

PHYSICAL WELLBEING

Sport continues to be repeatedly disrupted across Australia due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.



Young Australians



ISSUE

Data from Sport Australia's national AusPlay survey reports only 43% of children under 15 years participated in organised sport at least once per week in 2020 – down from 55% in 2019. [\[AusPlay, 2021\]](#)

The current pandemic may lead to a generation of young people 'lost' to sport due to many children missing out on sporting experiences during 2020 and 2021.

Organised sport offers physical and emotional development benefits for children. Playing sport helps children learn to control their emotions and channel negative feelings in a positive way. It helps to build life skills such as teamwork, patience and self-discipline. Without this early interaction with sport, young Australians risk missing valuable and positive experiences that will help shape their lives and future behaviours.



OPPORTUNITY

The pandemic has undoubtedly taken its toll on older Australians, but despite the recent lockdown restrictions, this cohort has demonstrated a desire to be more active and drawn to physical activities involving social interactions where social distancing rules can be observed.

The [World Health Organisation \[WHO\]](#) has warned that the impact on mental and psychosocial wellbeing of vulnerable groups, such as older adults, will be significant and enduring. Seeking to accelerate and increase the positive physical activity trends observed to date by older Australians may offer significant and protective wellbeing benefits to this high risk group.

Older Australians



Older Australians appear to have been more active during the pandemic and over a sustained period.

Trends over the last two decades suggest older Australians have made an even bigger effort to increase physical activity than the rest of the population with over 65s increasing activity by approximately 30%. [\[ERASS/AusPlay, 2021\]](#)



Women

Australian adults sought new ways to be physically active while organised sport was cancelled during the first two waves of the pandemic. The trend away from organised sport participation to more recreational activities such as walking, running, cycling, and bush-walking continues to accelerate. This trend was largely led by Australia women who sustained high levels of physical activity through walking for exercise. [\[AusPlay, 2021\]](#)



Women are more likely than men to participate in these types of physical activities—particularly while they remain possible during the lockdowns. Where more adult men generally gain their physical activity through participation in organised sport activities, which have been significantly disrupted during the pandemic.



OPPORTUNITY

While the negative impact of the ongoing pandemic on women is significant and well reported—the data on physical activity for this cohort is encouraging and demonstrates women are actively seeking different and more flexible ways to be active.

There is an opportunity here for sporting organisations to respond to this trend by offering more flexible and inviting organised sport participation opportunities for Australian women. These products would place less emphasis on the more traditional competition elements of organised sport, instead focusing on social participation pathway opportunities specifically tailored to women and girls.



ISSUE

While barriers to sport and physical activity participation for Australians living with a disability continue—the ongoing physical, social and mental health challenges could be further compounded by the pandemic. There remains a high risk that even the thought of returning to a former physical activity habit or behaviour for this group of vulnerable Australian will present a significant personal challenge.

People with a disability



The closures of day programs for people with disability as a consequence of the pandemic continues to cause serious harm to the mental health of this vulnerable group of Australians [\(ABC, 2021\)](#).

Australians living with a disability have been unable to access physical or social activities, and many will not have the ability to adopt new activities as substitutes. Increased barriers to participation, disruption and reductions in available services and routines may lead to many being unable or unwilling to re-engage in sport and physical activity.



OPPORTUNITY

Social and recreational activities have proven to be popular during the pandemic—and the rise of new digital offerings has provided Australians with more convenient ways to be connected and physically active. As sport emerges from the pandemic, it is likely many people will prefer to retain newly adopted physical activity habits and not return to former and more traditional sporting activities. Sporting organisations will need to consider offering participation products that meet the contemporary demands and lifestyle choices of many Australians.

Recreational activity and social sport



While the trend away from organised sport participation to more recreational activities has accelerated during the pandemic, especially for women and older Australians—adult men were more likely to increase participation in socially distanced sports such as golf and surfing.

People were about 3-5% more physically active during the lockdown period between April and June 2020 [AusPlay, 2020]. Organised sport participation was not possible for public health reasons during this time.

Technology has also played a significant role with 39% of Australians using digital platforms to exercise during the national lockdown in 2020. The use of digital platforms is projected to continue as Australians invest further in wearable fitness tech, at-home fitness equipment, and fitness apps. (Deakin University, 2021).



OPPORTUNITY

The mental health of Australians has been impacted across all generations and is likely to remain a challenge for communities and the Australian health system for many years. Although sport is not the only answer, it can play a valuable role in rebuilding mental health and reconnecting people and communities.

MENTAL WELLBEING



The necessary implementation of social restrictions due to public health orders, combined with the cancellation of sport and other community engagement opportunities, has impacted the mental health of many Australians. Research supporting the benefits of sport participation on positive mental health outcomes across the life course is well documented.

Despite reported high levels of psychological distress in 2020 among Australians (ABS, 2021), Sport Australia's

Community Perceptions Monitor survey found that people who were finding it easier to keep fit and active during the pandemic reported feeling more optimistic and connected, with greater personal well-being.

FINANCIAL WELLBEING



The cost of sport in the current financial climate will likely remain a barrier while the impact of the pandemic affects the disposable income of Australian households.

The [Australian Institute of Family Studies](#) reported Australians are generally reducing their spending rather than increasing debt. The cost of accessing sport is particularly difficult for Australian households currently experiencing financial hardship. The impact has likely been exacerbated for disadvantaged communities, particularly those where a higher proportion are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

With costs being an issue for many Australians, this will likely impact how much importance is placed on paying for traditional organised sports. Combined with the increasing trend towards free and lower cost outdoor and recreational physical activities, organised sport participation is at risk of becoming a more discretionary priority with many Australians.



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Not-for-profit sporting organisations and clubs are very dependent on membership income as a primary source of revenue. A significant drop in paid membership due to household affordability pressures will have a devastating impact on community sport in Australia. The flow-on effect will likely see a reduction in the sport and physical activity opportunities available to all Australians—and a subsequent physical health and mental wellbeing decline across the national population.

An erosion of the grassroots sport base in Australia will see significantly less people participating in sport—particularly participation in the more diverse and relatively smaller Olympic and Paralympic sports. This will impact the number of young Australians entering into the sport talent pathway and emerging as our future national sports representative.

As we enter the green and gold runway towards [Brisbane 2032](#), providing a strong community sport pathway for our future Olympic and Paralympic representatives will be an important focus—particularly for the current generation of young Australians.

CONCLUSION

The Australian sport sector was not prepared for a national crisis. The impact of the COVID 19 pandemic quickly revealed that much of what the sector had consistently relied upon from a format, structural and community base delivery model heavily reliant on volunteers, was not future proof nor the only alternative to connect people to physical activity opportunities.

If Australian sport is to become stronger and more resilient to future threats, it needs to adopt a more flexible and agile model that is responsive to and meets contemporary demands.

With every major challenge experienced, opportunity often follows. Sport providers should consider the value of social, flexible and consumer-centred products for participants and volunteers which are adaptable, more inclusive and affordable.

COVID-19 is predicted to remain part of life for the future and all Australians must learn to live with the changes it has enforced on our communities—including sport.

If sport does not respond sufficiently and differently as part of its recovery, it will be vulnerable to future crises. Now is the time to create a new Australian sport sector.