



The Netherlands Institute
for Social Research

Summary

No obligations: stepping away from coercive policymaking

Conceptions of citizens and policy preferences of private citizens and policymakers in sports and exercise policy



Mensbeelden
bij beleid

Summary

No obligations: stepping away from coercive policymaking

Conceptions of citizens and policy preferences of private citizens and policymakers in sports and exercise policy

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Review, conclusions and recommendations

Key message

Human beings live longer and in better health if they exercise and engage in physical activity sufficiently. Most adults are aware of this and yet many of them fail to meet the recommended amount of exercise of 30 minutes a day of moderate intensity activity. Current sports and exercise policies have to date been unsuccessful in getting citizens to engage in physical activity sufficiently. This means that there is a disconnect between citizens themselves, policies and the social challenge. In order to better understand this issue and gain insight into potential solutions, in this study we will explore the conceptions of citizens that private citizens and policymakers have in respect of sports and exercise. We interviewed 26 private citizens and 16 policymakers. By presenting them with fictitious but realistic policy options, we uncovered which policy options they believed best aligned with people and what their views on people were. How much support do people need, are non-committal measures sufficient, would any *nudges* be required or beneficial?

Our principal finding is that the conceptions of citizens and policy preferences of private citizens and policymakers in respect of exercise and physical activity are broadly similar. Both groups share conceptions of citizens that are both autonomous and relational. Within this view, human beings are autonomous, averse to authority and can and will make their own choices. At the same time, both groups believe that people's choices are largely shaped by their (social) environment and that people do not always make the choices they actually want to make. This indicates a preference in favour of policy interventions that are not coercive or 'patronising', which align with people's intrinsic sense of motivation and are based on an individual approach, that are low-threshold and socially oriented and/or encourage healthy exercise behaviour in children. These shared preferences provide opportunities for *supported* and *legitimate* policies that aligns with the conceptions of citizens of private citizens and policymakers. At the same time, these shared conceptions of citizens equally entail certain limitations in terms of developing *effective* policies. The challenge of getting people to engage in physical activity requires a behavioural change on the part of citizens at a structural level. Current policies have thus far been unsuccessful in bringing about that change. However, policies that go beyond current policy parameters are easily seen as overly intrusive or patronising. This creates tension between the shared conceptions of citizens and the social challenge. Moreover, because the world view of humans as autonomous beings is so widely shared and taken for granted, this entails certain risks. People who do not fit within this world view, for example, may fall by the wayside, inconsistencies in the conceptions of citizens may easily be missed and any solutions that fall outside this world view may potentially be overlooked.

In the following sections, we summarise the findings and outline the conclusions in greater detail.

The conceptions of citizens of private citizens and policymakers

Autonomous as well as relational conceptions of citizens

Broadly speaking, we have identified a large number of similarities in the preferences and underlying assumptions of policymakers and the citizens that we interviewed. In both groups we identified the world view of human beings as autonomous agents, who are averse to authority and who can and will make their own choices. At the same time, those choices are largely shaped by their (social) environment and human beings within these conceptions of citizens do not always make the choices they actually want to make. Both groups value freedom of choice and autonomy. Human beings want and are able to make their own decisions; policies should not compel or oblige people to do anything, impose anything and, above all, not patronise them. They expect this to apply not only to themselves but also to fellow

human beings in general. They believe that coercion is counterproductive because it is detrimental to people's intrinsic sense of motivation. The behaviour of these autonomous individuals is largely driven by intrinsic motivation and this motivation is regarded by participants as an important prerequisite for exercise and physical activity. People have to want to engage themselves. However, both groups believe that children are a key exception to this. Children must acquire and adopt healthy exercising habits and (sports) skills from an early age. Both citizens and policymakers alike therefore value compulsory physical education (PE) lessons in schools.

At the same time, fostering intrinsic motivation is not easy. The responses from both policymakers and citizens show that they believe that people's behaviour is largely determined by the social environment and is partly shaped during childhood. This, for example, includes the role of parenting and role model behaviour, other competing priorities and incentives, and social inclusion and exclusion: do people feel comfortable in a sports environment? Positive and negative experiences and associations likewise play a role in this regard, in addition to the exercise behaviour of others in their environment and opportunities to participate in those activities. Although both groups see intrinsic motivation as a key prerequisite for behaviour, they do not always seem to distinguish that motivation from people's habits. Moreover, participants implicitly make a distinction between the desire to engage in more exercise or physical activity – which many people possess – and the motivation to take specific steps to do so, which they believe many people lack. They believe that most people are aware that exercise is good for them and want to engage in physical activity, but nevertheless do not always do so (please also see WRR 2017 on 'capacity to act').

In short, citizens and policymakers are aware that wanting and being aware of something does not always lead to doing a thing, and they do not regard people as entirely rational beings. They attach great value to autonomy as 'status' and to the notion that people can make decisions about their own lives. However, not all of them appear convinced that people always possess autonomy as 'capacity', the ability to actually decide and act according to their own values, preferences and plans (Mackenzie 2019). Participants, however, believe that human beings are clearly social creatures. According to the participants, their social surroundings can help them exercise more, for example, by joining a sports club or by taking regular walks with neighbours. In this instance, we can identify conceptions of citizens based on relationships, in which human beings at their core are social beings, whose behaviour and decisions are embedded in a social context and partly dependent on others (see also Bakker-Klein 2019; Mackenzie 2019; Walker 2007).

Groups of citizens and their barriers

Participants believe that personal motivation and social surroundings play a key role in differences in exercise and physical activity behaviour. The interviews show that people have different motives as to whether or not to exercise and may experience different types of barriers. Citizens and policymakers made an implicit and, occasionally, explicit distinction between three groups of people:

- 1 people who want to engage in physical activity and do so;
- 2 people who do not exercise (enough) or engage in physical activity because they do not want to;
- 3 people who want to exercise (more), but don't.

Most citizens, and policymakers in particular, feel that the first group requires little policy steering, given that they already get sufficient exercise. However, a number of citizens who were interviewed, feel that this 'good behaviour' ought to be rewarded and encouraged. This is especially true for citizens who believe that this would motivate them personally.

The second group is similarly not a priority for the citizens and policymakers who were interviewed. Their reasoning is that if people really do not want to do something, their behaviour is hard to change through policy. The citizens who were interviewed often have a negative image of this group, who in principle are *able* to get enough exercise but do not *want* to, especially when the behaviour of that group has an impact on society, for example, in the form of rising healthcare costs. Nevertheless, they do not believe that this group should be compelled to modify their behaviour, although rewarding those who do get enough exercise could be seen as implicitly sanctioning those who do not engage in enough physical activity.

The citizens who were interviewed had different, occasionally negative, views on the third group, but more often than not without any strong moral judgment involved. Many respondents identified with this group or saw traits of this group reflected in people in their own surroundings. They feel the characteristics paint a picture of someone with a busy life, combining work, caring for their family and managing the household, who has very little time and energy to exercise or engage in physical activity. On the other hand, respondents cited the 'society of convenience', in which digital options seduce people into staying on the sofa. Occasionally, these impressions can go hand in hand: that of the working parent, who doesn't feel like going out for a walk after a long day at work. People who lead busy lives or are lazy are able to get enough exercise, but seem to mostly perceive small, surmountable barriers to taking action and could often do more than they believe they can. According to the citizens who were interviewed, people may have valid reasons for not getting (enough) exercise or physical activity, such as genuinely not having any time to exercise, or not having the money or having a safe place to do activities. However, citizens feel that people generally do not have valid reasons. Policymakers likewise stress that for the average person, money or access are not the principal barriers to increasing exercise and physical activity. Most respondents, with citizens in particular, felt that the responsibility to change their behaviour or not principally lay with people themselves.

Finally, the citizens and policymakers who were interviewed, felt that there are specific groups of people who *do* perceive there to be significant barriers, due to their having financial difficulties, having a physical disability or not feeling safe or excluded. They believe it is vital that policies should alleviate these barriers in order for these people likewise to have access to exercise and physical activity. They feel that people who want to exercise should be given opportunities to do so. We identified a positive view of people with a physical disability among respondents, as being people who have a lot of capabilities and are highly motivated as long as they are provided with the appropriate opportunities and facilities, such as transport or assistance. However, the experiences of respondents who themselves have a physical disability reveal that the guidelines on exercise – including if given support – are not always feasible for them and that getting the appropriate facilities is not easy in practice. The available support does not always match their specific needs, meaning they have to put in more effort or have less choice when it comes to exercise or physical activity. In theory, they are *able* to take part, but in actual fact feel that they are not *allowed* to participate. Social exclusion also plays a role in this sense of not being able to participate. The feeling of not fitting in at the gym or at a sports club simply because someone's body looks different from the norm is an issue that regularly comes up in the interviews.

What does this teach us more generally about the relationship between conceptions of citizens and the policy preferences of private citizens and policymakers? This study shows that seemingly opposing normative and empirical conceptions of citizens, e.g. conceptions of how humans ought to act (autonomous) versus the image of what people are really like (relational), can coincide. It shows that normative idealised views can have an impact in empirical conceptions of citizens when people assume that the behaviour of others is based on the values that they themselves consider important. It also shows that the normative ideal can sometimes outweigh the empirical conceptions of citizens within the preferences for policy interventions. Some of the participants put autonomy and freedom of choice first, even though they believed that fostering intrinsic motivation and personal responsibility is not enough to encourage people to change their behaviour.

Differences between private citizens and policymakers

In broad strokes, the conceptions of citizens of policymakers and private citizens align: we can identify largely the same common threads in both groups. Nevertheless, if we take a closer look, there are a number of differences between private citizens as a group and between private citizens and policymakers.

Firstly, there are differences between private citizens in terms of their views on people's individual sense of responsibility and self-reliance. Some respondents see a role for government in terms of making exercise easier, whereas others feel that people themselves are responsible for taking steps and believe that policies should stick to enabling people. This is also one aspect where there is a difference between policymakers and private citizens. Private citizens appear to place more value on individual responsibility,

self-reliance and personal discipline than policymakers. These citizens believe that people are aware that getting more exercise is healthier and therefore are quickly to regard government campaigns on the subject as patronising (see also 'S Jongers 2022; Van Meurs 2023). A number of citizen respondents also believe that if we really want something, we can do it.

Policymakers seem to regard the distance between wanting and doing a thing as somewhat greater. They cite the fact that being aware that exercise is healthy is not the same as knowing how to approach and shape the issue concretely. Policymakers are also generally marginally more positive in respect of the interventions that make getting exercise easier than private citizens. They also highlight the fact that getting more exercise is often easier than citizens think – taking walks, cycling or taking the stairs can already constitute an improvement. This may have a paradoxical impact: the guidance that people perceive as being patronising because people do not like the government telling them what to do may require them to do less than they expect from themselves.

Conversely, private citizens are slightly more likely to hold faith in the effectiveness of *incentives*, such as a discount in health insurance when getting enough exercise. Most respondents who felt this was a good idea indicated that they found it an appealing option for their own circumstances. Self-interest may well play a key role in this context. Another element that citizens value in *incentives* is that of rewarding 'good' behaviour. We have also identified enthusiasm for the policy option of rewarding volunteers as sports clubs for the same reason. Many participants believe this is good and important but generally do not believe that such a reward genuinely leads to people being motivated to volunteer or exercise more. In addition, some fear that rewarding 'good' behaviour causes intrinsic motivation to be converted into extrinsic motivation. If that happens, there is a chance that, for this group of people similarly, the reward will thereafter be a prerequisite for continuing to exercise or volunteer for a sports club where this was not the case before.

Furthermore, we have identified a difference between the views of people in general and the experiences of people who fall outside the image people have of the average human being. Most private citizens and policymakers who were interviewed believe that everyone will eventually be able to get sufficient exercise given the right support. People who feel that they cannot meet requirements of the guidance for physical activity due to a physical disability are bothered by the fact that the general guidance is not suited to them and feel that getting the right support is not a given. When policies provide opportunities for people to be *able* to exercise but these options do not align with what people can or want to do, or where making use of these options requires a great deal of effort, this can be perceived as a form of exclusion – of not truly being *allowed* to participate.

More generally, what does this teach us about the differences and similarities between the conceptions of citizens of private citizens and policymakers and their policy preferences? Firstly, this study shows that both private citizens and policymakers identify a gap between being able and wanting to exhibit behaviour, on the one hand, and actual behaviour, on the other. However, it also shows that they have different views on how to bridge that gap. Citizens seem to place more responsibility on individuals and on their sense of motivation: if people genuinely want to do something, they are able to do it. Private citizens also appear more likely to think that *incentives* can be beneficial in this regard. Policymakers appear to place the element of responsibility slightly more outside of individuals themselves and more onto their environment – a perspective they often back up with insights from (scientific) research.

Potential reasons to account for the shared conceptions of citizens

The significant overlap between private citizens and policymakers in their conceptions of citizens and preferences may be due to fact that sports and exercise policies have not been politicised much, if at all. It is an issue that has traditionally had little government involvement. Exercise and physical activity policy is non-committal and mainly facilitative and encouraging. Exercise and physical activity play a role in people's lives. Many people exercise and engage in physical activity and enjoy doing so and benefit from this. The percentage of people who do not exercise (enough) are often also aware of this. People also

cite the fact that exercise and physical activity touches on a number of challenges facing society, such as prevention and quality of life. We know from a recent study that most people (89%) do indeed believe it is (very) important that most people in the Netherlands live as healthy a life as possible. They also believe it is good that promoting a healthy lifestyle is a government objective, as long as primary responsibility is situated with citizens themselves (Wagemans and Peters 2023). At the same time, the lack of sufficient exercise and its consequences are not regarded by private citizens as one of the most important social challenges in the Netherlands (Geurkink et al. 2023).

People express more of a sense of urgency when exercise is related to social exclusion. Exercise and physical activity is an important issue to groups that deviate from the norm and experience social exclusion. To them, countering social exclusion is an important responsibility of government. However, for interviewees who themselves belong to the majority category, intervening on the issue of social inclusion is quickly regarded as positive discrimination and has negative connotations to them.

The conceptions of citizens and the policy preferences that we identified in this study are not limited to this policy dossier which has not subject to little politicisation. They reflect a more widely held ideal of self-reliance, autonomy and individual freedom in our cultural and social tradition (Peeters and Drosterij 2012; Van Rooij et al. 2019; RVS 2021). Similarly, the aversion to nudging, ‘patronising’ or coercive government measures of private citizens extends beyond the issue of exercise and physical activity to a whole range of social issues (Wagemans and Peters 2023). The same underlying conceptions of citizens reflected in a parallel research project on the conceptions of citizens and policy preferences of private citizens and policymakers in respect of policies relating to lifelong learning in which freedom of choice and intrinsic motivation likewise play an important role (Blijleven et al. 2023; Sarwary et al., yet to be published). These conceptions of citizens are part of a widely-shared culture.

Potential impact of the widely-shared conceptions of citizens

Basis for supported policies

Broad consensus on conceptions of citizens between policymakers and citizens may have a positive impact on support for exercise policies. Policies pursued based on the same notions of responsibility and freedom that are prevalent in society will attract more support than policies pursued from a very different perspective. This report provides several points of departure for policies in the area of exercise and physical activity that align with the conceptions of citizens of both groups. This involves enabling people to take part in exercise, for example through enough green spaces in districts, but also by facilitating exercise for the elderly and people with disabilities. Good transport facilities, for example, play an important role for these people. In order to promote exercise among people who in principle can take part in exercise but are not motivated, it is possible to capitalise on people’s social context. One particular aspect that recurs frequently in the interviews is that people enjoy exercising or engaging in physical activity together and that this is a way of ensuring participants stay highly motivated. Supporting local initiatives, such as rambling clubs or sports clubs, is seen as a non-coercive but promising way to encourage people to exercise more.

Tension between the shared conceptions of citizens and the social challenge

While consensus between policymakers and citizens can help build support, it does not necessarily lead to solving the social challenge of getting people to exercise. For both policymakers and private citizens, the dominant conceptions of citizens may not reflect reality or at least may not highlight all aspects of reality. Addressing the challenge in society may therefore require ideas that fall outside of the dominant conceptions of citizens and to actively engage in out-of-the-box thinking (also see Gebhardt and Feijten 2022; Van Rooij et al. 2019).

Many private citizens and policymakers have indicated that policies aimed at compelling people, such as making something mandatory, are counterproductive, and that getting sufficient exercise should come from people’s intrinsic sense of motivation. Another study has also shown that a healthy lifestyle is regarded by a lot of people as an individual responsibility and that the government is mainly given an

encouraging and facilitating role (Wagemans and Peters 2023). At the same time, the citizens and policy-makers who were surveyed argue that this sense of motivation is not always present and another study also shows that a lot of people do not exercise enough (Statistics Netherlands (CBS) and RIVM 2022). A person's individual sense of responsibility is often not enough to bring about behavioural change (WRR 2017). This is especially the case in an environment that complicates the desired behaviour of getting sufficient physical activity, in part due to technological developments such as electric bikes and delivery services (Netherlands Sports Council (Nederlandse Sportsraad) 2024). If the policy objective therefore is to get people to engage in physical activity more, but the policy is based on free and responsible citizens and relies on citizens' intrinsic motivation, the question is whether the policy objective can be achieved. Sometimes the conception of citizens that people are motivated and it is better for the government to be restrained can clash with the reality of human behaviour, which, in this case, is the fact that people often do not exercise enough anyway (RIVM 2023). A merely enabling government may not be enough in that case.

Indeed, in the interviews, both policymakers and private citizens are quick to push aside some of the ideas for getting people to exercise and engage in physical activity more. Ideas that people feel are overly coercive, as well as more subtle forms, such as nudging, are quickly labelled 'patronising'. Not only is this word a go-to term for citizens and policymakers in respect of measures that go beyond simply enabling or facilitating exercise, but former State Secretary Van Ark likewise used the term in respect of what she considered overly far-reaching exercise and physical activity policies, as recorded in the NRC newspaper (Van Steenberghe 2023). It is not inconceivable that a percentage of people would stand to benefit from policies that go slightly further than simply facilitating exercise and physical activity. That percentage would, for example, relate to people who would like to exercise more, but just need a little bit more of a push to take action, such as leaving the car in the drive more often. Making it harder to rely on their car might make them opt in favour of cycling, although such measures are considered patronising within the dominant conceptions of citizens. However, there are past examples that show that the government can indeed be successful in establishing certain standards, even when this goes against the notion of the autonomous, rational individual and a restrained government. Making it compulsory to wear seatbelts in cars or banning smoking in pubs and restaurants were both met with strong reactions both prior and immediately after the introduction of these policies. After some time, however, the measures were no longer seen as patronising by a large percentage of people, but rather as the new normal. Making policy that aligns with the conceptions of citizens of most private citizens stands in the way of some of the more far-reaching policies that may be necessary.

In addition, our results show that groups may be falling by the wayside because they do not conform to the dominant conceptions of citizens. The notion that everyone can exercise, occasionally with assistance, is widely held among participants. Occasionally they make exceptions for people with physical disabilities, however this sometimes ignores people who fall outside the norm for other reasons and do not feel at home in gyms and in the voluntary sector and feel unsafe in a park. Even when these people *can* in principle exercise, they may nevertheless feel that they are not *allowed* to participate in exercise. These feelings of social exclusion can easily be overlooked, especially when the impression of everyone having easy access to exercise and physical activity is so prevalent. Behaviour that does not fit the ideal image can then be perceived as irrational or lazy, while, viewed in context or from a different perspective, it may be reasonable or understandable (Baillergeau and Duyvendak 2016).

This picture also contains the implicit inference that if a person cannot meet the standard for exercise or physical activity, this is their own fault, which further increases people's social exclusion. Indeed, empirical notions of what we think people are like often also implicitly have normative overtones. Policies that favour specific groups to increase social inclusion are easily identified as positive discrimination – a term which mostly evokes negative associations among our participants.

Broad-based perspectives for policy

If politicians and the government want to do more to get citizens moving, it would be prudent to reflect carefully about the dilemma between support and decisiveness. When reflecting within the dominant conceptions of citizens, we can identify a number of starting points for policy on exercise and physical activity.

Starting points for policies within the dominant conceptions of citizens

- **Connect with people's intrinsic sense of motivation.** There is a preference among the policymakers and citizens interviewed for interventions that match people's intrinsic motivation rather than external incentives. Both groups believe that motivation is an important prerequisite for sports and exercise. They believe it is difficult to influence that motivation but that interventions can align with that motivation or can help uncover that motivation. This includes interventions that help people find an activity or exercise environment that suits them or facilitating a wide range of exercise or physical activity options.
- **Ensure a personalised approach.** Policymakers and citizens prefer interventions with a personalised approach that takes into account the various barriers people experience. They cite interventions that rely on personal contact, such as providing a coach or trainer when exercising or encouraging group activities that people can join. In short, the interventions required bespoke solutions. An as yet unmentioned reason why participants dislike blanket prohibitions or commands is because those interventions would not sufficiently take into account people's personal circumstances. The private citizens who were interviewed want the government to trust them. They feel that interventions relating to exercise and physical activity should be based on good intentions – even if they believe that not all citizens always have them.
- **Encourage easily accessible and social exercise activities.** Both citizens and policymakers value the promotion of easily accessible and social exercise activities. Examples they cite include encouraging and facilitating small-scale groups for exercise or physical activity where the social aspect plays an important role, or, for example, cycling lessons in a familiar and trusted environment. They also cite encouraging everyday exercise, such as walking or cycling for groceries. In that context, people have to take action to exercise themselves, but this is an easy and manageable step. A group aspect also provides a reinforcing mechanism. Private citizens also cite the active but non-committal encouragement of exercise at work and policymakers cite ensuring a green environment that invites people to cycle and take walks.
- **Ensure an environment that encourages children to exercise.** Both the citizens and policymakers see an important role for the government in ensuring an environment that encourages children to exercise, for example at schools and sports clubs. This will allow children to learn health habits and sports skills. Unlike with adults, the government can and should take a more directive stance in this context: children need exercise. However, the interviewees yet again believe it is vital to align with children's intrinsic sense of motivation and above all allow them to experience the enjoyment of exercise.
- **Ensure that support not only contributes to 'being able to' but also to 'being allowed to'.** The respondents have a preference for supporting people in exercising that contributes not only to people 'being able to' participate but to people feeling 'allowed' to participate. This applies to and according to groups that cannot or can hardly participate without support. When removing financial or physical barriers and providing opportunities for people with physical disabilities, the elderly or those with financial difficulties, for example, freedom of choice is just as important as for the other groups. According to respondents, this means enabling a sport or means of physical activity that suits the individual. Both the citizens and local policymakers who were interviewed mentioned that, in their view, this calls for policymakers and professionals who listen to the target group and do not decide what will help them on their behalf. However, according to some, it also means not wanting to force everything to be accessible. If a sports club is not really motivated to offer an inclusive range of exercise options, or if there is no demand for it, this will do little to make people feel included.

Broadly based: New ways forward for policy on exercise and physical activity

These starting points seem to provide scope for the government to do more to promote exercise and physical activity in a way that is consistent with the dominant autonomous and relational conceptions of citizens. The question is whether these starting points, operating within the dominant conceptions of citizens, are sufficient to take adequate steps to really move forward with policy on exercise and physical activity and thereby make people live healthier lives for longer. If we, as a society, consider it important to live healthier lives for longer, it is crucial that we have a debate in society about this issue, while also challenging the underlying ideology. The key issues in this context are how far the government can or should go to get people exercising and which clever new ideas can be devised to get there (Pool 2023). The dominant conceptions of citizens are so widely held that they are difficult to escape, so it is prudent to consciously look for ideas in practice and in science that do not fit within the dominant view. This also requires bold political and policy action. There are various schools of thought in respect of this social debate:

1 Introducing new standards by being more proactive

Politicians and government agencies could introduce new standards by being more proactive. This is no easy task, given that this goes against the way exercise and physical activity has been dealt with thus far. Perhaps politicians and policymakers can gain inspiration in other areas. Indeed, regulations do exist to make healthy behaviour easier or cheaper and unhealthy behaviour harder or more expensive, such as rules that prevent supermarkets from selling spirits. For example, the Netherlands Sports Council (2024) recommends that standards be established for different environments, such as work, education, childcare and the spatial environment that make more exercise the logical step. This could be achieved, for example, by ‘introducing an exercise impact report for the living environment or by including more specific targets in laws and related documents’. This could include standards incorporated into the Environment and Planning Act for healthy and exercise-friendly neighbourhoods or guidance for sufficient exercise in the quality requirements for childcare (Netherlands Sports Council 2024).

2 Embed policy objectives on health to make them less non-committal

Another school of thought is to enshrine health-related policy objectives in law to make them less non-committal, as with climate targets and budget deficit standards.¹ This can be achieved by agreeing on a commitment of efforts: politicians can require themselves to produce a comprehensive plan by a certain date. It could also be achieved through a performance requirement, with a certain percentage of the population having to meet the exercise standard for a specific year. In that situation, the ministers concerned would have to be more accountable for their policies and their results and will be made to respond to questions on their efforts to a greater degree.

These two schools of thought are at odds with the desire for non-committal measures, however, examples from other policy areas show that more drastic measures for the sake of people’s health and safety can eventually evolve into a socially-accepted norm, such as in the case of the crash helmet or safety belt obligation, or the smoking ban *inter alia* in hospitality establishments, at work, in public buildings and in schoolyards. In the case of tobacco control policies, we know that although these measures were initially met with resistance, support for them grew after their introduction (Kantar Public 2022; Luís and Palma-Oliveira 2016; Willemsen and Been 2022). Government action can therefore also help change the norm. Seat belts and smoke-free buildings are now seen as normal.

Moreover, many of the example interventions discussed do not focus on the individual, but on the environment, in order to encourage physical activity and exercise through that route. This allows the government to more actively encourage healthy habits in adults without coercion. Unconscious behavioural change (nudging) can be achieved by making the undesirable behaviour more difficult or costly and by making the desired behaviour easier or by encouraging it. Nudging does involve an ethical debate about its desirability and how the government can use it (Schmidt and Engelen 2020).

¹ For example, this was advocated by Jochen Mierau, Professor of Public Health Economics at the University of Groningen and the UMCG in an article in *de Volkskrant* on 17 January 2024 (Mudde 2024).

Opponents, for example, fear interference with people's autonomy. One misconception in this regard is that even without deliberate nudging, some choices are more obvious than others. No setup, however, is entirely neutral. Transparency regarding the intervention and its purpose is crucial in this regard.

3 Take a positive approach

In addition, there are other far-reaching schools of thought that present options which are not coercive and are based on a positive incentive. An existing example is the inclusion of the combined lifestyle intervention (*gecombineerde leefstijlinterventie*, GLI) in the basic health insurance package. The GLI helps people suffering from obesity exercise more and eat a healthy diet (RIVM n.d.). Along those lines, other positive incentives to encourage exercise could be conceived of, such as offering free exercise opportunities, potentially linked to locations where people work or through health insurance companies.

In order to garner as much support as possible, it is vital to engage with different groups in society. When it comes to policies that make the undesirable choice more difficult, make it more expensive, or even mandate or ban it, it would be beneficial to gain insight into what this means for the people affected. After all, some people depend on their car, including to get to a sports venue. Rewarding people who exercise enough comes at the expense of those who cannot exercise and more coercive measures are bound to be met with resistance. In this context, it would be beneficial to actively involve civic organisations and at an early stage as well.

However, it is difficult to escape the dominant conceptions of citizens without consciously recognising and facing it and looking for other ideas. This applies not only to sports and exercise policy but also to other issues where the notion of a restrained but facilitating government and of autonomous and responsible citizens plays a major role. Reflecting on what blind spots this creates and what we could do about them is a good first step in terms of breaking the thought pattern, allowing new ideas to penetrate and serving groups of people who do not conform to the dominant conceptions of citizens.

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