The unparalleled growth in the scale, complexity and profile of the Olympics over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – although a symptom of the historical success of the event and its governance – has generated a myriad of risks for organisers. In recent times this has reached a potential tipping point, leading the Olympic Games Study Commission (2002, p. 16) to report that ‘...[t]he Games have reached a critical size which may put their future success at risk if the size continues to increase.’ There is concern that continued growth of the event could threaten its long-term viability, such that in the future cities might be put off from bidding to host the Games if the risks are perceived as being too great – just as the public of the US city of Denver rejected a referendum for state funding of the 1976 Winter Olympics due to concern over rising costs and the environmental impacts of the event.

Long-term trends in the scale and scope of the Olympics provide important insights into simultaneous growth in the pressures of event planning and management. While the Olympic Games staged in Athens in 1896 was arguably the world’s first major international sporting event and the largest and most ambitious of its era, the event has grown at a rapid rate since its revival. Across all possible categories of governance and event management, it has grown from its modest origins: the programme of sporting competition is larger and more diverse; there are more competitors, officials, frontline staff and volunteers; the cost of staging the Games has continued to rise as have revenues from the commercial activities of both the IOC and host OCOGs; the construction programmes have become ever grander and more ambitious, transforming the infrastructure and urban environment of host cities; the economic benefits of hosting the Games
have acquired increasing weight with applicant cities; the number of live spectators and television viewers has grown; the policing and security requirements for hosting the Games have escalated; the duration and demands of project management have expanded; and the Olympic brand has become ubiquitous, with the Olympics now organised under intense and constant scrutiny from the point of the initial bid to the closing ceremony of the Games and beyond.

To provide a broad overview of the rate of historical growth in the magnitude of the Olympic Games, a number of variables provide basic measures of event size and scope that are both reliable and consistent over time. The overall scale of the sporting programme has grown at a considerable rate since the first modern Olympics held in 1896 (and since the first Winter Olympics in Chamonix in 1924). This trend can be illustrated both with the number of events included in each Summer and Winter Olympics and with the number of competitors, each of which is plotted in Figure 2.1. Both measures indicate that the size of the event has increased at a growing rate over time. Even these measures cannot provide a full picture of the scale of organisational task associated with staging the event. There are knock-on effects of the inclusion of additional sports and events in the Olympic programme. As the Olympic Games Study Commission (2003, p. 9) observes, these ‘...lead directly to increases in team numbers, technical officials, OCOG workforce, the number and size of venues and facilities, infrastructure, security, volunteers, technology and services such as accommodation, transport, meals, accreditation, cleaning and waste’. Interdependencies across all functional areas of the Olympic programme therefore mean that growth in the number of competitors and accredited officials, facilities and services ‘directly impact the workforce requirements, complexity and costs in other related functions’ (Olympic Games Study Commission 2003, p. 11). Headline figures of the number of competitors and sporting events represent the tip of the iceberg, then, contributing to the increased cost and complexity of the Games across all areas of its organisation.

Further to this, the widening level of international participation can be shown with the number of participating NOCs, also presented in Figure 2.1. Over time, the Olympics has expanded to become a truly global mega-event – far beyond its mainly European and North American origins. While the Olympics is a much larger event today than it was in 1896, the rate of growth across all these measures has plateaued, somewhat, in the past decade or so. This is unsurprising given the increasing concern of the IOC over the unsustainable growth in size of the event.