



Australian Government

Australian Sports Commission

SPORTAUS
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AusPlay Focus

**How Australians' participation
in sport and physical activity
is adapting to COVID-normal**

July 2022 update

SportAus.gov.au



How Australians' participation in sport and physical activity is adapting to COVID-normal

Participation and involvement in sport is a key way to help build stronger communities and improve the health and wellbeing of Australians.

The ability for Australians to be active in their communities has been interrupted since COVID-19 was first confirmed in Australia in late January 2020. In particular, the pandemic has had a significant impact on organised sport as these gatherings were put on hold to adhere to health advice.

Throughout the pandemic, the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) has kept in touch with the Australian community to understand how their behaviours have changed and how they're feeling about being involved in sport going forward.

The data in this report is sourced from two surveys of the Australian community that are funded and led by the ASC:

- AusPlay – the only national population survey that measures Australians' participation in sport and physical activity; and
- Community Perceptions Monitor – a monthly survey of Australians aged 18+ on a range of topics related to sport and physical activity.

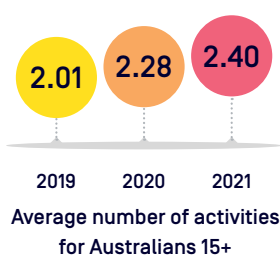
Key findings

As we continue to adapt to “COVID-normal”, AusPlay data is starting to show more evidence of how the participation habits of Australians are changing.

Australians aged 15+ are embracing a greater mix of activities

Compared to 2019, the average number of activities per person has increased.

And fewer Australians are relying solely on sporting clubs or organised venues for exercise – they are more likely to be adding in “COVID-safe” unstructured activities.

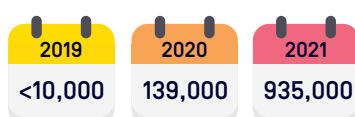


Physically-distanced or home-based activities are continuing to increase in popularity



“Exergaming” becomes a top 20 activity for Australians aged 15+

Participation in exercise accessed through gaming consoles or online interactive platforms increased 100-fold between 2019 and 2021



The social and mental health benefits of exercise continue to increase in importance for Australians aged 15+



There are indications that children are getting back to regular (1+ per week) participation

Year-on-year, participation is still lower than in 2019, but six-monthly data shows an uptick in the second half of 2021 (up to 46% from 42% in the second half of 2020).

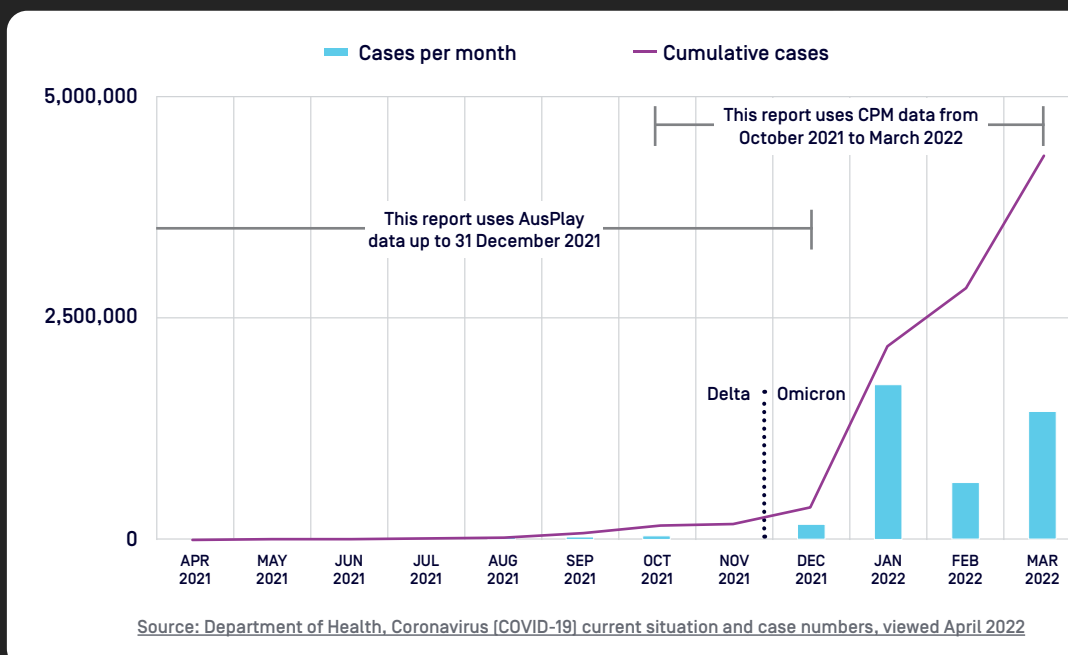


Key dates for COVID-19

The Delta variant of COVID-19 was dominant for most of 2021 in New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT, sending those communities into extended lockdowns in the second half of the year. This resulted in sport and physical activity being more impacted than in other jurisdictions and, where appropriate, NSW, Victoria and the ACT have been examined separately.

The Omicron variant was first detected in late November and peaked in most states and territories in January or February 2022. Any impact of Omicron on participation in sport and physical activity won't be seen in AusPlay data until at least the October 2022 release.

The chart below picks up where we left off in the June 2021 COVID-19 update, showing case numbers by month and cumulatively from April 2021 to March 2022.



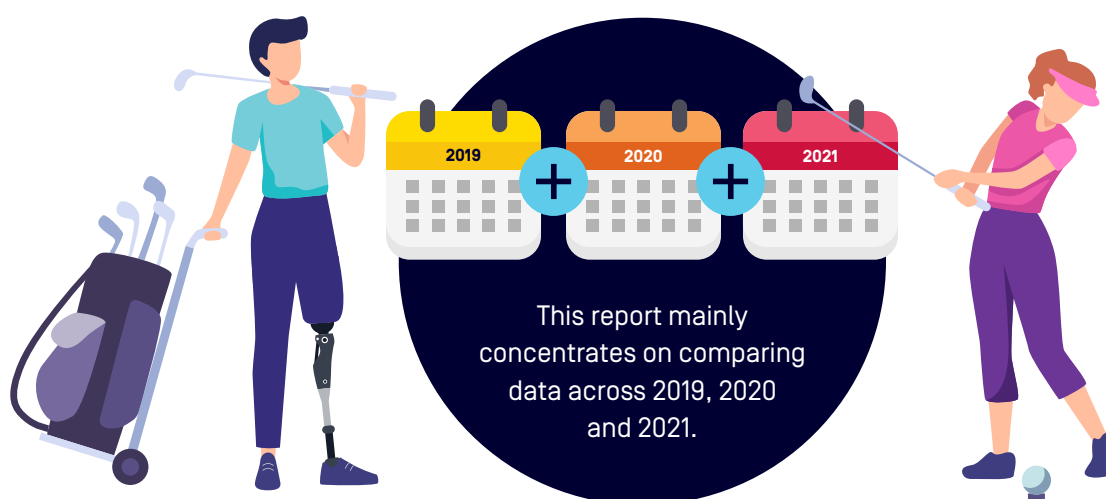
About this report

Identifying the ongoing effects of COVID-19 in long-term data

The first COVID-19 update in June 2020 looked for early signals of the impact the pandemic was having on sport and physical activity. We found that people were being active more frequently, since exercise was one of the permissible reasons for leaving home.

The second update, in June 2021, identified increased participation in activities that could be played in physically-distanced ways, such as golf and tennis. There was also an increase in activities that didn't need any special venues or organisation, such as walking or running.

We now have more data available to us to identify how Australians are adapting to living with COVID-19 and how their participation in sport and physical activity is changing. This update focuses on participation during 2021 and how it compares to a pre-pandemic 2019 baseline. It uses AusPlay data collected up to December 2021 and Community Perceptions Monitor data from October 2021-March 2022.



With more data now available, this third update examines if previously observed participation behaviours have continued as Australians became used to living with the pandemic, and along the way seeks to answer three questions posed at the end of the second update:

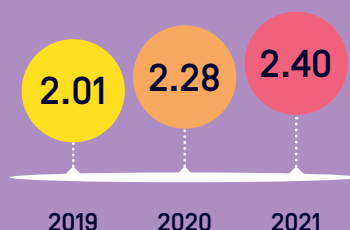
1. What impact does a return to sport, particularly organised and team sport, have on men's participation?
2. When will children's organised participation outside of school reach its lowest point in AusPlay's trend data?
3. What does the 'new normal' look like for sport and physical activity participation in Australia?

The way Australians participate in sport and physical activity is changing

On average, Australians aged 15+ are participating in more activities

AusPlay collects information from each respondent on up to 10 sport and physical activities they have done in the past twelve months. Over the last three years, the average number of activities reported has steadily increased.

AVERAGE NUMBER OF ACTIVITIES



AUSTRALIANS 15+



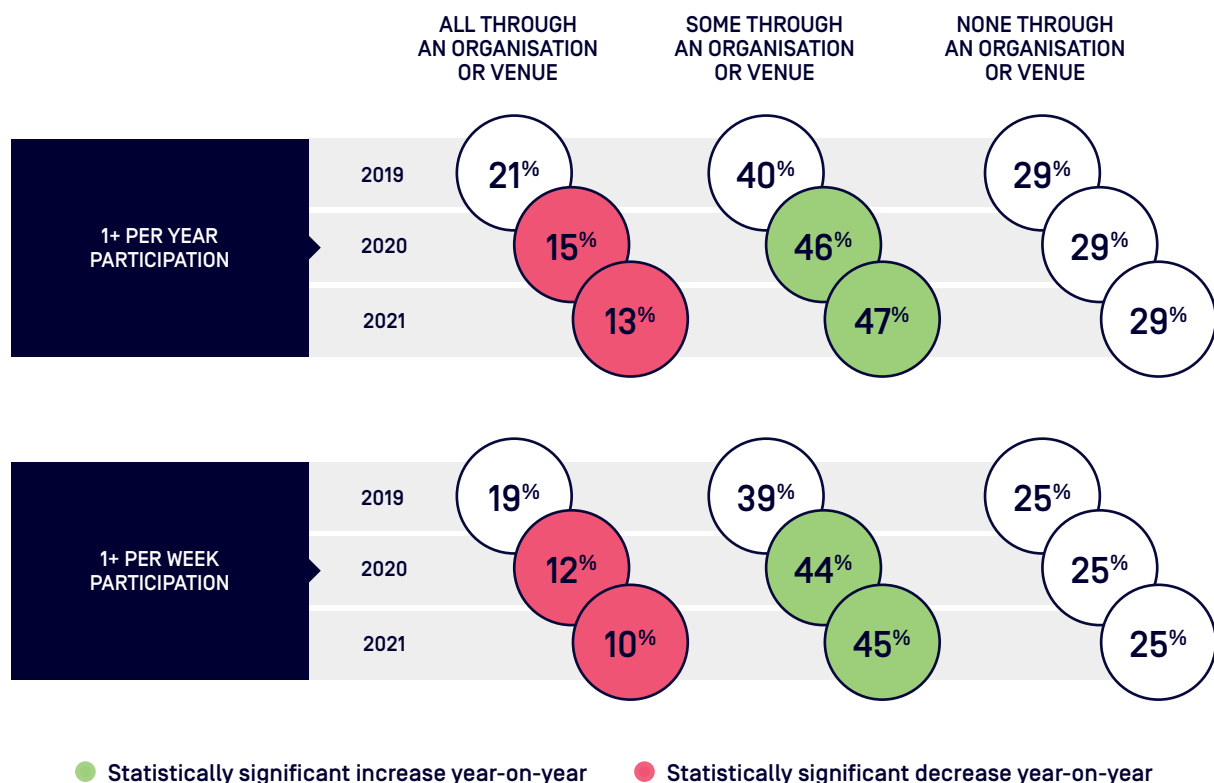
Australians 15+ are embracing a more mixed approach to getting active

The higher average number of activities is reflected in the way Australians 15+ are participating – we are taking an increasingly mixed approach to being active.



PARTICIPATION BY TYPE AND FREQUENCY – AUSTRALIANS 15+

Source: AusPlay



What's driving these changes?

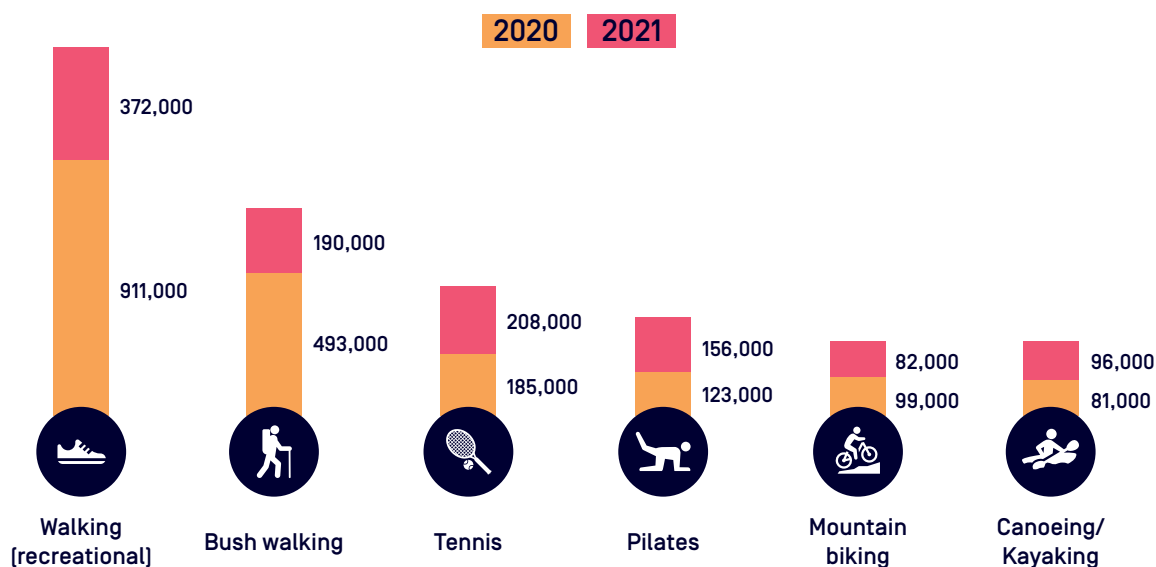
Physically-distanced or home-based activities are being sustained or increasing

In our June 2021 COVID-19 update, we highlighted how activities that could be carried out in a physically-distanced way had become increasingly popular. Here we follow up to see what has happened to those activities in the last year.

Those shown below experienced statistically significant increases in participation in both years.

ESTIMATED INCREASE IN PARTICIPANTS IN 2020 AND 2021 – AUSTRALIANS 15+

Source: AusPlay



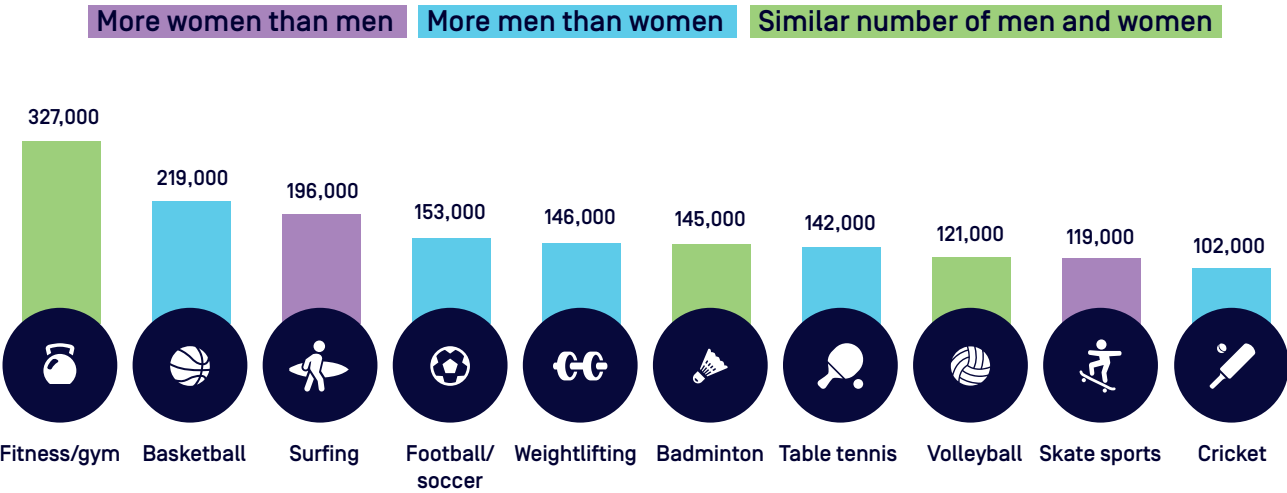
Participation in other activities that increased significantly in 2020 – Running/jogging/athletics, Cycling, Swimming, Yoga, Golf and Fishing (recreational) – levelled off in 2021.

Participation in many other sports and activities has taken longer to increase, with those shown below experiencing statistically significant growth from 2019 to 2021.

As well as being outdoor, physically-distanced activities, Surfing and Skate sports can likely attribute some of their increase to their inclusion in the Tokyo Olympics.

ESTIMATED INCREASE IN PARTICIPANTS 15+ FROM 2019 TO 2021

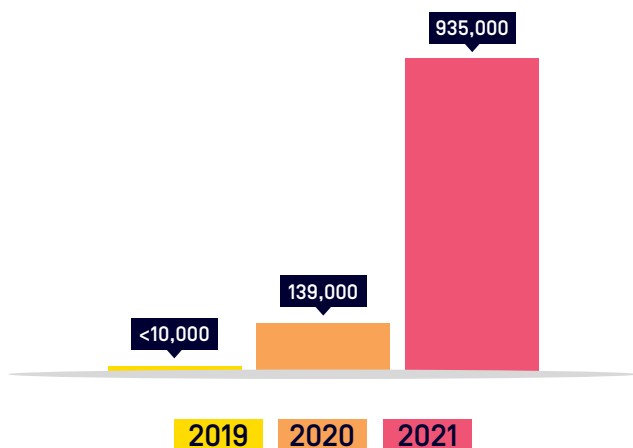
Source: AusPlay



“Exergaming” becomes a top 20 activity

The number of Australians 15+ who participated in “exergaming”¹ increased dramatically in 2021, reaching a similar number of participants as Pilates and Basketball.

ESTIMATED NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS 15+ IN “EXERGAMING”



The most popular way to use technology was through motion sensing/activity-based video games such as Wii Fit, Xbox, PlayStation [893,000 participants]. The use of indoor smart trainers/treadmills [260,000] or online platforms such as Zwift or Rouvy [170,000] was lower but still growing.

Who’s participating in “exergaming”?

Those participating are more likely to be:

- Under the age of 35
- Living in families with children
- Living in the states that experienced the Delta lockdown (NSW, Victoria or the ACT)

A more detailed report on “exergaming” (virtual based physical activity) can now be found on the [AusPlay results page](#).

1. **Exergaming** – Virtual/technology-based/gaming exercise, for example motion sensing console games, smart treadmills, online platforms such as Zwift

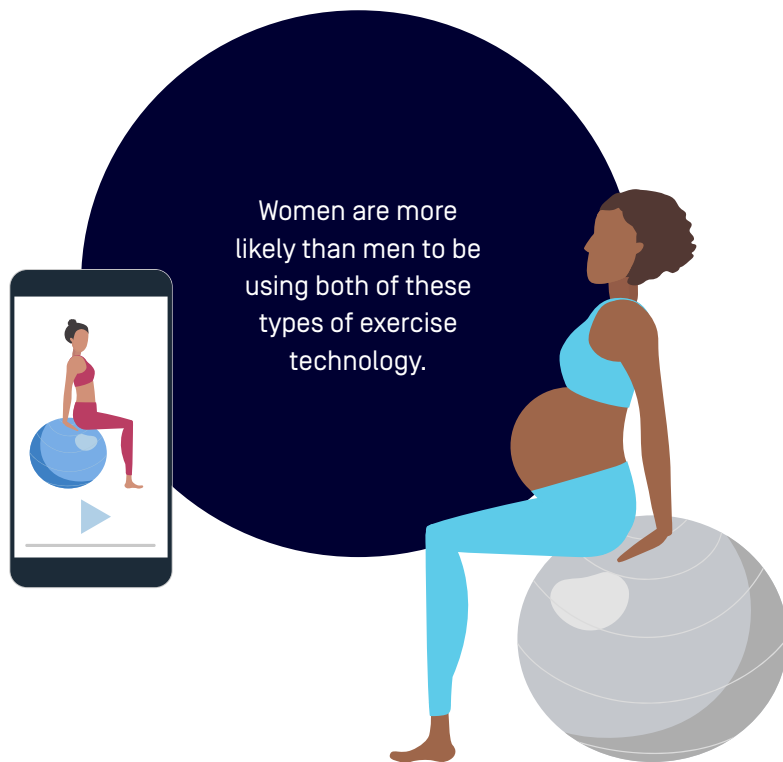
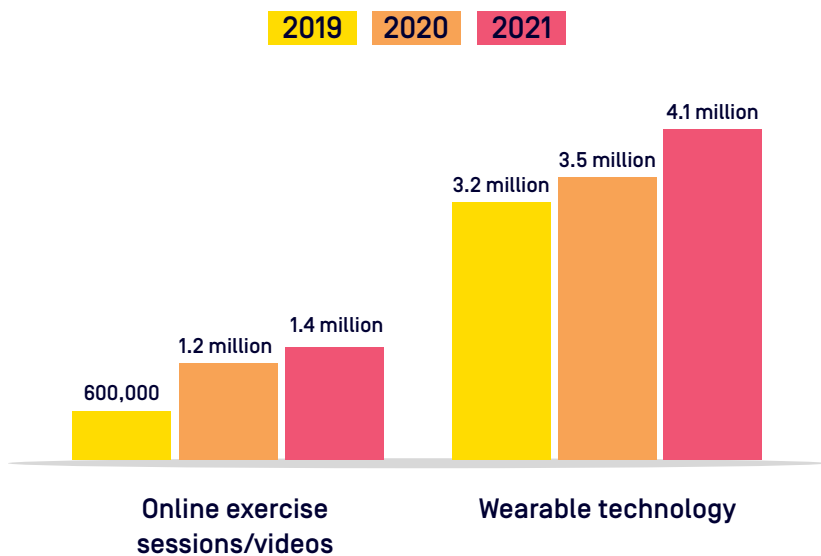


Use of wearable and other exercise technology is also increasing

While the pandemic may not have initiated the increasing use of other technologies, it has certainly accelerated the trend.

ESTIMATED NUMBER OF AUSTRALIANS 15+ USING DIFFERENT FORMS OF TECHNOLOGY

Source: AusPlay



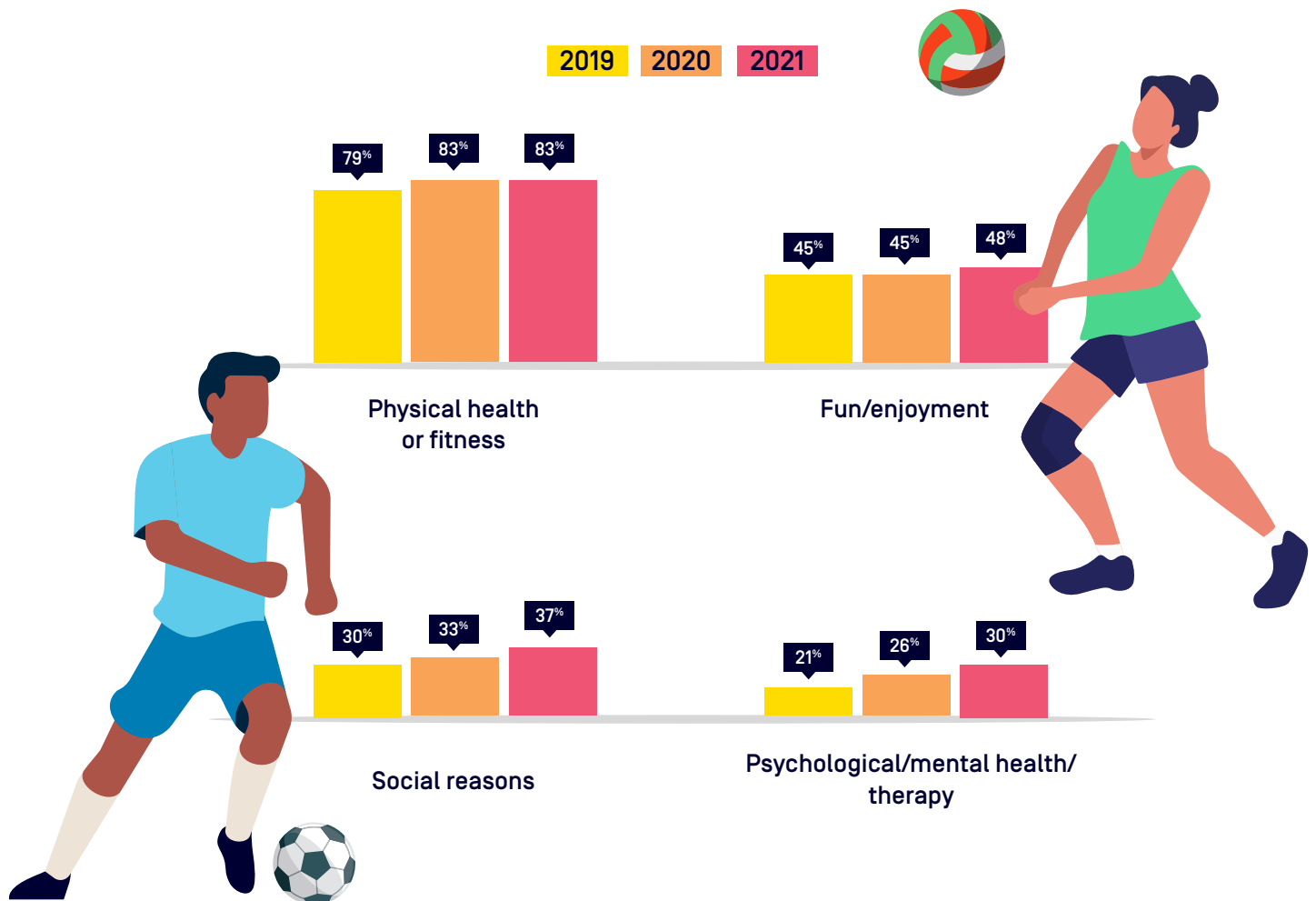
The social and mental health benefits of exercise are more important than ever

Most participants in sport and physical activity are still motivated by physical health/fitness or fun/enjoyment but the importance of social (such as meeting up with friends) and mental health benefits continue to grow.

In 2021 women were more motivated by mental health benefits [36%] than men [24%].

MAIN MOTIVATIONS – PARTICIPANTS 15+

Source: AusPlay



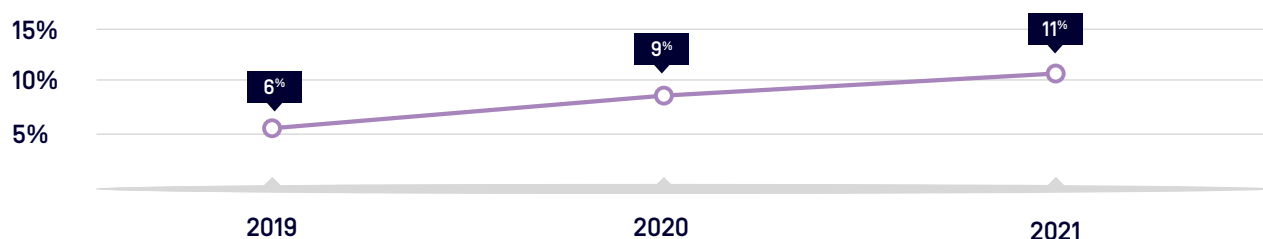
In the Community Perceptions Monitor, 61% of Australians 18+ who play or volunteer in community sport say that the positive effect it has on their mental health is one of the things they enjoy about it. This was followed by the regular exercise they get from training/playing [56%].

Increased use of public space

Where Australians get active has also changed. The most marked change was in the use of public space for sport and physical activity among Australians aged 15+. This trend is apparent across all adult age groups and across all top 20 sports and physical activities but has been most strongly driven by increased participation in recreational and bush walking, running, football/soccer, tennis and swimming.

USE OF PUBLIC SPACE FOR SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY – AUSTRALIANS 15+

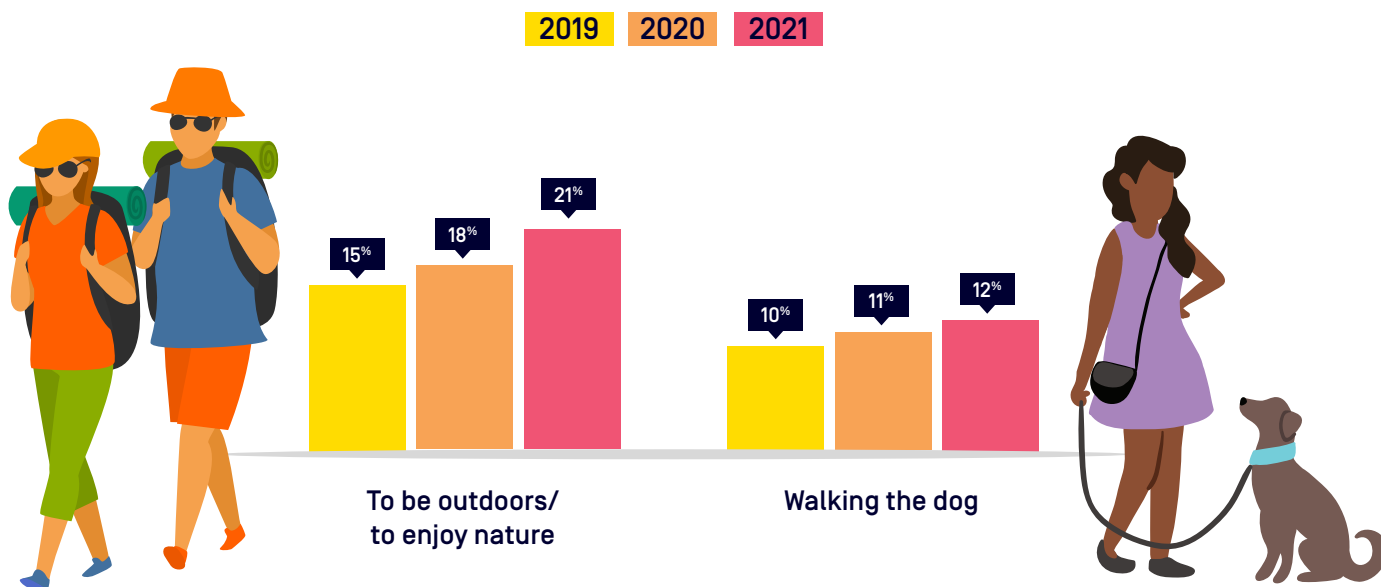
Source: AusPlay



The increase in use of public space is reflected in more Australians saying they get active to be outdoors or walk the dog.

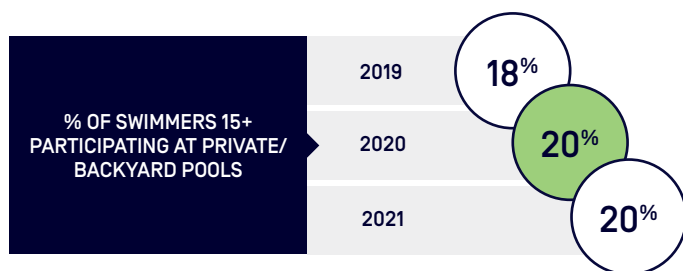
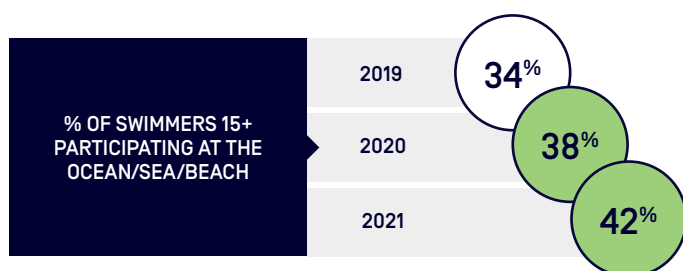
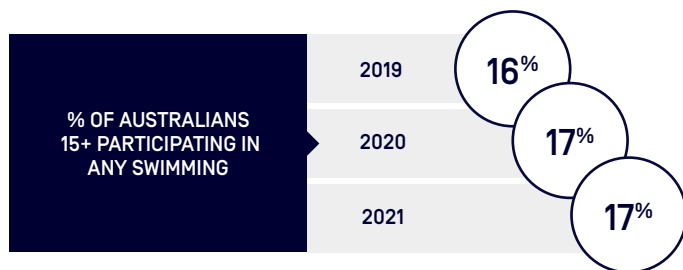
OTHER MOTIVATIONS FOR PARTICIPATION – AUSTRALIANS 15+

Source: AusPlay



Similarly, more Australian adult swimmers headed outside in 2020 and 2021 than in 2019.

The proportion of Australians swimming has remained stable but more are doing so at the beach and in backyard pools.



● Statistically significant increase year-on-year

Source: AusPlay

[NB. Not mutually exclusive – some participants may do one or all of the categories]



Since 2019 AusPlay has been recording more detail about where Australians swim.

To see more data on types and locations of swimming, visit the new [Swimming Detail Report](#).



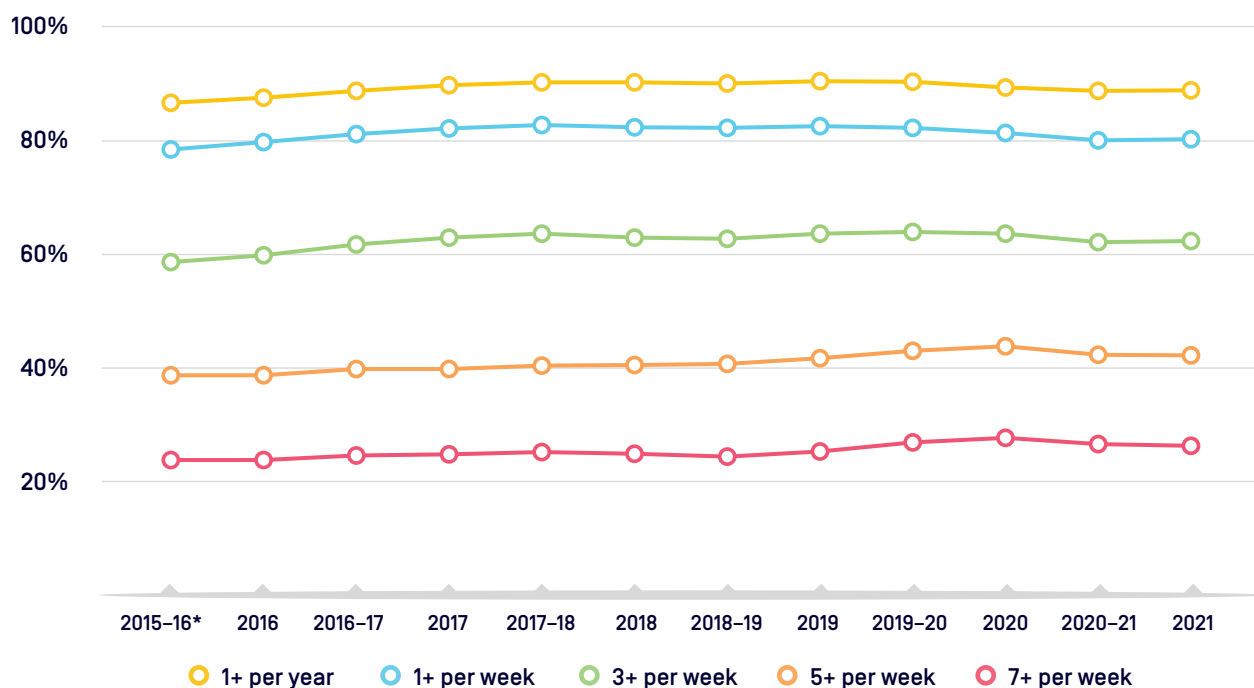
Impact on participation trends

Higher frequency participation has been sustained among Australians 15+

In 2020 there was an increase in 5+ and 7+ a week participation in sport or physical activity for those aged 15+. While these rates have not continued to rise in 2021, they have been sustained and are still higher than they were before 2019.² Older Australians (55+) continue to be more likely to participate 7+ times per week (30%) than those aged 15-34 (24%) and 35-54 (25%).

PARTICIPATION RATES OVER TIME BY FREQUENCY – AUSTRALIANS 15+

Source: AusPlay



* Not a full financial year as AusPlay commenced on 22 October 2015

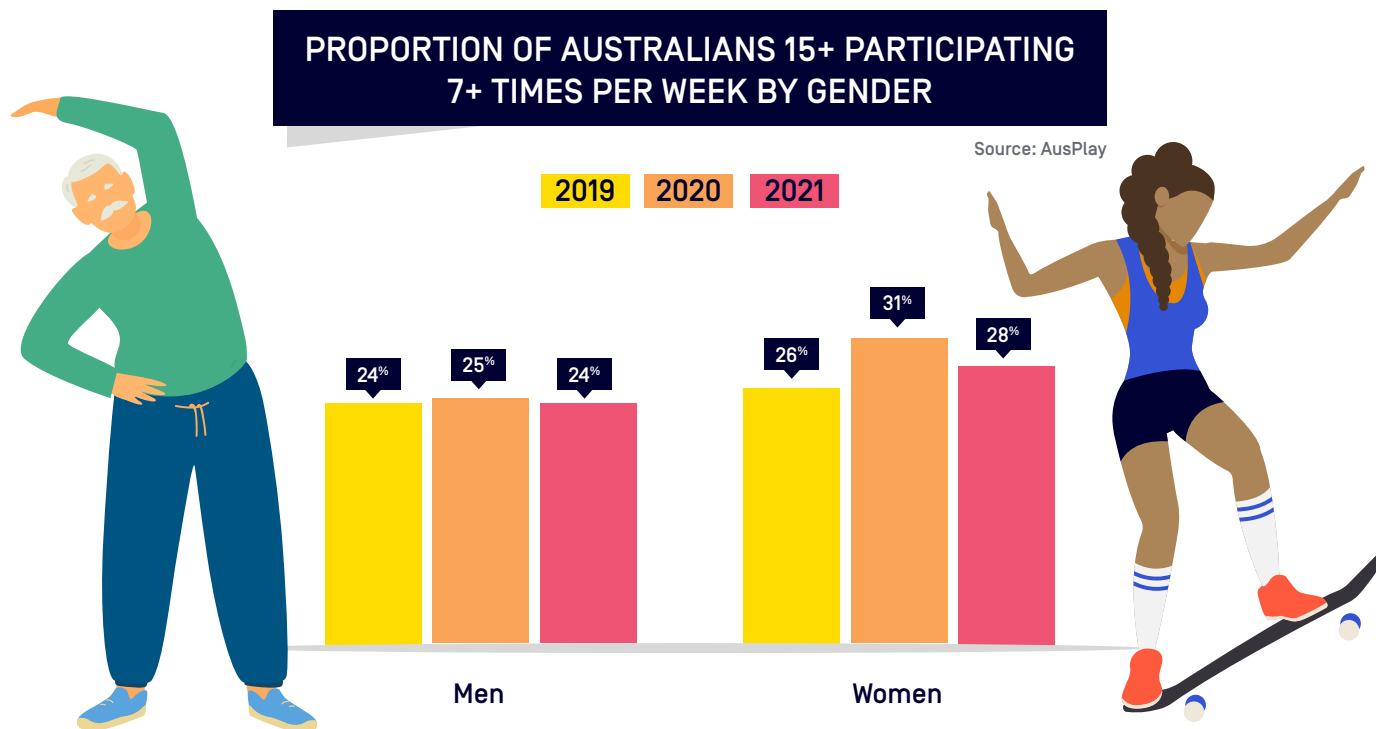
2. AusPlay reports new data every six months, based on interviews conducted in the preceding calendar or financial year. Therefore, each data point in the chart has six months of overlapping data.



Women continue to be physically active more often than men

In 2020, the increase in 7+ per week participation was driven by women, thought to be partly due to the national lockdown allowing them more time in the day. While this rate for women has declined in 2021, it is still higher than in 2019.

At the same time, the men's rate has remained static, likely due to men being more involved with club sport.



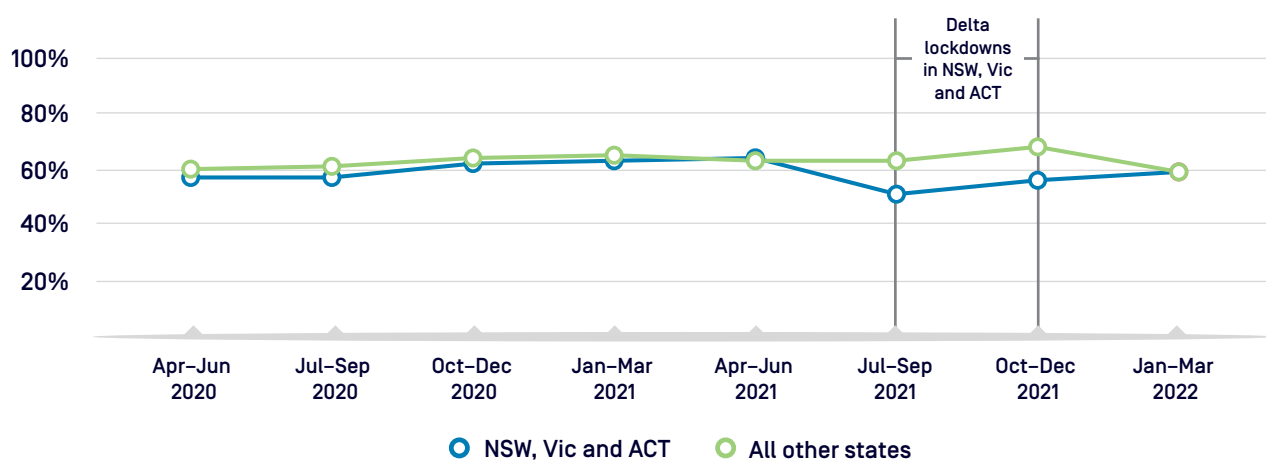
Some people have found it harder to get active

While the restrictions imposed during lockdowns encouraged some Australians to get physically active more often, CPM data shows that lockdowns can also have a negative effect on how easy people find it to keep fit and active. This would be the case for those adults who only exercise through organisations or venues that may have been closed.

KEEPING ACTIVE DURING THE PANDEMIC – AUSTRALIANS 18+

Source: Community Perceptions Monitor

% who agree/strongly agree that “It is reasonably easy under the current circumstances for me to keep fit and active”



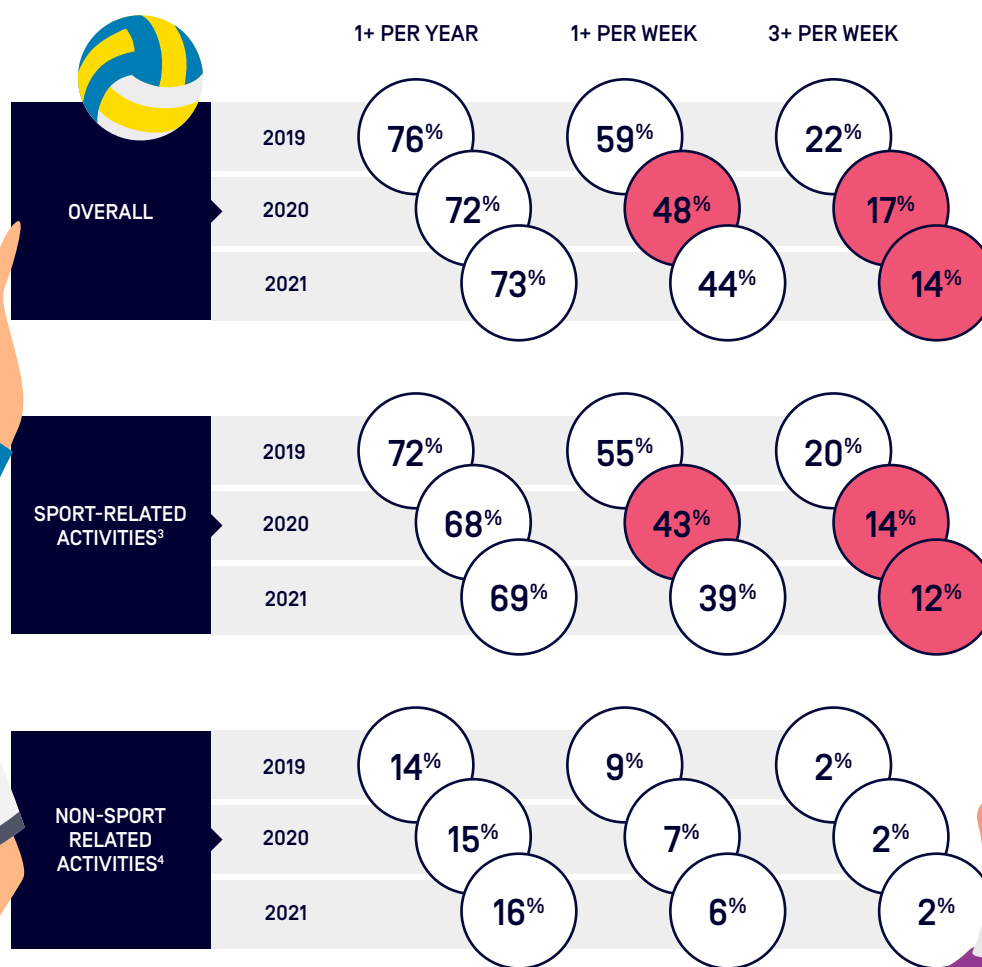
What is happening with children's participation?

Children's participation is showing signs of recovery despite year-on-year declines

As noted in previous COVID-19 updates, the pandemic has had greater impact on higher frequencies of participation – year-on-year the proportion of children participating three or more times a week fell significantly in both 2020 and 2021.

CHILDREN'S ORGANISED OUT-OF-SCHOOL PARTICIPATION BY TYPE AND FREQUENCY

Source: AusPlay



● Statistically significant decrease year-on-year

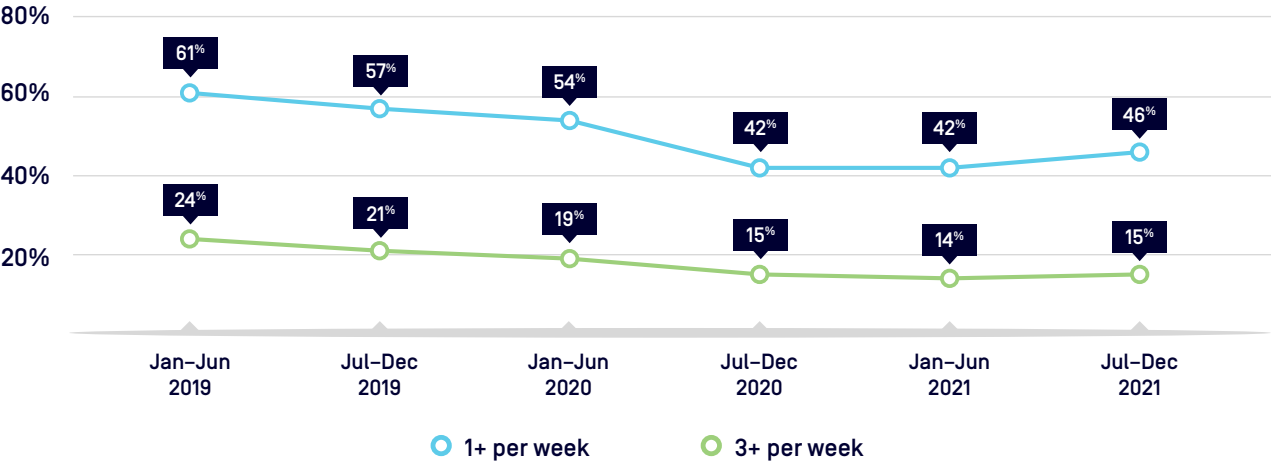
3. Physical activity that is typically associated with a sporting organisation, for example, athletics, cycling, football/soccer, netball

4. Physical activity that is typically not associated with a sporting organisation, for example, gym/fitness, bushwalking, recreational dance.

But the year-on-year data doesn't tell the whole story – if we break it into six-month periods, we see indications of stabilisation and recovery in the second half of 2021.

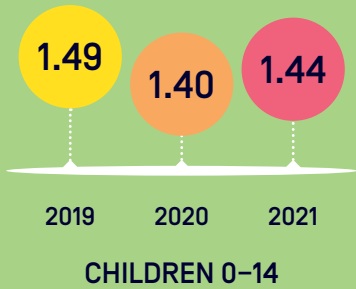
CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN ORGANISED OUT-OF-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES - 1+ AND 3+ PER WEEK

Source: AusPlay



The relative stability of overall participation rates (1+ per year) is reflected in the average number of activities for children being similar in 2019 and 2021.

AVERAGE NUMBER OF ACTIVITIES

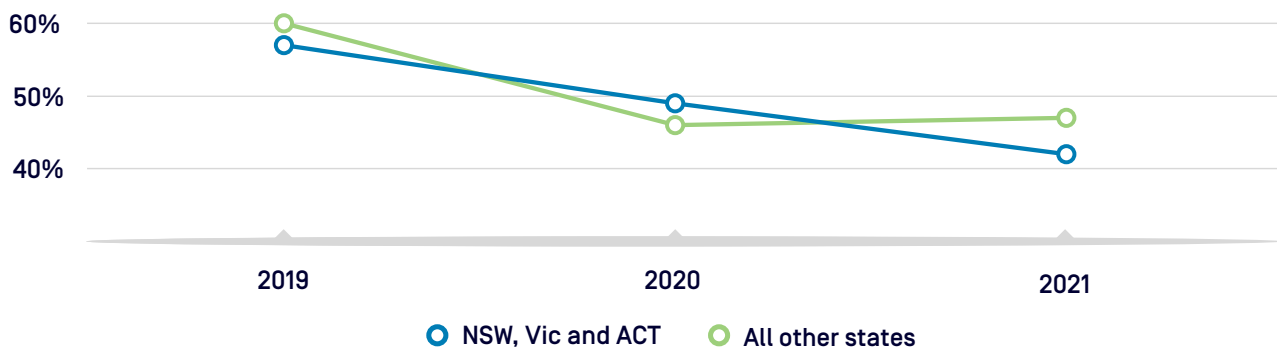


Jurisdictions that avoided the Delta lockdown are driving the recovery

In 2021 three jurisdictions – NSW, Vic and the ACT – experienced outbreaks of the Delta variant of COVID-19. The effect of the subsequent lockdowns is clearly seen in children's 1+ per week participation compared to the unaffected states and territories.

CHILDREN'S ORGANISED OUT-OF-SCHOOL PARTICIPATION BY JURISDICTIONS - 1+ PER WEEK

Source: AusPlay



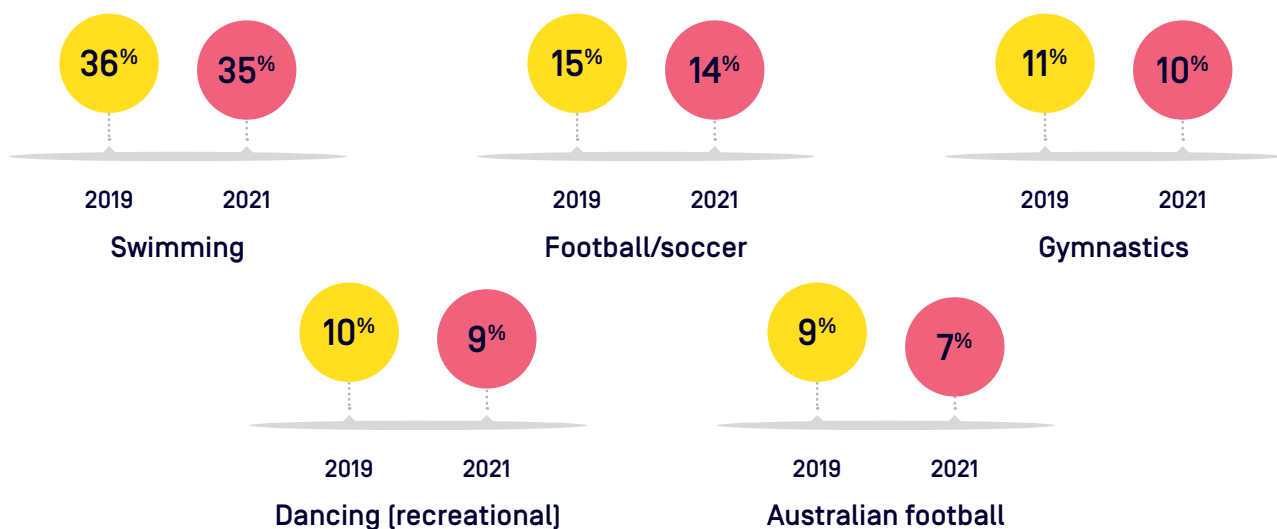
All sports and activities have been affected in a similar way

The year-on-year decline in 1+ per week participation has been felt by sports and physical activities across the board, with none immune from losing regular participants.

While children may not have been able to participate as regularly as they might like in the past two years, the stability of the overall participation rate [1+ per year] suggests that they are going back to their activities when they can. This is illustrated in 1+ per year participation in the top five activities below.

1+ PER YEAR PARTICIPATION IN TOP FIVE ACTIVITIES – CHILDREN 0–14

Source: AusPlay



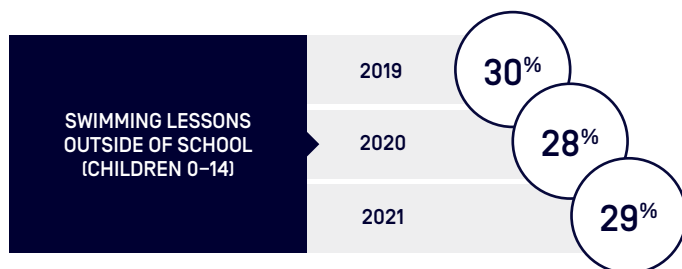
As the lifting of restrictions allows sport to operate without interruption once more, children should be able to return to participating more regularly. Future AusPlay data will reveal if this is the case.



Importance of swimming lessons reflected in new data

New data now available lets us delve deeper into the most popular children's activity.

Swimming lessons outside of school have continued to be important, with participation rates remaining similar each year.



Source: AusPlay

In comparison, swimming lessons **in school** have declined, which is not surprising when the amount of time spent remote learning in 2020 and 2021 is considered.



● Statistically significant decrease year-on-year

Source: AusPlay

A concern is that some children may have missed out on swimming lessons if their only experience of them has been at school.

Since 2019, AusPlay has collected additional information on swimming. We can now look at the type of swimming participation – whether children swim in school, what type of swimming they do out of school, and where they do it.

To see more data visit the new [Swimming Detail Report](#).



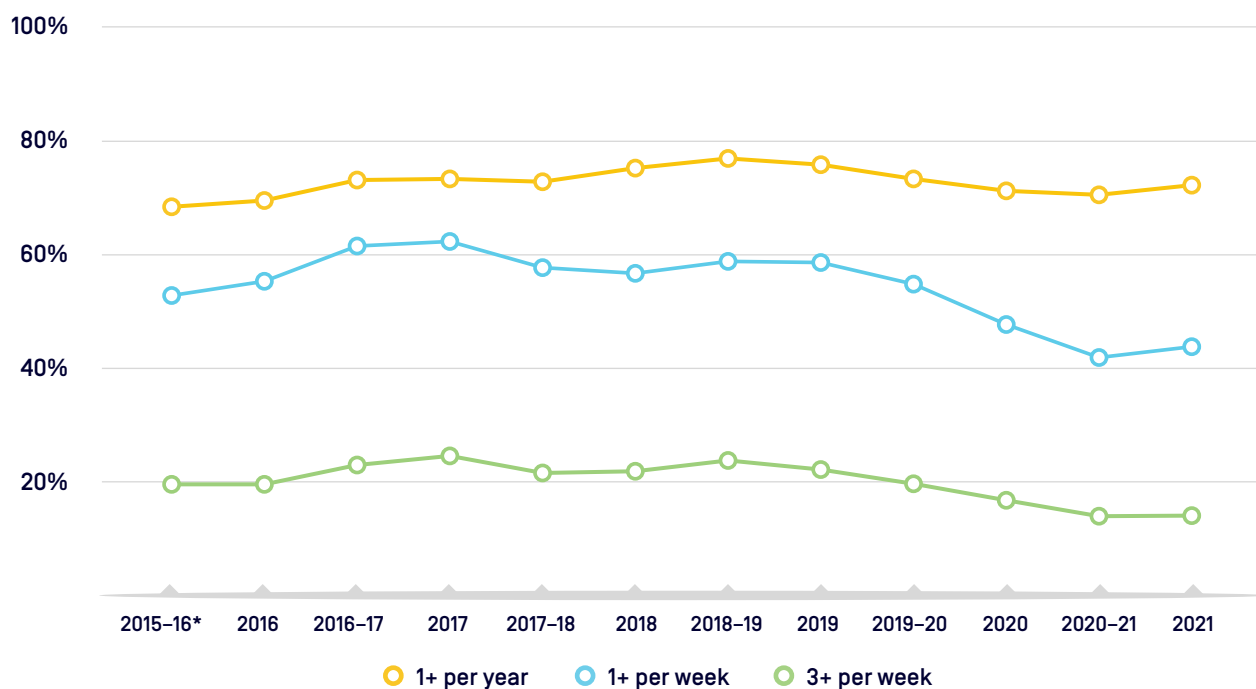
Impact on children's participation trends

Regular participation by children has stabilised

Participation rates for children are stabilising or turning upwards after reaching low points in 2020-21.⁵ But there is still scope for encouraging children back to more regular activity – rates for 1+ per week and 3+ per week participation remain lower than before the pandemic.

ORGANISED OUT-OF-SCHOOL PARTICIPATION RATES OVER TIME BY FREQUENCY – CHILDREN 0-14

Source: AusPlay



* Not a full financial year as AusPlay commenced on 22 October 2015

5. AusPlay reports new data every six months, based on interviews conducted in the preceding calendar or financial year. Therefore, each data point in the chart has six months of overlapping data.



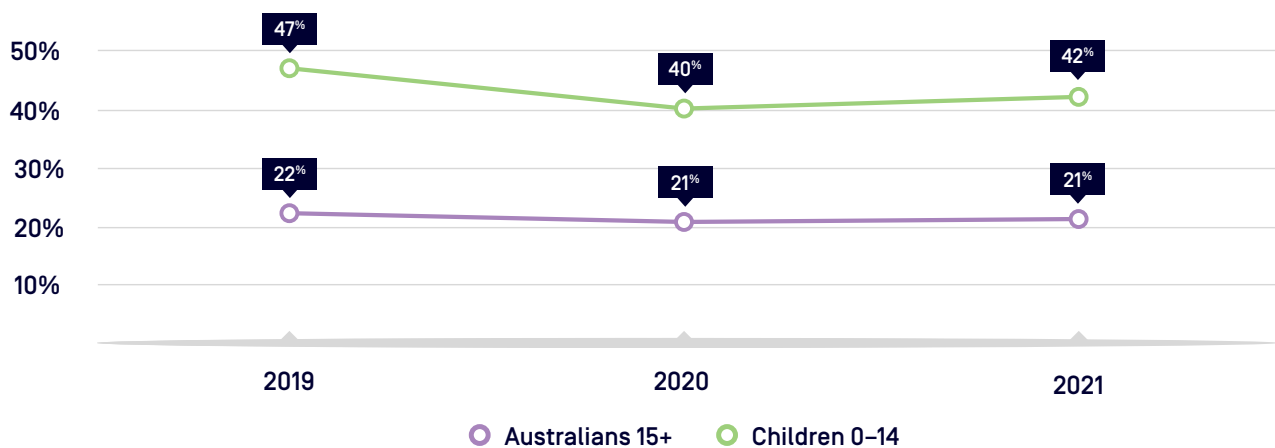
What does the future look like for community sport?

There is growing evidence that the new participation “normal” includes a greater mix of organised sport and the types of activities that can be done in a physically-distanced way.

Australians are not abandoning club sport – there are indications players are returning – and clubs will continue to play an important part in the mix of activities.

PARTICIPATION THROUGH SPORTS CLUBS/ASSOCIATIONS

Source: AusPlay

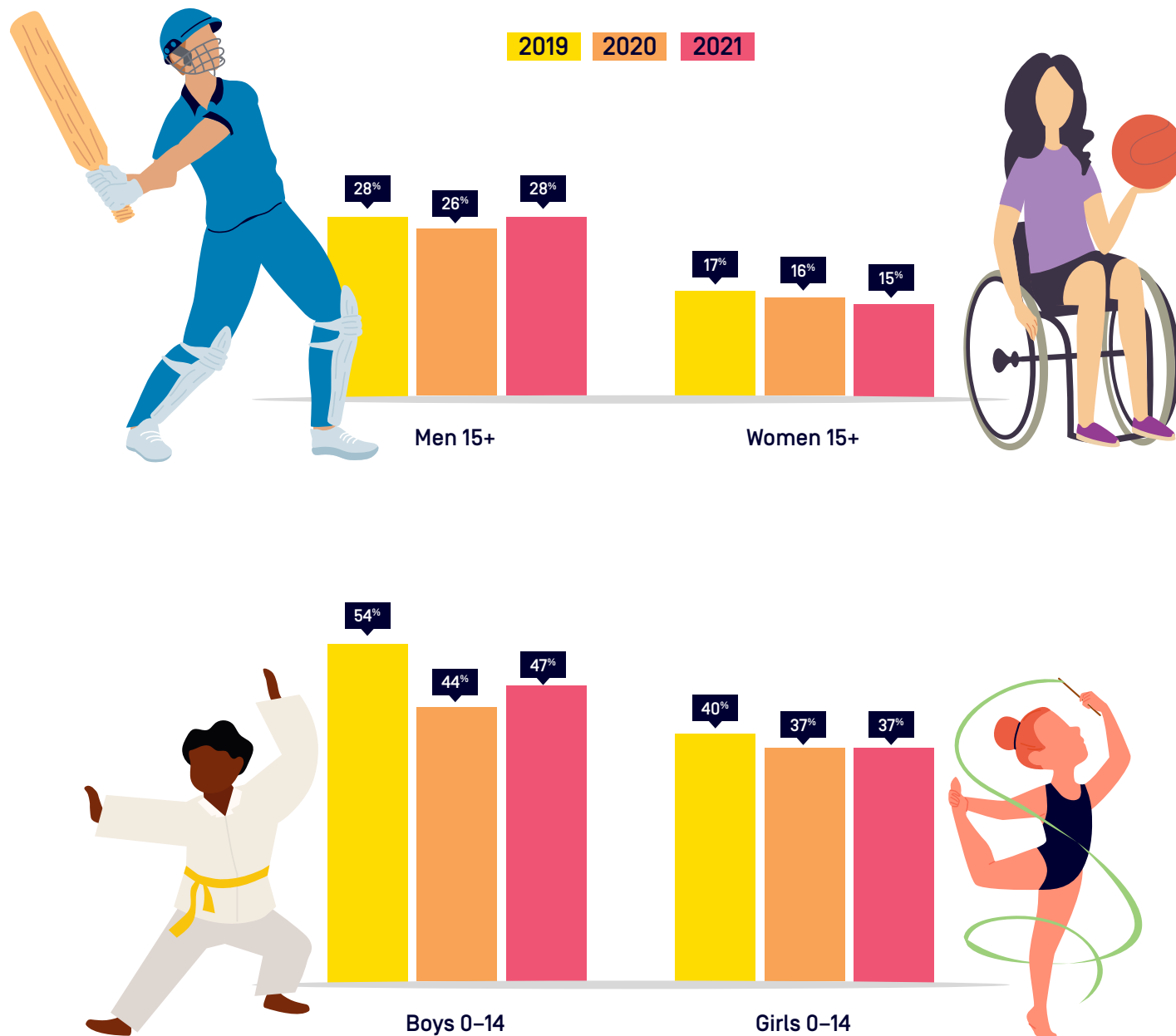


Men and boys are currently driving the return to clubs

Men have traditionally been more likely to participate through sports clubs than women. It is not surprising, therefore, that both the decline in 2020 and the beginnings of a rebound in 2021 have been driven by men and boys.

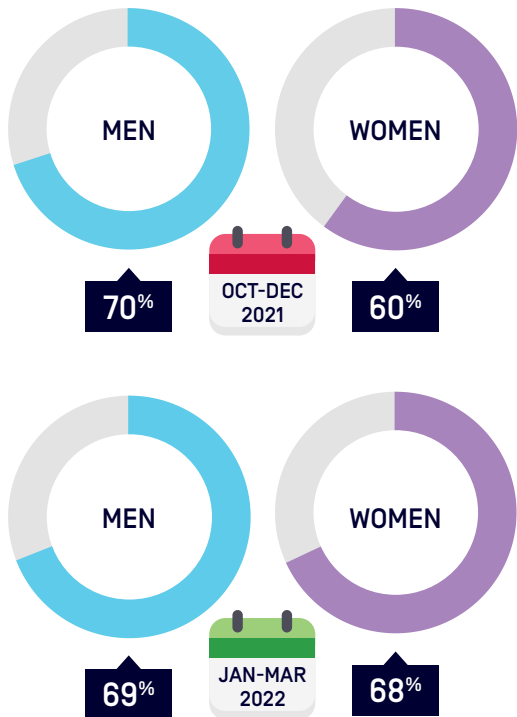
PARTICIPATION THROUGH SPORTS CLUBS/ASSOCIATION BY GENDER

Source: AusPlay



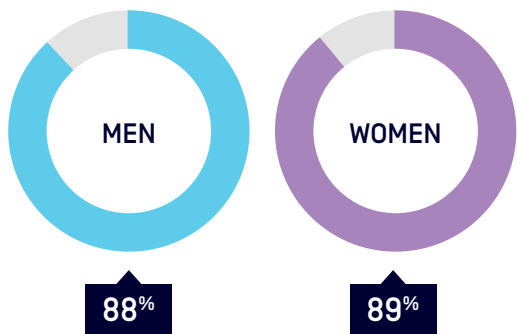
Results from the CPM reflect this slower return to sport by women but also suggest that it is now starting to accelerate. At the end of 2021, women were less likely to say they have returned than men but in the first three months of 2022 the return rate was equal.

Proportion of pre-COVID community or social sport players who have already returned:



Looking to the future, most current players (and those who played before COVID-19 but haven't yet returned) say they intend to play in the next 12 months.

Proportion of pre-COVID and current players likely to play in the next 12 months:



Future AusPlay data will confirm whether these intentions result in action.



As players return we also need volunteers to return



But as sports return, even a small decline can pose a problem since the same number of jobs still need to be done.

When we look at the number of roles our volunteers are taking on, we see evidence of this. The proportion of volunteers doing just one role has declined, while those doing three or more has increased.



● Statistically significant increase year-on-year

*Difference between 2019 and 2021 is statistically significant

Source: AusPlay



Which roles are losing volunteers?

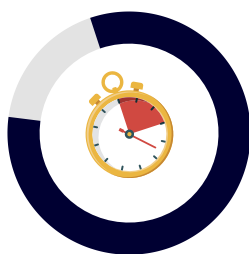
Between 2019 and 2021 the roles that lost the most volunteers were officials and ad hoc helpers (carrying out tasks such as setting up, packing down, cleaning etc). In 2021 there were an estimated 75,000 fewer Australians 15+ putting their hand up to be officials and 73,000 fewer offering to do ad hoc tasks.

Results from Sport Australia's Community Perceptions Monitor in the six-month period from October 2021 – March 2022 suggest that volunteers are less likely to return than players.



88%

of pre-COVID and current **players** are likely to play in the next 12 months



82%

of pre-COVID and current **volunteers** are likely to volunteer in the next 12 months

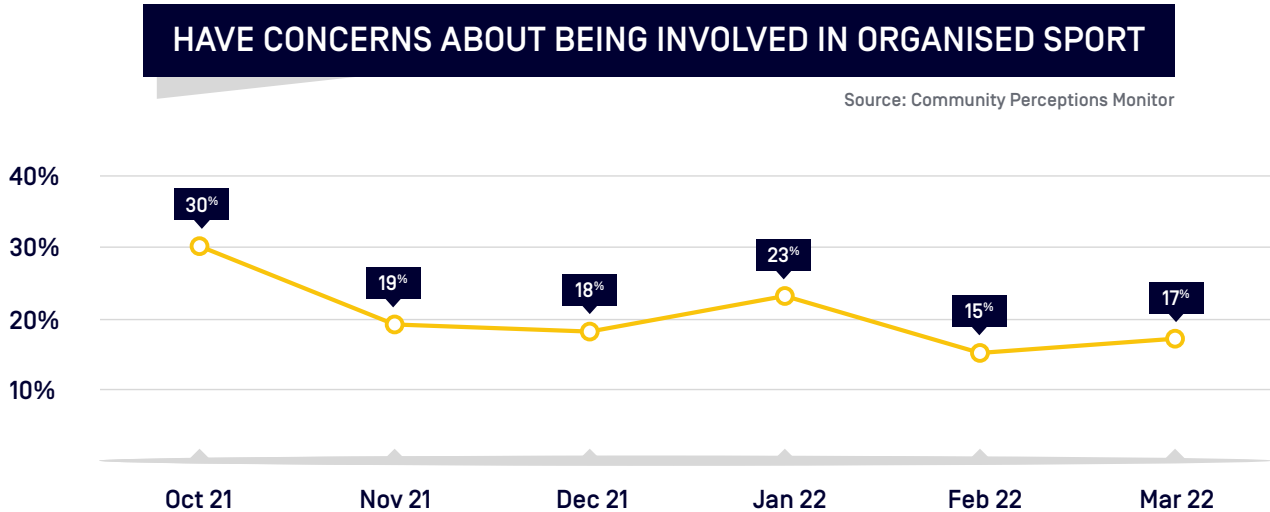
To help the sports sector address the challenge of falling volunteer numbers, the ASC has recently convened the [Sport Volunteer Coalition](#).

This group of experts will be meeting regularly to develop ways to transform the sport volunteer experience and promote the value of volunteering in sport.



There are still some concerns about participating in sport

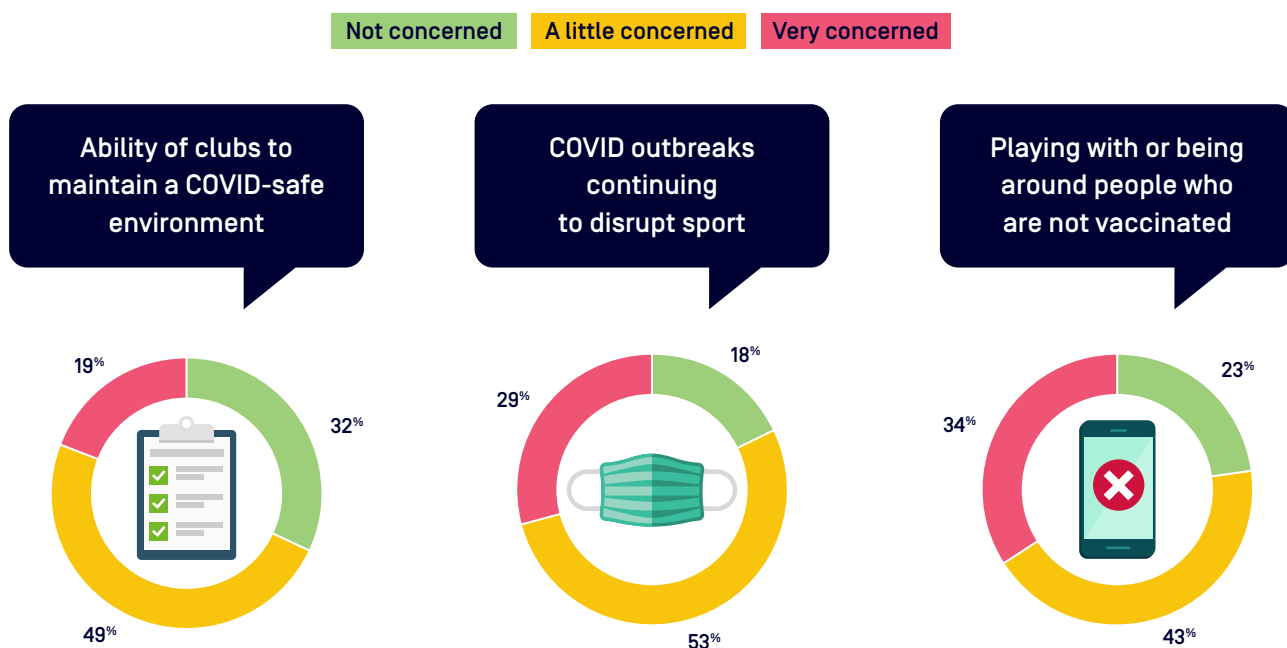
Most Australians who are involved in community or social sport as a player, volunteer or parent don't have any concerns about continuing as we move into "COVID-normal" but there is a fairly large minority who do. The level of concern has declined since October 2021, apart from a slight increase when the Omicron wave took off.



Since October 2021, the Community Perceptions Monitor has included questions about Australians' concerns about returning to sport when COVID-19 is a permanent feature of our lives.



When prompted with a list of possible concerns, those likely to be involved in organised sport in the next 12 months were most worried about playing with or being around people who are not vaccinated [34% very concerned].



Source: Community Perceptions Monitor

While it is individuals' own opinions and experiences that determine their level of concern, there are some things clubs and sports authorities can do to help alleviate any anxiety. Almost half of those who expressed concern said they would be more comfortable if clubs provided clear information about their COVID-safe procedures [49%] and if only vaccinated people were allowed to participate [47%].



What does the future hold?

In 2021 the pandemic continued to affect our lives significantly, with most of the country experiencing lockdowns or restrictions at some point. We started to have a better understanding of what “COVID-normal” meant and how our day-to-day behaviours needed to change.

AusPlay data for 2021 has shown how our behaviours relating to sport and physical activity are adapting but we don't yet know if these behaviours are long-term changes or if Australians will revert to pre-pandemic habits. In particular, future COVID-19 updates will tell us:

- If “exergaming” continues to grow
- If the indications of a return to club sport are the start of a full recovery
- If high frequency participation among women returns to pre-pandemic levels
- If the mix of individual/physically-distanced and organised activities has reached its natural balance or continues to change
- If in-school swimming lessons continue to decline and, if so, will out-of-school lessons increase to cover this loss.

As the answers to these questions become clear, clubs and other sporting providers will need to think about how they fit into the new sport and physical activity landscape. While clubs will always have a place, they may have to adapt their offering to accommodate participants that are changing their physical activity behaviours.



Data sources



This update follows two earlier reports by the ASC on the early **[October 2020]** and ongoing **[June 2021]** impact of COVID-19 on sport and physical activity participation.

What's new since June 2021:

- AusPlay 12-month recall data collected from January – December 2021
- CPM data collected from October 2021 – March 2022

AusPlay

AusPlay commenced in October 2015 and is the largest and most comprehensive survey of its kind ever conducted in Australia. Each year, 20,000 Australian residents aged 15 or over complete the survey. Apart from providing information about their own participation, parents/guardians of children under the age of 15 are asked about the organised physical activities undertaken by one of their children aged 0–14 outside of school hours.*

It is important to note that information is not collected on children's school activities or casual play outside of school as many parents/guardians aren't able to provide this information accurately.

Respondents are asked about their participation in sport and physical activity in the 12 months prior to interview. These interviews are conducted by mobile telephone and have continued uninterrupted during COVID-19.

* AusPlay collects data from one randomly selected parent and one randomly selected child in the same household.

Community Perceptions Monitor

The Community Perceptions Monitor (CPM) captures public attitudes towards various aspects of sport through an ongoing survey of 500 Australian residents aged 18+ each month.

From April 2020 it has included some questions about the impact of COVID-19 on people's lives and on sport in particular. From June 2020 it has also included questions on attitudes and concerns about returning to sport.

The survey is conducted in the first two weeks of each month, using an online methodology. Data is weighted to be representative of the Australian 18+ population. Depending on the data item, results may be based on one or more months' responses.



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Any further questions about AusPlay
[or queries for additional customised reporting/
further analysis of the dataset] can be directed
to the Insights team at Sport Australia via:

AusPlay@SportAus.gov.au