



Victorian participation in organised sport

Research highlights

About this research

This research provides a picture of participation in organised community sport in Victoria. It was carried out with collaboration from a range of state sporting associations, government, peak sporting organisations and universities to support the future planning for seven Victorian sports: Australian football, basketball, cricket, hockey, bowls, netball and tennis.

The research used data from over 2.6 million Victorian sport participant records across the seven sports, captured in an online geographical information system (GIS) mapping tool as part of a broader Sport and Recreation Spatial project, developed through a VicHealth Physical Activity Research Practice Fellowship.

As part of the research, four broad themes were investigated:

- participation levels and trends
- influences on participation
- the relationship between facilities and participation
- the health benefits of participation.

This research is unique in its focus on organised community sport participation, and because it also includes an aggregation of participation data from up to seven Victorian state sporting associations. As a result, it offers insights into organised sport participation in Victoria.

This summary highlights key research findings and recommendations for state sporting associations, funders and promoters of sport participation and future research.

Detailed outcomes from the Sport and Recreation Spatial research project are available at www.sportandrecreationspatial.com.au

Key findings

The value of sport

Participation in organised sport is associated with:

- better physical health outcomes, including reduced prevalence of overweight and obesity and type 2 diabetes
- improved social, emotional and psychological wellbeing
- higher self-esteem, better social skills, higher confidence and competence, and fewer depressive symptoms among children and adolescents (Eime et al. 2013a)
- improved wellbeing, reduced stress and distress, and higher social functioning and vitality for adults participating in team sport (Eime et al. 2013b)
- contributing to people's health-enhancing levels of physical activity, with almost a fifth of all such activity occurring through playing club sport (Eime et al. 2015a).

Trends in participation

Participation in sport and recreation among Australians aged 15 years and over generally increased between 2001 and 2010, while participation in organised or club-based sport remained steady (Eime et al. 2015b).

However, capturing younger age groups can present a contrasting trend in organised or club-based sport participation.

Club membership data analysed from across five of the seven Victorian state sporting associations (Australian football, basketball, cricket, hockey and netball), covering those aged four years and older, showed that:

- participation rates in Victoria increased from 7.5 per cent to 8.3 per cent, meaning that over 50,000 more Victorians were playing the organised sports studied in 2012 when compared to 2010
- males have a higher rate of participation in organised sport than females, with this disparity strongest in younger age groups, particularly the five- to nine-year old age group (26 per cent higher)
- across all age groups, participation rates for these sports in regional areas were consistently higher than in metropolitan areas, especially among adults
- young people dominate club sport participation, with the majority of participants in Victoria aged less than 30 years of age
- participation in club sport peaks among the 10 to 14 age group (Eime 2015).

Tracking club members aged five years or older from four popular sports – Australian football, basketball, cricket, netball – over a four-year period, commencing either 2009 or 2010, showed that:

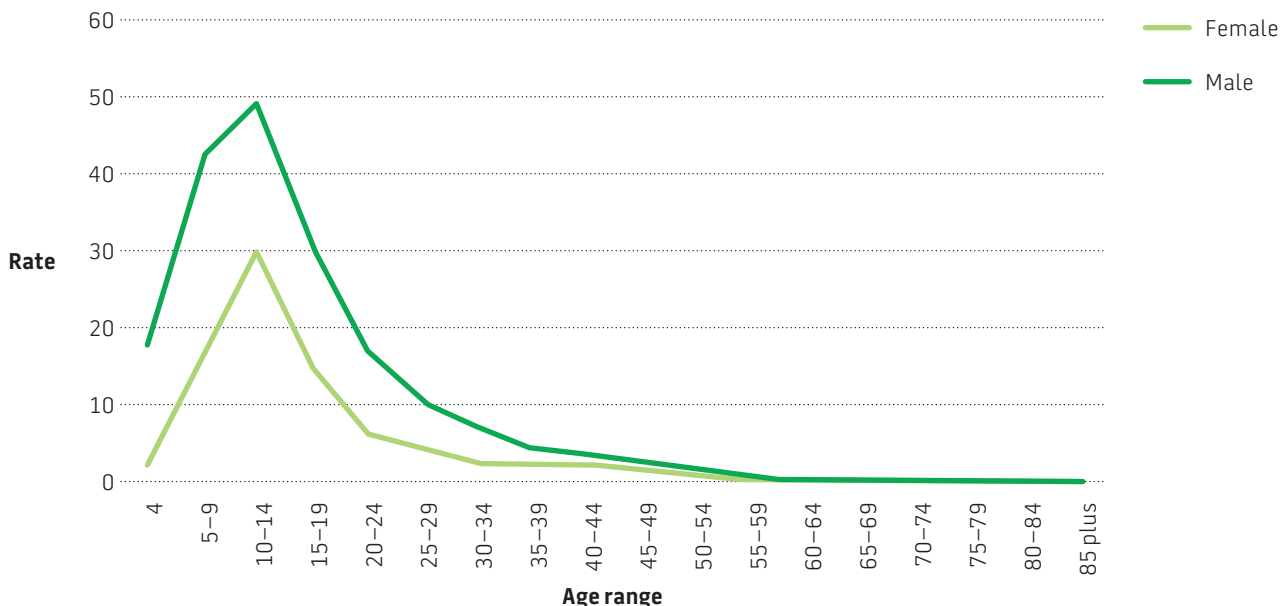
- at least 40 per cent participated continuously in a particular sport over the four years. A further 40 per cent took part in either two or three years, but not all four years (Eime et al. 2015c)
- few children participated in a sport for four consecutive years, especially those aged four to six.

Children making the transition from junior programs into community sport

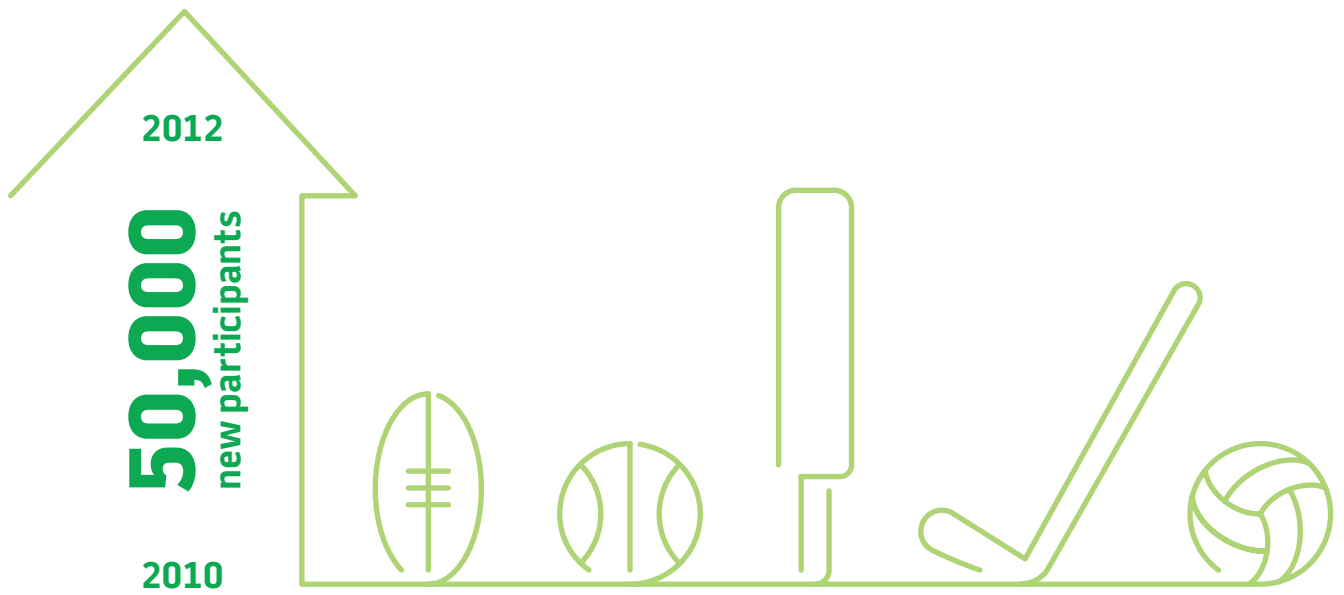
Tracking participants aged four to 12 years in three popular sports – Australian football, cricket, netball – over a four-year period, commencing either 2009 or 2010, found that (Eime et al. 2015d):

- most children in a specific modified junior sport program such as AFL Auskick, in2Cricket or NetSetGo stopped participating without making the transition to a community level sports club
- on average, boys who did transition from a specific modified program into club programs did so earlier than girls (with the transition typically occurring at seven years for boys and 10 years for girls).

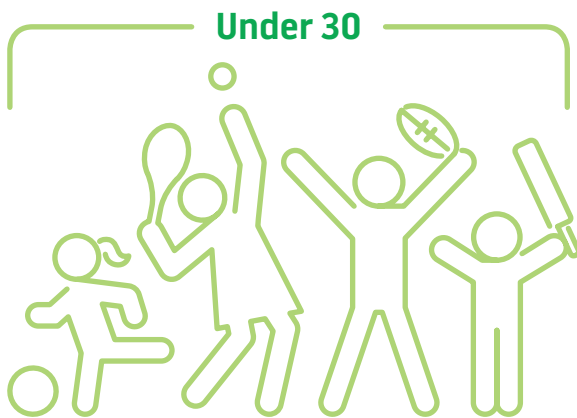
Figure 1: Age-specific participation rates in Victoria by gender across five sports, 2012.



Participation across five organised sports increased by 50,000 between 2010 and 2012.



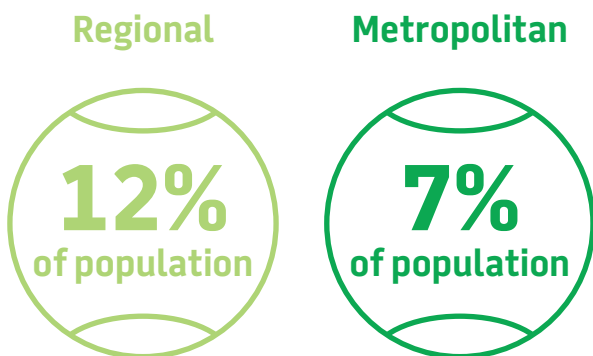
80 per cent of club sports participants are under 30.



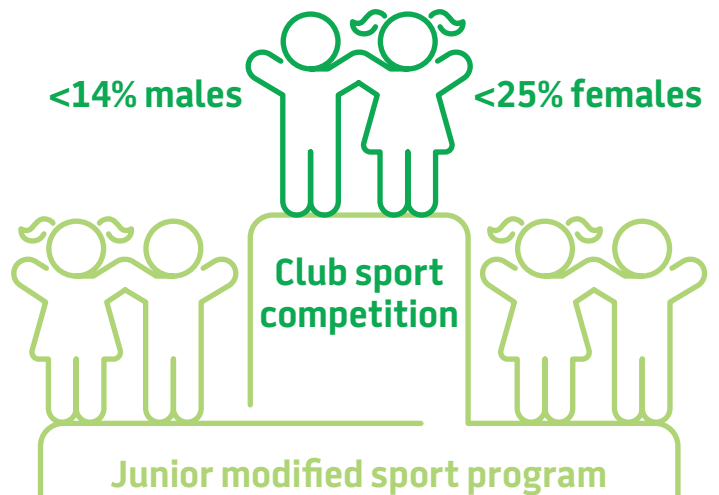
Males participate more than females in organised sport.



Participation rates in organised sport are higher in regional than metropolitan areas.



Few kids progress from a junior modified sport program to club sport competition.





The link between facilities and participation

Comparing organised sport participation with sports facilities provision, among four popular sports – Australian football, cricket, netball, tennis – in particular localities across Victoria, revealed that:

- local government areas with higher availability of sports facilities, including fields or courts, recorded higher levels of sport participation.
- regional areas had higher participation rates and better provision of facilities per person than metropolitan regions.
- there are significant differences in the relationship between facility levels and participation rates between different sports and across geographical regions (Eime et al. 2014). For example, in metropolitan Melbourne one sport varied from having a field or court for every 2000 persons to nearly 40,000 persons per local government area.

Improving participation data

The use of club membership data by state sporting associations is an important measure of organised sport participation. This research revealed considerable variations in both:

- quality of the data, including the ability to compare over several years
- capability of state sporting associations to utilise the data for decision making and future planning.

The research identified opportunities to improve sport membership data.

- Individual participants and members register and provide their own details online to improve data quality.
- Valid and consistent date of birth data is invaluable in identifying an individual participant to report on participation trends.
- Valid and consistent identification numbering, such as a member number, enables data comparison over multiple years, including retention and continuity of participation.
- Standardised choices in membership forms, such as check box or drop down fields, significantly increases data quality, consistency and analysis compared to using free-text fields, especially for standard items such as the name of a club, association, program or qualification.

There is a clear opportunity to standardise the data collected and stored by different sports, to facilitate comparison and analysis of whole-of-sector trends in organised sport participation.

Recommendations

This research has informed the following recommendations for organisations seeking to increase participation rates in organised sport.

State sporting associations

- Develop strategies that better link modified sport programs to community-level participation structures to retain participants, including considering intermediate or transition programs.
- Reflect age and gender participation trends in the development of programs and products that consider flexible structures and schedules, to boost retention and maximise transition into community-level sport.
- Develop non-competitive products targeting young people and/or women, focused on fun, friends and fitness to maximise participation. These may focus on building competency and skills, and building confidence and social connection.
- Investigate how competitive grades could be structured differently to target wider ranges of skills and abilities of young people, to support retention in sport participation.
- Promote the physical, mental and social health benefits of participation in sport across all ages.
- Capitalise on the multiple benefits of sport participation at the individual and community levels, to create strategic partnerships.
- Develop strategies to increase sport competency/skill development to enhance confidence and participant retention, especially among children and adolescents.
- Use data-driven, evidence-based decisions in day-to-day operations and strategic directions to increase participation, and in planning facility developments.
- Improve the quality and consistency of membership data collection and management, including online participant registration systems, so that data can be better used to monitor trends and inform strategic priorities.
- Contribute to the continued integration of sport participation data at a sectoral level.

Policy makers and funders

- The sport sector should focus on the issues of drop-out and retention, particularly for very early modified sport adopters, adolescents, females and those 30 years of age and over.
- The health benefits of participation in sport across the lifespan should be promoted.

- Relevant health and sport policy should emphasise the impact of sport participation at a community level in enhancing health, to support a balanced investment alongside a focus on elite participation pathways.
- Community sport participation should be promoted alongside less structured and organised physical activity options, in recognition of its potential contribution to mental and social health outcomes.
- A uniform, sector-wide approach to collecting, managing, analysing and monitoring sport participation data and trends should be encouraged, to inform an evidence-based approach to strategic decisions and investments.
- The results of this research relating to facility provision and participation data, including trends, should be used to inform evidence-based decisions about future investments in sport and recreation facilities.
- Consideration should be given to the balance of sport funding. Australian sport policy is currently highly directed towards elite player development, and not community grassroots and the decline in grassroots participation.

Researchers

There are clear opportunities for researchers to investigate and advise on a range of related themes and topics, including:

- characteristics and demographics of sport participants
- influences on participation for different segments of the community
- effectiveness of modified programs for children, in influencing the patterns and determinants of participation and retention
- impact of participation in modified sport programs by children at a very early age on their participation in organised sport later in life
- what leads children, adolescents and adults to continue or not continue to participate in organised sport, to inform strategies that maintain participation
- links between participation rates within a community and facility usage, facility characteristics (for example, female change rooms) and facility quality (for example age and state of repair)
- physical, social and psychological health impacts of discontinuing participation in sport during late adolescence and among females in particular
- expanding the collection of participation data to capture additional information, including more detail on types of participation, such as recreational and other leisure-time physical activity.

Glossary

Sport participation – This research was based on two data sources: The national Exercise, Recreation and Sport Survey (ERASS), and State Sporting Association (SSA) registered club sport membership. In ERASS sport was defined as a physical activity that was administered by a state or national sport organisation recognised as such by the Australian Sports Commission. SSA sport participation was defined as being a registered club member.

Organised sport – ERASS distinguished activity organised by a club or other organisation such as a commercial gym. All SSA activity is classified as organised.

Modified sport program – Junior entry-level SSA sport program with modified rules and/or equipment.

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Associate Professor Rochelle Eime, Federation University, and Victoria University

VicHealth Physical Activity Research Practice Fellow, 2011–15

This summary is based on the work of Associate Professor Rochelle Eime, whose research is providing evidence to inform sport and policy and decision makers in planning for future participation in sport.

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Victorian Health Promotion Foundation
PO Box 154 Carlton South
Victoria 3053 Australia
T +61 3 9667 1333 F +61 3 9667 1375

vichealth@vichealth.vic.gov.au
vichealth.vic.gov.au
twitter.com/vichealth
facebook.com/vichealth

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