



# Australian Social Trends June 2011

## Sport and physical recreation

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# Sport and physical recreation

Sport is an important feature of the Australian lifestyle and plays a large part in the lives of many Australians. Participation in sport or physical recreation offers many benefits, ranging from simple enjoyment to improved health and the opportunity for social interaction.

Regular physical activity reduces the likelihood of a person developing many chronic diseases, and may also play a therapeutic role in relation to mental health disorders. Physical activity is important for young people in developing healthy bodies, but is also important for older people in maintaining quality of life and independence.<sup>1</sup>

Participating in sport or physical recreation with others may also provide opportunities for social interaction, leading to stronger personal and community networks.

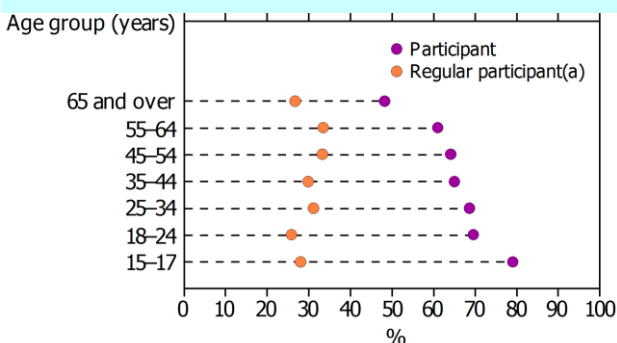
Due to the many known benefits of exercise, the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing promotes the [National Physical Activity Guidelines for Adults](#), which advocate at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most, preferably all, days.

This article looks at the rates of participation in sport and physical recreation across Australia for people aged 15 years and over, by selected characteristics and by selected activities. The article also looks at Australians who had reported low or no exercise and who would therefore not be meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines.

## Who participates in sport and physical recreation?

A person's likelihood of having participated in sport or physical recreation may be related to many characteristics such as their sex, age, family situation, usual hours worked, country of birth or socioeconomic status.

### Participation in sport or physical recreation within the last 12 months – 2009-10



(a) Participated more than twice a week in all 12 months.

Source: ABS [Participation in Sport and Physical Recreation, Australia, 2009-10](#) (cat. no. 4177.0); ABS 2009-10 Multipurpose Household Survey

## Data sources and definitions

The main data source for this article is the participation in sport and physical recreation topic in the ABS 2009-10 Multipurpose Household Survey. The survey looked at people aged 15 years and over across Australia but excludes people living in very remote areas. This is expected to have only a minor impact on any aggregate estimates produced for individual states and territories, except for the Northern Territory where this group accounts for around 23% of the population.

A *participant or player* is a person who has played a sport or physically undertook an activity for exercise or recreation at least once in the 12 months prior to the survey. People who participated more than twice a week on average in each month over the 12 month period were considered to have participated *regularly*. People involved solely as a coach, teacher, instructor, referee, umpire, administrator or club committee member are excluded from the data.

*Cycling* includes BMXing and mountain biking.

*Dancing* includes ballet and boot scooting.

*Swimming* includes diving.

*Dependent children* are all people aged less than 15 years; and people aged 15-24 years who are full-time students, have a parent in the household and do not have a partner or child of their own in the household.

For people born overseas, *main English-speaking countries* are the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa and the United States of America. Being from a non-main English-speaking country does not imply a lack of proficiency in English.

## ...age and sex

In 2009-10, 64% of Australians aged 15 years and over had participated in sport or physical recreation at least once within the last 12 months – down from 66% in 2005-06. Almost half (47%) of the people who had participated within the last 12 months (or 30% of all adults) had done so regularly (more than twice a week).

Rates of participation within the last 12 months varied across age groups. Participation was highest for 15-17 year olds (79%) and generally declined with increasing age, with a relatively large decline in participation among older people aged 65 years and over. Lower participation rates among older age groups could be expected given that disability rates increase with age.<sup>2</sup>

The same pattern was not evident for regular participation rates, with 18-24 year olds (26%) less likely to participate regularly than 55-64 year olds (34%). While older people were less

## Income definitions

**Equivalised household income.** Equivalising adjusts actual household income to take into account the different needs of households of different size and composition. There are economic advantages associated with living with others, because many household resources can be shared.

**Income quintiles** are derived by ranking all the population from lowest to highest income and then dividing that population into five equal groups. The lowest quintile is made up of the 20% of the population with the lowest income. For more information about household income measures see ABS [Household Income and Income Distribution](#) (cat. no. 6523.0).

likely than younger people to have participated at all, those who did were more likely than younger people to participate regularly.

The decrease in overall participation (64% in 2009–10, 66% in 2005–06) was largely driven by a fall in female participation, from 66% in 2005–06 to 63% in 2009–10. In 2009–10, the participation rate was only slightly higher for men (65%) than for women (63%), although the reverse was true for regular participation (31% for women and 29% for men).

## ...socioeconomic status

Although not all-encompassing measures, income and educational attainment are good proxy indicators of an individual's socioeconomic status.

Access to financial resources may increase a person's ability to participate in sport or physical recreation where there are costs involved. People whose equivalised weekly household income was in the highest quintile reported a participation rate of 80%, whereas the participation rate for people in the lowest quintile was just over half this (45%).

Higher education can also lead to higher income and thereby indirectly increase a person's ability to meet the financial costs involved in participating in some sport or physical recreation. It may also provide people with a better understanding of the many benefits that such activities may offer, thereby directly increasing their willingness to participate. People who had attained a Bachelor degree or above were much more likely to have participated in sport or physical recreation than those whose highest attainment was Year 10 or below (77% compared with 49%). While many people whose highest attainment was Year 10 or below were aged 65 years and over, the participation rate for this group only increased to 52% when these older people were excluded.

## Sport and social capital

Social capital is often defined as a resource founded on networks of mutual support, reciprocity and trust that may benefit health, education and employment outcomes for individuals while also fostering community strength and resilience.<sup>3</sup> The associational nature of sport and sporting clubs is sometimes seen as a forum for the creation of social capital,<sup>4</sup> with links evident between certain indicators of wellbeing and participation in sport and physical recreation.

According to the ABS 2006 General Social Survey (GSS), among people aged 18 years and over, those who participated in sport or physical recreation were more likely than others to be a volunteer (42% compared with 21% of non-participants), to be actively involved in a social group (75% compared with 43%), or actively involved in a civil or government group (23% compared with 11%).

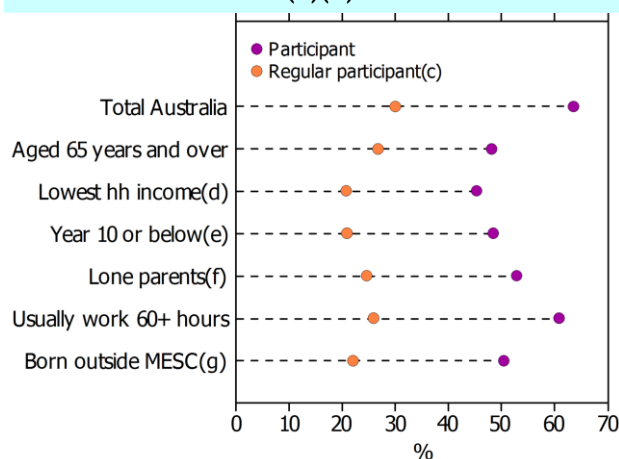
Data from the 2006 GSS also indicated that sport participants generally had more frequent contact with their family and friends, had a greater number of friends to confide in and had a greater ability to obtain support in times of crisis than non-participants.

For more information see ABS [Sport and Social Capital, Australia, 2006](#) (cat. no. 4917.0).

People involved in organised sport or physical recreation through non-playing roles (such as coaches and officials) may also experience the benefits of strengthened social capital. The ABS April 2010 Survey of Involvement in Organised Sport and Physical Activity showed that there were 1.6 million people who were involved in organised sport or physical recreation in a non-playing role.

For more information see ABS [Involvement in Organised Sport and Physical Activity, Australia, April 2010](#) (cat. no. 6285.0).

## Participation in sport or physical recreation within last 12 months(a)(b) – 2009-10



- (a) People aged 15 years and over.  
 (b) Characteristics displayed which had lower than average participation.  
 (c) Participated more than twice a week in all 12 months.  
 (d) In the lowest quintile of equivalised weekly household income.  
 (e) People whose highest level of attainment was Year 10 or below.  
 (f) Lone parents aged 15-49 years with dependent children.  
 (g) People born outside main English-speaking countries.

Source: ABS 2009-10 Multipurpose Household Survey

## Football participation

While many Australians love their footy, across Australia the game of football comes in several different forms. The main variations are, in no particular order, outdoor soccer (also known as association football), indoor soccer, Australian Rules, rugby union, rugby league and touch football (a non-contact form of rugby league). In 2009–10, 1.2 million people aged 15 years and over (6.9%) participated in at least one form of football.

Of those who did play football, most had played outdoor soccer (33%), touch football (22%), indoor soccer (20%) or Australian Rules (20%). Around one in ten footballers had played rugby league (9.5%) and a similar amount had played rugby union (8.0%).

Men were more likely than women to have played football (11% compared with 2.6%).

Male footballers were likely to have played outdoor soccer (33%) or Australian Rules (23%). Of footballing women, the majority played touch football (44%), outdoor soccer (36%) or indoor soccer (23%).

Across Australia, soccer (both indoor and outdoor) had higher participation rates among people living in Major Cities than those in other areas, while rugby league, touch football and Australian Rules showed the opposite pattern, being more popular outside Major Cities.

The article 'Football: Four Games, One Name' from ABS [Perspectives on Sport, May 2009](#) (cat. no. 4156.0.55.001) takes a more in-depth look at football in Australia.

## ...family situation

For some people, family commitments may make it hard to find spare time to participate in sport or physical recreation, or they may be unable to find appropriate childcare. In 2009–10, of people aged 15–49 years, lone parents with dependent children (53%) and those in couple relationships with dependent children (66%) had lower rates of participation than people in couple relationships without dependent children (70%) and people who were neither a parent, nor in a couple relationship (72%).

## ...hours worked

The amount of time that people spend in the workplace may also impact upon the amount of time they are able and/or willing to spend participating in sport or physical recreation. The participation rate for people who usually worked 1–34 hours per week was 69%, higher than the participation rate for people who usually worked 60 hours or more in a week (61%).

People who usually worked 60 hours or more in a week were also less likely than those who usually worked 1–34 hours to have participated regularly, i.e. more than twice a week (26% compared with 35%).

## Children's participation in organised sport

Participation in organised sport is an important part of a child's social development. As a subset of broader physical activity, participation in organised sport is also important for the development of motor coordination skills, teamwork and physical fitness. In recent years, increasing awareness of the incidence of childhood obesity has highlighted the desirability, on health grounds, for children to participate in regular activity.

An estimated 63% of children aged 5–14 years (1.7 million children) participated in at least one organised sport outside of school hours, in the 12 months to April 2009. Almost half of these children played two or more organised sports (30% overall). Participation was higher among boys (70%) than girls (56%).

In 2009, the most popular organised sport for children was swimming, with a participation rate of 19%. This was followed by outdoor soccer at 13% and Australian Rules football at 8.6%.

For more information see ABS [Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities, Australia, Apr 2009](#) (cat. no. 4901.0) and ABS [Research Paper: Children's Participation in Organised Sporting Activity, Oct 2009](#) (cat. no. 1351.0.55.028).

## ...country of birth

People born outside Australia but born within main English-speaking countries had comparable participation rates to people born in Australia (66% for each), although they were slightly more likely to have participated regularly (36% compared with 31%). People born outside main English-speaking countries had a much lower participation rate (50%) and only 22% participated regularly.

While participation rates of men and women were similar for people born in Australia and for those born in main English-speaking countries, there was a divide between the participation rates of men and women who were born outside main English-speaking countries (54% compared with 47%). For further analysis see the article 'Migrants and sport' in ABS [Perspectives on Sport, Dec 2009](#) (cat. no. 4156.0.55.001).

## Whether met exercise guidelines

While in 2009–10 around two-thirds (64%) of Australians aged 15 years and over had participated in sport or physical recreation at least once, less than one-third (30%) participated more than twice a week.

In line with this, the ABS 2007–08 National Health Survey found that the majority of Australians aged 18 years and over had only a low level of exercise for fitness, recreation or sport in the two weeks prior to interview (36%), or were sedentary (i.e. very low, or no exercise – also 36%). Unless their physical activity levels were significantly boosted through occupational activities (such as

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and sport

According to the ABS 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, nearly one-third (30% or 99,000) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over had participated in some type of sport or physical activity in the 12 months prior to interview. Men had higher rates of participation (38% or 59,000) in sport or physical activity than women (23% or 40,000). The participation rate decreased with age for both men and women.

Almost half (47%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 4–14 years in 2008 had played organised sport. There was a noticeable difference between boys and girls, with over half of boys (51% or 37,000) and less than half of girls (43% or 29,000) participating in organised sport.

Almost half (45%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over had attended a sporting event as a spectator.

For more information see 'Indigenous people's participation in sport and physical activities' in [ABS \*Perspectives on Sport, June 2010\*](#) (cat. no. 4156.0.55.001).

labouring) or household activities (such as housework and gardening), these people would not have achieved the minimum daily level of physical activity based on the [National Physical Activity Guidelines for Adults](#).

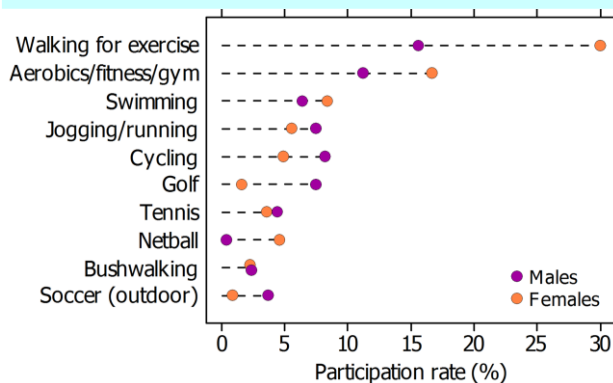
The proportion of Australian adults considered to have only a low or sedentary exercise level in 2007–08 (72%) was slightly higher than in 2001 (69%).

## Most popular sports and physical recreation activities

Of all sports or physical recreation activities, walking for exercise had the highest level of participation (23%). Aerobics, fitness or gym was also a popular activity group (14%).

Swimming (7.4%), cycling (6.5%) and jogging or running (6.5%) were the only other activities that were participated in by more than one in twenty Australians.

### Sports and physical activities with the highest participation rates(a)(b) – 2009-10



(a) People aged 15 years and over.

(b) Proportion of people who undertook the activity at least once within the 12 months prior to survey.

Source: ABS [Participation in Sport and Physical Recreation, Australia, 2009-10](#) (cat. no. 4177.0)

## Long-term conditions caused by sport or exercise injuries

Sport and physical recreation have obvious health benefits, but sports injuries do pose a risk for players. While many sports injuries such as cuts and bruises may not lead to long-term problems, arthritis and back pain are common long-term conditions that can be brought on by trauma to joints or the back experienced through sport or exercise injuries.

The ABS 2007–08 National Health Survey showed that there were 526,000 Australians aged 15 years and over who had a current long-term condition that was a result of a sporting or exercise injury. Of these 526,000 people, around three-quarters (73%) had a condition of the musculoskeletal system or connective tissue that had been caused by injury, including arthritis (28%), back pain (19%) and disc disorders (12%).

Around two-thirds (68%) of people with a long-term condition caused by a sports or exercise injury were men.

Participation in specific activities varied with the sex and age of participants.

### ...by sex

Both walking for exercise and aerobics, fitness or gym were more popular for women (30% and 17% respectively) than for men (16% and 11% respectively). There were other activities that were predominantly participated in by one or the other sex. Netball, for example, had a higher number of women than men participating (12 times as many women as men). On the reverse were golf and outdoor soccer. Golf had four and a half times as many men as women participating. Similarly, outdoor soccer had around four times as many men as women.

### ...by age

Overall, the most popular activity was walking for exercise (23%), however, this was not the case for people aged 15–17 years, where only 6.3% walked for exercise. People of this age group were more likely to have participated in aerobics, fitness or gym (12%). People aged 18–24 years also favoured aerobics, fitness or gym (20%) over walking for exercise (10%).

Among people aged 55–64 years and 45–54 years, walking for exercise was the most popular activity (34% and 30% respectively). Golf (7.2% for 55–64 year olds) and lawn bowls (4.7% for people aged 65 years and over) were two other activities that were more popular among older rather than younger age groups.

### ...recent changes

Of the ten most popular activities in 2009–10 in terms of participation, only two had grown in popularity since 2005–06. The participation rate in aerobics, fitness or gym increased from 13% to 14%, while jogging or running increased from 4.3% to 6.5%. Participation rates in cycling, netball and outdoor soccer showed no

## Attendance and participation

While attendance at sporting events may not provide the same direct health benefits as participation, attendance may provide opportunities for community bonding and increased social capital.

In 2009–10, 43% of people aged 15 years and over had attended a sporting event in the last 12 months. The highest attendance rates were for Australian Rules (16%), horse racing (11%), rugby league (9%) and motor sports (8%). None of these top four spectator sports were ranked in the top ten sports or physical recreation activities in terms of participation, suggesting that there are differing factors motivating people to participate in some sports and/or attend others.

### ...who attends sporting events?

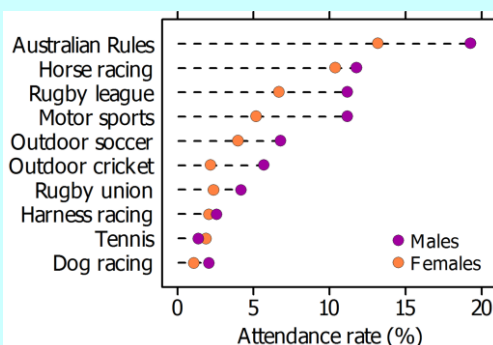
While total participation rates were similar between men and women, there was a large difference in attendance rates – 50% of men compared with 37% of women. This disparity was also the case for most of the top ten spectator sports, such as Australian Rules, rugby league and motor sports, although a slightly higher proportion of women than men attended tennis events.

Attendance rates showed a similar pattern to participation when looked at across age groups, being highest among 15–17 year olds (58%) and generally declining with age, being lowest for people aged 65 years and over (23%).

### ...attendance across Australia

The Northern Territory had the highest sports attendance rates (59%), although Victoria (50%), the ACT (49%) and South Australia (48%) also had relatively high rates of attendance.

### Top 10 attendance sports(a) – 2009-10



(a) People aged 15 years and over.

Source: ABS [Spectator Attendance at Sporting Events, 2009-10](#) (cat. no. 4174.0)

significant change over the period (6.5%, 2.6% and 2.3% in 2009–10 respectively), while there had been slight decreases in the participation rates of the other popular activities.

## Organised vs. non-organised activities

Many sports or physical recreation activities were organised by a club or association (such as a sporting or social club, church group, old scholars association or gymnasium). Such

organisation may provide improved access for participants to certain activities that involve teams, special equipment, venues and/or costs.

In 2009–10, 26% of Australians aged 15 years and over had participated in some form of organised sport or physical recreation. There was a slight difference by sex – 28% of men and 24% of women.

The types of organised sports or physical recreation activities that people participated in varied. In 2009–10, organised golf had the highest participation rate among men (3.7% of all men participated in organised golf).

Organised outdoor soccer, outdoor cricket, Australian Rules, lawn bowls, and aerobics, fitness or gym activities were other relatively common organised activities for men, with around 2% of men having participated in each. For women, the most popular organised activities were aerobics, fitness or gym (6.1% of all women), while netball (4.1%), dancing (2.0%) and yoga (1.8%) were also relatively common organised activities.

While many of the most popular activities such as walking for exercise, swimming, aerobics, fitness or gym and jogging or running may at times be organised, they are often easy to participate in informally. This would in part explain why around half (52%) of Australians aged 15 years and over had participated in any non-organised sport or physical recreation and why 37% had participated in only non-organised sport or physical recreation.

## Participation across Australia

Participation rates varied across the country. The two territories had the highest participation rates, with 77% in the Australian Capital

### Participation rates(a)(b) – 2009-10

	Participant %	Regular participant(c) %
New South Wales	62.7	28.2
Victoria	64.6	30.4
Queensland	62.1	30.7
South Australia	61.7	30.4
Western Australia	65.4	32.2
Tasmania	64.4	29.8
Northern Territory(d)	71.5	37.3
Australian Capital Territory	77.1	38.8
<b>Australia</b>	<b>63.6</b>	<b>30.1</b>

(a) People aged 15 years and over.

(b) Proportion of people who undertook the activity at least once within the 12 months prior to survey.

(c) Participated more than twice a week in all 12 months.

(d) Refers to mainly urban areas only.

Source: ABS [Participation in Sport and Physical Recreation, Australia, 2009-10](#) (cat. no. 4177.0); ABS 2009-10 Multipurpose Household Survey

Territory and 72% in the Northern Territory, while participation rates in the states ranged from 62% in South Australia and Queensland to 65% in Western Australia and Victoria. Regular participation, while lower, showed a similar pattern (i.e. being higher in the territories than the states). The relative popularity of certain activities changed between each state and territory and also between Major Cities and other areas.

### ...different activities for different states

Walking for exercise was the most popular activity for participants across all states and territories. Other activities popular nationally (aerobics, fitness or gym, jogging or running, swimming and cycling) also tended to remain popular in each jurisdiction. However, the varying preferences and/or differing demographic make-ups of the populations in each state or territory did appear to influence the relative popularity of some activities, with some standing out as being more popular within certain borders. The following discussion focuses on activities where at least 1% of the national population aged 15 years

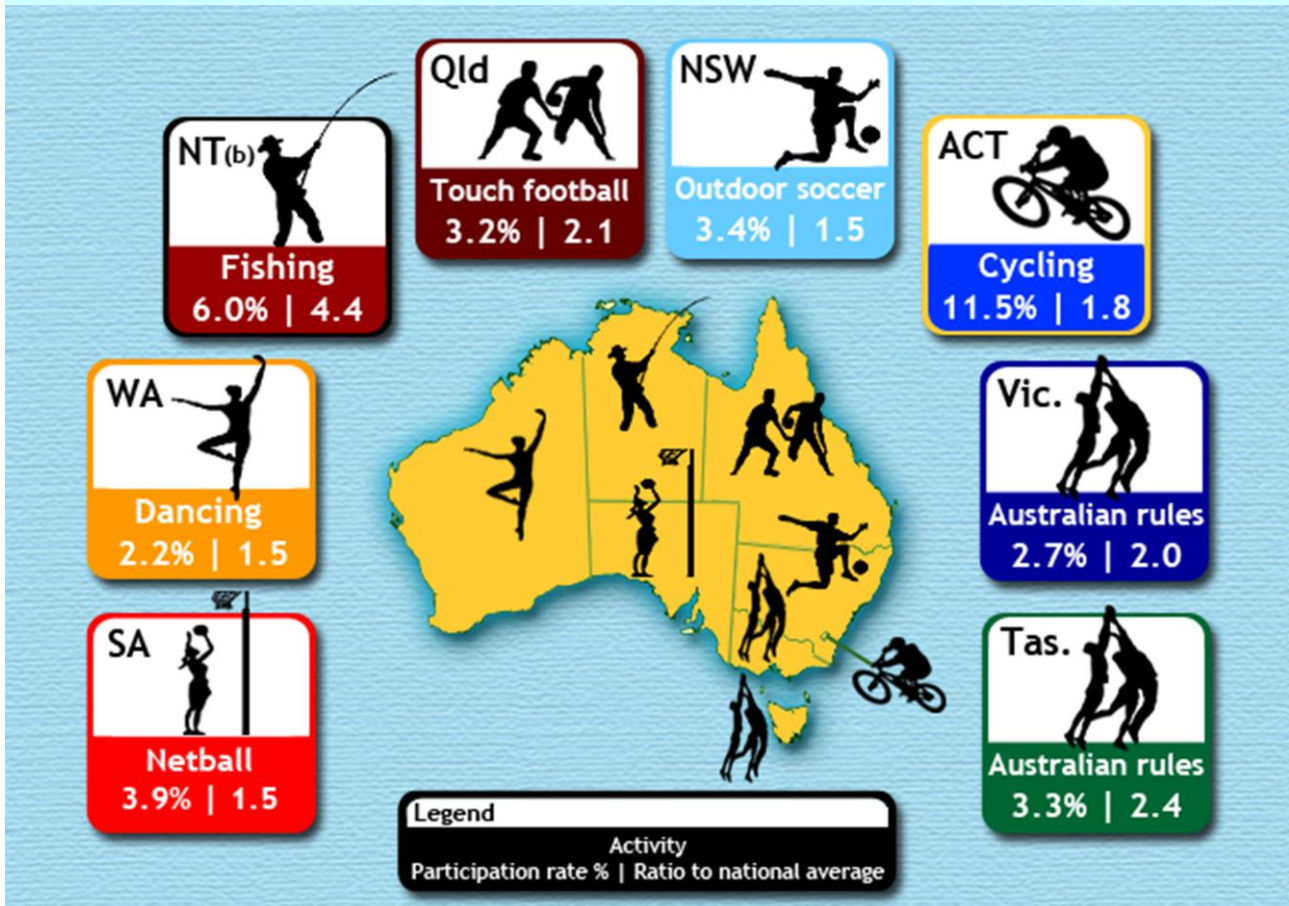
and over participated.

While walking for exercise was the most popular activity within all states and territories, the rate of participation in Tasmania was 1.3 times as high as the national average. Aerobics, fitness or gym was the second most popular activity group across most jurisdictions, with the highest participation rate in the Australian Capital Territory (1.4 times as high as the national average).

Participation in the different football codes showed strong variation across the country, with Australian Rules football having relatively high participation rates in both Tasmania (2.4 times as high as the national average) and Victoria (2.0 times). Touch football had high relative participation in Queensland (2.1 times as high as the national average), while outdoor soccer had strong relative participation in the Australian Capital Territory (2.4 times as high) and New South Wales (1.5 times).

Other activities for which participation rates varied across the country include cycling, netball, dancing, fishing and bushwalking. Participation in cycling within both the

Participation rates and ratio to national average of selected sports or physical recreation activities(a) by state and territory, people 15 years and over – 2009-10



(a) Activities with the highest relative participation rate compared with the national average, where the national participation rate was at least 1%.

(b) Refers to mainly urban areas only.

Source: ABS 2009-10 Multipurpose Household Survey



## Major Cities

*Major Cities* are Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong, Tweed Heads and the Tweed Coast, Melbourne and Geelong, Brisbane, most of the Gold Coast and much of the Sunshine Coast, Adelaide, Perth, and Canberra and Queanbeyan.

Hobart and Darwin are not included in the Major Cities group. For further information about Remoteness Areas see Chapter 8 of ABS [Australian Standard Geographical Classification \(ASGC\), July 2006](#) (cat. no. 1216.0).

Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory was 1.8 times as high as the national average. Netball was popular in South Australia (1.5 times as high) and dancing in Western Australia (1.5 times). Fishing was common in the Northern Territory (4.4 times as high) and Queensland (1.5 times), while bushwalking was popular in Tasmania (2.1 times).

## ...Major Cities vs. the rest

In 2009–10, there was no statistically significant difference in the sport or physical recreation participation rates between people living in Major Cities of Australia and those living in areas outside the Major Cities (64% compared with 62%). However, people who lived in Major Cities were slightly less likely than people who lived elsewhere to have participated in organised sport or physical recreation (25% compared with 28%). There were also differences in the types of activities that these people participated in.

Certain activities were more popular among people who lived in Major Cities compared with those who lived outside Major Cities. For example, the participation rate in indoor soccer was over twice (2.3 times) as high and the rate in outdoor soccer was almost twice (1.9 times) as high in Major Cities as in areas outside Major Cities. Participation rates were also higher in both jogging or running and basketball (1.7 times for both) and aerobics, fitness or gym (1.5 times). The differences in some of these activities would in part be explained by the varying availability of certain sports facilities such as indoor sports centres or commercial gymnasiums.<sup>5</sup>

Some other activities were more common among people living in areas outside Major Cities. For example, participation in horse riding, equestrian activities or polo was more than three times (3.7 times) as high in areas outside Major Cities, than in Major Cities. Participation in fishing and lawn bowls were both around two and a half times as high in areas outside Major Cities (2.6 and 2.4 times respectively), touch football was almost twice (1.9 times) as high, while Australian Rules was around one and a half (1.6) times as high.

## Looking forward

The majority of Australians participate in some form of sport or physical recreation at least once in any given year. Depending on a person's circumstances or characteristics, they may be more or less likely to have participated. The activities in which they participate also vary.

Although most Australians do participate, of concern is that less than one-third (30%) did so more than twice a week in 2009–10 and that the majority of Australians had only low or sedentary exercise levels (72% in 2007–08). Many Australians would not be achieving the exercise levels recommended by the National Physical Activity Guidelines.

Improved Health and Physical Education (HPE) in schools may be a way to improve this situation, initially among children, but with potential flow on effects for adult participation as these children age. HPE will be included in the development of the Australian Curriculum for all school students as a core learning requirement until the end of Year 10. The objective will be to maximise the number of school hours that students participate in quality physical education and sport.<sup>6</sup>

Each state and territory, through their sport and/or health departments, along with their institutes or academies of sport, has an important role to play in promoting sport and physical activity within their jurisdiction. At the national level, the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) has a wide range of programs in place to meet its key objective of securing an 'effective national sports system that supports improved participation in quality sport activity by Australians'. Achieving this objective will take the ASC one step closer to achieving their mission of 'enriching the lives of all Australians through sports'.<sup>7</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 International Platform on Sport & Development, 2011, [The Health Benefits of Sport and Physical Activity](#), International Platform on Sport & Development, Bienne, <[www.sportanddev.org](http://www.sportanddev.org)>.
- 2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010, [Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2009](#), cat. no. 4430.0, ABS, Canberra, <[www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)>.
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- 4 Tonts, T., 2005, 'Competitive Sport and Social Capital in Rural Australia', in *Journal of Rural Studies*, vol. 21, pp. 137–149.
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- 7 Australian Sports Commission, 2010, [What is the ASC?](#), Australian Sports Commission, Canberra, <[www.ausport.gov.au](http://www.ausport.gov.au)>.

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