

MONITORING & TRACKING THE FIELD



CFLRI'S BULLETIN SERIES MONITORING SPORT AND RECREATION IN CANADA

Participation in Sport

According to the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute's 2019-2021 Physical Activity Monitor (PAM), just over one-quarter (27%) of adults participate in sport. By definition, sport includes physical activities that usually involve competition, rules, and develops specific skills. There are no significant differences in participation rates by regions across the country.

Sport participants were asked how regularly they have participated in sport in the past 12 months. Among participants,

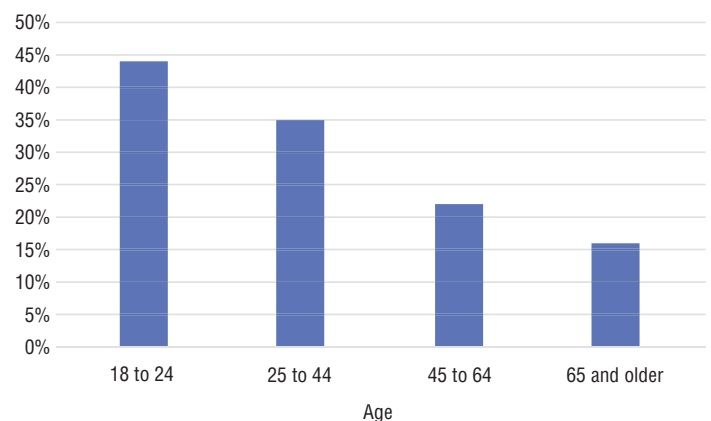
- 23% participate every month of the year,
- 30% participate 6 to 11 months,
- 37% report participating 1 to 5 months, and
- 11% report not participating at all.

Moreover, sport participants were also asked how frequently they participated during these months. Among participants:

- 19% participate at least 4 times per week,
- 39% say 2 to 3 times per week,
- 23% report participating once a week, and
- 18% participate several times per month or less often, or in a variable manner.

Participation varies by age and gender. A substantially higher percentage of men (36%) participate in sport compared to women (19%). Participation generally decreases considerably with increasing age (i.e., from 44% of 18 to 24 year olds to 16% of adults 65 years and older).

Figure 1: Sport participation by age



CFLRI, 2019-2021 Physical Activity Monitor

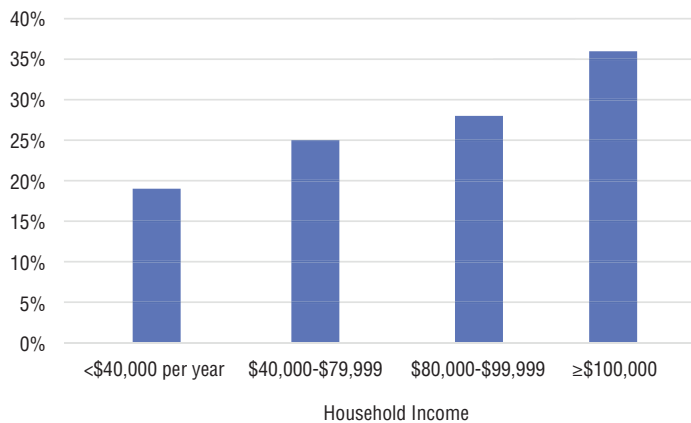
Frequency of participation also varies by age. A greater percentage of adults aged 25 to 44 years report participating in sport once a week compared to adults 65 years and older, whereas the opposite relationship is true for those reporting more participation at 2 to 3 times per week. Adults aged 18 to 24 years are most likely to report participating at least 4 days per week.

A substantially higher percentage of men participate in sport compared to women.

A greater percentage of adults with a university degree (30%) report participating in sport compared to those with less than a high school education (18%). The percentage of adults participating in sport generally increases with increasing household income levels, with 36% of adults living in households with annual incomes of at least \$100,000 indicating they participated compared to 19% of adults living in households with annual incomes of less than \$40,000. A greater percentage of adults who are single or never married (35%) participate in sport compared to 27% of those who are married or living with a partner, who in turn, are more likely to participate compared to those who are widowed, divorced or separated (14%).

A greater percentage of adults with a university degree report participating in sport compared to those with less than a high school education.

Figure 2: Sport participation by household income



CFMRI, 2019-2021 Physical Activity Monitor



Discussion

Regular participation in sport is an important component to overall health and well-being. The benefits of participating in sport extend beyond just the physical to include psychological and social benefits as well.¹ Research has shown that despite the known benefits of regular physical activity and sport, a sizable portion of the Canadian population remains less active. Sport participation among adults has varied little over the years. Similar to the current findings, previous estimates (from the 2016-2018 PAM), also showed that about a quarter (25%) of the adult population (aged 18 years and older) had participated in sport.² Similar findings were also reported in the 2016 General Social Survey (GSS), where 27% of Canadians (aged 15 years and older) said they regularly participated in sports.³ Although participation in sport is low among adults in general, research has shown that certain groups within the population consistently demonstrate lower participation rates and that participation rates vary by certain socio-demographic factors. For example, this study found that sport participation was higher among men, young adults, those living in higher income households and those with a higher level of education. These socio-demographic differences in sport participation noted in this study have persisted over time and is similarly reported in other studies.^{2, 3} Other studies have noted a difference in sport participation by ethnicity. According to the 2016 GSS, sport participation did not differ among Indigenous peoples (26%) and other ethnic groups (25%) compared to the national average (27%), however, a lower rate of sport participation was observed among immigrants (21%) compared to Canadians overall.³

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on the health and well-being of Canadians. There is growing evidence in the literature demonstrating changes to movement behaviours among Canadians, as public health restrictions and lockdowns have made it increasingly challenging for some to stay active. While physical activity levels among Canadian adults may not have changed drastically, research is showing that *where* and *how* individuals are active has changed during the pandemic.⁴

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Data examining the impact of the pandemic on sport participation specifically is not well-established, however, there is some evidence to support a negative impact on the sport sector. A national survey examining the impact of COVID-19 on local sport organizations found that almost all (99%) of clubs were affected to some extent (e.g., loss of revenue, closures, staff shortages).⁵ Local sport organizations are key drivers for sport participation in the community and according to these organizations, 65% offer programming specifically for adults and 30% service older adults.⁵ During the pandemic, about three-quarters of local sport organizations reported temporary closures and one in four indicated they were operational but with modifications.⁵ In addition to being faced with challenges in accessing programs and services, many Canadians are grappling with fears and anxiety about returning to organized sport, and thus sport providers are being faced with a unique challenge to address these fears and concerns.⁶ CFLRI research will explore these factors in upcoming bulletin releases in this series. The Canadian Parks and Recreation Association's Re-Imagine RREC-Renew, Retool, Engage, Contribute (RREC) report calls for additional research to monitor physical activity and sport participation behaviours to get a better sense of the long-term impact of the pandemic on movement behaviours of Canadians.⁶

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS



Consider new ways to stay active

The pandemic may have caused a decline in participation in organized sport and physical activities, however interest and use of parks and trails, outdoor activity and unstructured leisure activities has increased during this time.⁶ To capitalize on this, promotional efforts could focus on highlighting alternate ways to be active during and after the pandemic, such as participating in outdoor and unstructured activities where the risk of transmission is lower. Examples of outdoor activities may include running, walking or wheeling, cycling, swimming, hiking, skating and cross-country skiing. Many Canadians have experienced financial hardships during the pandemic,⁷ and so educating the public about ways to be active that are relatively inexpensive, safe and that can be done alone or together as a family may be particularly effective for increasing participation.



Consider adapting existing programs and practices

To encourage participation, sport organizations may need to consider adapting existing practices and programs/facilities.⁶ Outdoor activities have become increasingly favourable and as a result, outdoor facilities (e.g., trails) may need to be improved to allow for year-round participation (e.g., maintaining in all seasons).⁶ Developing additional program options, such as virtual programming or training, for individuals who may still be reluctant to return to in-person programming may be an important strategy for retaining

membership. Virtual programs also have the added benefit of reaching a broader audience, allowing more to participate, such as those who face challenges with travel or live in rural and remote areas, thus potentially increasing revenues for organizations.⁶ Sport organizations may need to reconsider scheduling to adjust capacity limits to reduce the amount of contact between participants. Staggering programs will allow for cleaning/sanitization between groups and time for ventilation, thus reducing the risk of transmission.⁶



Financial supports

With growing concerns around the safe return to indoor activities, sport and physical activity providers will require financial support from governments to help make improvements to the design and operation of new and/or existing facilities. The aim here will be to restore public faith in returning to in-person programs by reducing the risk of transmission as well as to ensure that these facilities/programs are adaptable and less susceptible to future disruptions. Changes that may be considered include; use of hygienic materials that can be easily cleaned; updating ventilation systems for improved air flow to reduce the risk of transmission indoors; and improved change room and shower design to allow for physical distancing.⁶ Sport and physical activity providers are facing many challenges due to the pandemic, chief among them being staffing shortages. Staff and volunteers are integral to delivery of these programs and services, therefore funding support for the recruitment and training of new staff and volunteers will be important.

References

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⁴ Watt, J., Colley, RC. 2021. Youth-but not adults-report less physical activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistics Canada. Available from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2021001/article/00032-eng.htm>

⁵ Sport for Life. 2020. Impacts of COVID-19 on Local Sport Organizations-Nationwide Survey Results. Accessed from: <https://sportforlife.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/National-Report-Impacts-of-COVID-19-on-Local-Sports-Organizations-1.pdf>

⁶ Canadian Parks and Recreation Association. 2021. ReImagine RREC-Renew, Retool, Engage, Contribute. Reimagining Parks, Recreation and Community Sport: Highlights Report. Available from: https://cpca.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ReImagine_RREC_highlightsEN-2.pdf

⁷ Statistics Canada. 2020. The Social and Economic Impacts of COVID-19: A Six-Month Update, Key findings. Available from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-631-x/2020004/conclusions-eng.htm>



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