and it earns the trust it gets. But a national sample cannot size a single sport's true footprint, cannot resolve to a town or a club, and cannot say which league is growing and which is quietly dying. Funders end up navigating with two instruments: a national photograph that is honest but coarse, and local registers that are precise but wrong. Between them sits the actual question, who plays, where, how often, unanswered.

EVERY BODY MEASURES DIFFERENTLY, SO NOTHING ADDS UP

One organisation counts registered members. Another counts "participation opportunities". A third counts attendances, where the same child on ten Saturdays is ten. Definitions of a "regular" player vary from weekly to annually. The same child can be counted twice by two bodies and missed by a third, in the same season. Add these together, as national headlines routinely do, and you get a total with the confidence of arithmetic and the accuracy of folklore.

Grassroots sport does not have a data problem, it has a counting problem. There are plenty of numbers about sport. There is no count of it.

4 THE PRINCIPLE

You cannot grow what you cannot count. Participation data is public infrastructure, and it should be built the way we build public infrastructure: to a published standard, for everyone, with the costs carried by the system rather than the citizen.

A country would not fund schools on enrolment numbers nobody believed, or plan roads on traffic counts taken once a year from a sample of streets. Yet that is how sport is funded. If participation data is the basis for allocating public money, setting national strategy and holding bodies to their own targets, then it deserves the same seriousness as any other national statistic. Five rules would get us there, and none of them requires our platform, or any platform, to be true.

1**COUNTED, NOT CLAIMED**

A participation number should be produced as a by-product of sport actually happening, sessions run, players present, week after week, never as a self-declared total submitted with a funding bid. Claims are negotiating positions. Counts are facts.

2**OPT IN, AND THE PERSON OWNS THE RECORD**

Nobody should be counted without consent, and the record of a person's participation belongs to them, not to a governing body, a vendor or a funder. A census built on surveillance would deserve to fail.

3**INDIVIDUAL PRIVATE, AGGREGATE OPEN**

The individual's data stays private, always. The anonymised totals, how many play, where, how often, at what ages, are the public asset, and should be available to the bodies and funders who steward the sport.

4**ONE DEFINITION, PUBLISHED METHODOLOGY**

"A player" must mean the same thing everywhere, and the counting rules must be public enough to criticise. If the methodology cannot survive scrutiny, the number does not deserve trust.

5**HONEST EVEN WHEN IT HURTS**

The Active Lives standard: publish the true number, not the number that wins the grant. A census that flatters its funders is worse than no census, because it launders guesswork into evidence.

Hold any counting system, government, governing body or commercial, including ours, against these five. A system that fails them will produce numbers that serve the counter, not the sport.

5 THE BUILD

We are building SHOT to be, among other things, an opt-in, privacy-first census of grassroots sport. Not a survey, not a register: a count that falls out of clubs simply running their week.

COUNTING AS A BY-PRODUCT

The club and coach tools on our platform are free, permanently, and they handle the ordinary rhythm of a club: sessions planned, squads picked, attendance taken, development recorded. When a club runs its week on those tools, participation is recorded as a side effect of the club doing what it already does. No forms, no annual return, no self-declared total. That is the first principle from the previous page made mechanical: the count happens because the sport happened.

THE INDIVIDUAL OWNS THE RECORD

Every participant on the platform holds their own record through the Sport Head ID, an identity that belongs to the person, not to any club, body or vendor, and travels with them between teams, clubs and sports for life. That matters for privacy, and it also matters for arithmetic: because the record follows the person, someone who plays two sports at three clubs is counted once, accurately, rather than three times or not at all. The double counting and the missing counting that break today's national totals are both solved by the same design decision.

AGGREGATE, ANONYMISED, REPORTED BACK

What a governing body or funder receives is the aggregate: anonymised totals of active participants by sport, region, age band and frequency, including the unaffiliated play their registers have never seen. The individual is never exposed; the sport, for the first time, sees its true size. A body reporting 400,000 players could discover what its own people already know, and take the real number, counted and checkable, into its next funding negotiation.

WHAT THIS IS, HONESTLY

I want to be precise about the status of all this, because the credibility of a census rests entirely on the discipline of the people running it. This is a capability we are building, not a dataset that exists today. We will publish the counting methodology, how we define a player, the consent model, the privacy architecture, the aggregation rules, before we publish a single participation figure, and we will publish data only when it clears thresholds we have stated in advance. This paper series has its own fact rules: every statistic cited or flagged, no internal usage numbers presented as market facts, and known-bad figures kept out even when they would flatter us. The census will be held to the same standard, because a count you cannot interrogate is just a claim with better typography.



COUNT WHAT YOU FUND

The first honest census of grassroots sport will not be built by any one organisation. It needs the bodies who steward the sports, the funders who pay for growth, and the government that owns the statistics to want the true number more than the convenient one.

IF YOU RUN A GOVERNING BODY

Ask yourself one question: how far apart could your registered number and your real playing population be, and how would you know? If the honest answer is "we would not", talk to us about what an opt-in census of your sport would look like, starting with the definition of a player you would be willing to publish.

IF YOU FUND SPORT

Ask for counted numbers, not claimed ones. Write measurement into grant conditions: not more reporting forms for volunteers, but evidence produced as a by-product of delivery. Every pound moved from claimed to counted is a pound that stops rewarding the best storyteller and starts rewarding the best programme.

IF YOU WORK IN GOVERNMENT

Treat participation data as national infrastructure. Active Lives proves the appetite for honest measurement exists; the gap is granularity. A published national standard for what counts as a player, and for how aggregate participation data is produced and shared, would cost a fraction of what is currently misallocated on numbers nobody can check.

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SOURCES

- Sport England, Active Lives Children and Young People Survey 2024-25 (published December 2025): 49.1% of children meeting the 60-minute daily activity guideline; "sport matters to me" 51% at primary to 39% at secondary
- Sport England with Sheffield Hallam University and Manchester Metropolitan University, Social value of community sport and physical activity in England, 2023/24: £122.9 billion annual social value; participation inequality estimated at £19.6 billion a year
- The FA, Grassroots Football Strategy 2024-2028 (October 2024): targets of 220,000 new players and 15,000 new teams by 2028

The account of a sport whose governing body reports around 400,000 players against an honest playing population in the millions is drawn from SHOT's own conversations during 2025-26 with people who work inside that sport. It is deliberately anonymised, reported as told to us, and is itself unaudited. That no one can audit it is the argument of this paper. The census capability described in Part Five is in development; its methodology will be published before any participation figures are.