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Community sport and active recreation in Victoria: changes and challenges

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Executive summary

Most Victorians engage in community sport and active recreation (CSAR), with approximately 85.4 per cent of Victoria's adult population taking part at some point throughout 2023–24. CSAR's significance in Victoria is reflected in the diversity of participants and organisations that facilitate participation, as well as the range of government policies and funding mechanisms that support opportunities to get involved. However, the sector faces many challenges, sitting at the intersection of discussions around cost-of-living concerns, gender disparities, barriers for marginalised groups, sustainability and volunteerism.

This paper provides a summary of Victorian participation in CSAR, delving into some of the most recent participation data from across the state, detailing who is participating, how and in what ways. Data is broken down to consider the impact of age, education and socioeconomic status, among other factors, on participation trends. Expanding on this data, the paper explores the place of CSAR in the context of public health—mental and physical—as well as its contribution to social and economic wellbeing.

On a participant level, despite the benefits on offer and the widespread participation in CSAR, some cohorts are still underrepresented in different parts of the sports landscape. The paper explores the reasons for this, in particular the changing experience of sport for women and the growth in inclusive policies and initiatives.

In addition to these impacts, many clubs and organisations also face challenges to longevity and sustainability. The final section addresses issues such as the retention of volunteers, the adequacy of existing facilities and the impact of climate change. Overall, the paper provides a snapshot of Victoria's CSAR sector, together with the challenges faced at a range of levels, including for participants, organisations and governments.

Introduction

Most Victorians engage in community sport and active recreation (CSAR). It can be a pastime, a hobby, a passion, even a necessity. In 2023–24, 85.4 per cent of Victoria’s adult population, approximately 4.8 million people, participated in CSAR at some point in the year in some form, organised or non-organised. This number has always been high, as it is across Australia, and complements Melbourne’s self-declared—and occasionally externally validated—reputation as the ‘sporting capital’ of the world.¹ That boast may be more reflective of its calendar of major professional sporting events, but demand is underpinned by a widespread willingness to keep active.

CSAR’s significance in Victoria is reflected in the funding mechanisms, sports infrastructure and public health impacts promoted by governments of different levels, as well as the sheer volume and integration of sports and recreation providers within communities. CSAR also sits at the intersection of discussions around health outcomes, cost-of-living concerns, gender disparities, barriers for marginalised groups, sustainability and volunteerism.

This paper provides a snapshot of Victorian participation in CSAR. It delves into some of the most recent AusPlay participation data, which is provided for by the Australian Sports Commission and illustrates how people are participating, in what kinds of activity and who is doing it. This data can be broken down in numerous ways, and the paper provides an analysis of the data in terms of barriers and motivations for community sport participation, including through considerations of age, education and socioeconomic status.

In addition to this data, the paper explores the place of CSAR in the context of public health—mental and physical—as well as its contribution to community, social and economic wellbeing. Factors such as facilities, funding, policies and entrenched cultural norms still provide barriers to entry. Expanding on the data available, the paper looks at the evolving experience of sport for women in previously male-dominated environments, as well as the barriers remaining for other cohorts underrepresented in CSAR.

A number of broader challenges are also threatening the viability of community sport on an organisational scale, including attraction and retention of volunteers, concerns around access, the burden of administration, and the rising costs of funding facilities. The paper examines challenges like COVID-19 and the advancement of climate change in this context. All these factors will continue to affect the ways people engage with community sport, how it is organised, how it is delivered and the scope of benefits it can provide across the population.

What is community sport and active recreation?

Community sport and active recreation encompass a broad range of activities, categorised in various ways. Activity may be organised or informal; paying or non-paying; sport-related or non-sport-related. Organised activities may include club-based team sports and gym-based fitness, while non-organised or informal activities may include individual pursuits such as running, walking and adventuring (see Terminology on p. 33). In the final three sections, ‘Who benefits?’, ‘Who wants to join?’ and ‘What are the broader challenges?’, ‘community sport’ is often mentioned alone and concerns mainly to organised, sport-related activity.

¹ J. Michaels (2025) ‘[Melbourne’s major NFL and NBA plays rubberstamp ‘sporting capital of the world’](#)’, *ESPN*, 7 February; J. Allan, Premier of Victoria (2025) *Melbourne—the sporting capital of the world*, media release, 21 April.

1 | Who funds and runs community sport and active recreation?

While most people's exposure to CSAR may only extend as far as their own fitness routine or their own club, the sector spans a complex network of stakeholders promoting participation and public health. These include participants as the base-level stakeholder, but also then include the gyms they are members of, clubs they participate for, the leagues they play in, the regional sports associations their clubs may be party to, among others. A range of government entities also provide policy, funding and overarching strategic direction.

The state government's role

Clubs and private businesses receive a large amount of revenue from membership fees and fundraising, but the CSAR sector also relies on government funding. The Minister for Sport (currently Steve Dimopoulos) and Minister for Community Sport (currently Ros Spence) oversee Sport and Recreation Victoria (SRV), the chief body responsible for this sector, which sits within the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions. SRV oversees the constituent bodies governing sport at both elite and community level, including:

- state sporting associations
- regional sport assemblies
- state recreation organisations, disability sporting organisations and other sport and recreation bodies
- state sport trusts
- sporting institutes and regional academies of sport.²

In all, the government gives high regard to community sport in its media output, with successive Labor governments publishing over 500 press releases mentioning community sport since the November 2014 election—roughly one per week. These releases promote a range of government input, including facilities investment, funding initiatives, grants programs and targeted vouchers. The government currently has several initiatives, strategies and plans around community sport, but its overarching direction is outlined in the *Active Victoria 2022–26* strategy, which has several objectives:

- connecting communities—achieving equitable and sustained participation as well as quality infrastructure that is inclusive, accessible and respectful;
- building value—growing a highly skilled recreation workforce as well as implementing good governance practices for a safe and sustainable sector; and
- enduring legacy—maintaining a pipeline of sporting events and ensuring Victorians' success in high-performance sport.³

As part of this strategy, SRV also facilitates a Safe and Inclusive Sport Community of Practice for knowledge-sharing among sports stakeholders on how to achieve gender equality in sport. Other initiatives include those targeted at boosting participation among the general population (Get Active Victoria) and smaller subgroups, such as people with a disability (Access All Abilities) and children (VICSWIM Summer Kidz program).

SRV manages several grants and investment streams, including for country football and netball clubs, emergency sports equipment, Aboriginal sports participation, kids' vouchers, and local sports infrastructure, among others. Recent figures from the Minister for Community Sport and SRV indicate that the state government has funded 375 community

² Sport and Recreation Victoria (2025) '[State sporting associations](#)', SRV website, 29 April; Sport and Recreation Victoria (2024) '[Regional sports assemblies](#)', SRV website, 3 December; Sport and Recreation Victoria (2024) '[State sport and active recreation bodies](#)', SRV website, 6 November; Sport and Recreation Victoria (2024) '[State sport trust entities](#)', SRV website, 28 May; Sport and Recreation Victoria (2024) '[Victorian Institute of Sport and Regional Academies of Sport](#)', SRV website, 28 May.

³ Department of Jobs, Regions and Precincts (2022) *Active Victoria 2022–2026: a strategic framework for sport and recreation*, July, Melbourne, DJRP, pp. 22–23.

sport and active infrastructure projects since 2018, worth \$99 million combined, and contributed more than \$2.3 billion in community sport infrastructure since Labor came to office in 2014.⁴

The objectives of SRV in overseeing sports grants and participation are also complemented by the advocacy of the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth). VicHealth's ten-year strategy for 2023–33 also seeks to build partnerships with sports organisations to help implement access equity and other health policy goals.⁵ A few of VicHealth's initiatives include the following:

- Together with the SRV, they introduced the *Fair access policy roadmap*, which aimed to achieve equitable access to CSAR infrastructure.⁶
- A recent VicHealth campaign, called This Girl Can, 'advocated for all women—cis, trans, non-binary and gender diverse—to get active in supportive and welcoming environments'.⁷
- An initiative with the local government sector, Building Active Communities, also sought to increase CSAR participation opportunities through community design.⁸

Other stakeholders

A range of other stakeholders help support the CSAR sector. At a federal level, the Minister for Sport (currently Anika Wells) oversees sport, which also includes oversight of the Australian Sports Commission and several national sports bodies, including Sport Integrity Australia.⁹

Local government associations are also involved at an LGA level, often managing community assets such as parks, sporting facilities and aquatic facilities.¹⁰

The various levels of stakeholders are illustrated in the following table, drawing on the Clearinghouse for Sport's summary of sports governance in Australia.¹¹

⁴ R. Spence, Minister for Community Sport (2025) *Big win for local sports clubs across Melbourne*, media release, 22 May.

⁵ VicHealth (2023) *The next 10 years 2023–2033: Reshaping systems together for a healthier, fairer Victoria*, July, Melbourne, VicHealth.

⁶ Office for Women in Sport and Recreation, Sport and Recreation Victoria & VicHealth (2022) *Fair access policy roadmap*, Melbourne, Department of Jobs, Regions and Precincts.

⁷ VicHealth (date unknown) 'This Girl Can Victoria', VicHealth website.

⁸ VicHealth (2023) *Building active communities*, August, Melbourne, VicHealth

⁹ A. Albanese, Prime Minister of Australia (2025) 'Press conference—Canberra', online transcript, 12 May; Department of Health and Aged Care (2025) 'About sport in Australia', DHAC (archived), Wayback Machine Internet Archive, 8 January.

¹⁰ Vic Councils (date unknown) 'Sport & recreation', Vic Councils website.

¹¹ The Clearinghouse for Sport is a data hub coordinated by the Australian Sports Commission for Australian sports and recreation agencies to share information and research.

Table 1: Community sport and active recreation stakeholders¹²

Community sport and active recreation stakeholders	
Government entities	<p>Federal:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts • Australian Sports Commission • Australian Sports Foundation • Sport Integrity Australia • National Sports Tribunal <p>State:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sport and Recreation Victoria (and interstate equivalents) <p>Local government councils</p>
High performance	<p>Peak sporting bodies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Australian Olympic Committee • Paralympics Australia • Commonwealth Games Australia <p>National Institute Network (NIN):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Australian Institute of Sport • Victorian Institute of Sport (and interstate equivalents) <p>Victorian regional academies of sport:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barwon Sports Academy (Geelong) • Bendigo Bank Academy of Sport (Bendigo) • Gippsland Sports Academy (Newborough) • SouthWest Academy of Sport (Warrnambool) • Sunraysia Academy of Sport (Mildura) • WestVic Academy of Sport (Ballarat)
Sporting organisations	<p>National Sporting Organisations (NSOs) (Aus)</p> <p>State sporting associations (SSAs) (Vic)</p>
Advocacy and professional bodies (some examples)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VicSport (Vic) • Australasian College of Sport and Exercise Physicians • AUSactive • Pride in Sport • Sports Environment Alliance • Sports Medicine Australia
Community sector	<p>Sport and active recreation clubs</p> <p>School sport</p> <p>University sport</p> <p>Preventive health and fitness providers (gyms, etc.)</p>

¹² Clearinghouse for Sport (2024) '[Structure of Australian sport](#)', Clearinghouse for Sport website, 19 March.

2 | Who participates?

Participation data for CSAR is periodically published through the Australian Sports Commission's AusPlay survey.¹³ The results document the behaviours of Australian child (0–14) and adult (15+) populations, highlighting areas where participation is strong and indicating where barriers are preventing participation. Data for the financial year 2023–24 marks the start of a new data collection method for the Australian Sports Commission—away from phone interviews and towards online surveys. While this means the data comes from a wider survey pool (a doubling of the annual national sample size from 20,000 to 40,000 respondents), the data cannot be compared directly with previous AusPlay datasets. The following section will take a snapshot of the 2023–24 statistics.

The estimated percentage of Victorian adults who in 2023–24 participated in CSAR at least once a month was 80.10 per cent, while about 67.40 per cent participated once a week and about 49.50 per cent participated three times a week.¹⁴ However, these aggregate estimates hide significant variation among smaller demographics such as those defined by age, sex, employment and other factors. Tables 2 and 3 display some basic estimates for adult and child participation from the AusPlay data. Definitions according to AusPlay for 'organised', 'informal', 'sport-related' and 'non-sport-related' activities can be found in the 'Terminology' section at the end of the paper (see p. 33).

Type of activity

Some takeaways from the 2023–24 AusPlay survey results for Victoria on types of activity undertaken include the following:¹⁵

- **Informal activity** was the most common type of activity, with about two thirds of the population (67.5 per cent) participating by themselves informally, while about half the population were informally active with friends and family (50.8 per cent).
- There was a marked difference in how men and women participated in **organised sport participation**: 17.3 per cent of men participated through a sports club or association, compared with just 9.6 per cent of women (9.6 per cent), while women were more likely to be active through a gym or fitness club (13.5 per cent) or private or commercial business (12.7 per cent).
- In terms of **sport-related** and **non-sport-related activities**, 34.6 per cent of Victorians participated exclusively in non-sport-related activities (running, gym, individual fitness, etc.), 14.9 per cent in exclusively sport-related activities; 35.9 per cent participated in both sport-related and non-sport-related activities.
- **Men are more active in sport-related activities** (59.1 per cent) than women (42.6 per cent), while **women are more active in non-sport activities** such as gym/fitness, bushwalking, recreational dance, etc. (75.9 per cent) compared to men (65 per cent).
- The **most popular activity for adults** was, by far, recreational walking, with almost 6 in 10 women taking up that activity (59.1 per cent), markedly more than men (44.2 per cent).
- For the **most popular activities among children**, swimming was the most popular extracurricular sport: 20.3 per cent of boys and 28.6 per cent of girls. The next most popular for boys was a tussle between basketball (13.5 per cent), soccer (13.0 per cent) and Australian rules football (11.4 per cent). For girls, a distant second was gymnastics (10.2 per cent).

¹³ Clearinghouse for Sport (date unknown) 'AusPlay™', Clearinghouse for Sport website.

¹⁴ Australian Sports Commission (2024) *AusPlay survey results July 2023 – June 2024: Victoria data tables*, Canberra, ASC.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

Motivations

Victorians' motivations for physical activity vary widely, but patterns do emerge upon closer inspection. Respondents to the AusPlay statistics were able to select more than one motivation or barrier, and with so many people participating, the motivations by far outnumber the barriers. Generally, they skew towards exercising for fun and enjoyment early in life (71.9 per cent of those aged 15–17) and towards staying active to keep fit later in life (73.4 per cent of those aged 65+). Some takeaways from 2023–24 data include the following:¹⁶

- **Physical fitness** (64.2 per cent) and **fun** (58.1 per cent) were the biggest motivators across the population, followed by losing weight/toning, being outdoors and social reasons.
- The **biggest difference between genders** came in the motivation to 'lose weight, keep weight off and tone'. Younger women aged 15–17 and 18–24 cited this motivation (47.6 and 57.6 per cent, respectively) much more than men in those brackets (31.5 and 40.9 per cent).
- Men appear to **exercise for social reasons** less when leaving the 15–17 bracket (63.3 per cent) into the 18–24 bracket (49.7 per cent). Women, on the other hand, retain this motivation from 15–17 (57.1 per cent) to 18–24 (57.2 per cent) and drop off later in the 25–34 years bracket (48.6 per cent).
- More women (26.1 per cent) count **walking the dog as a motivation** than men (17.8 per cent), while more men play for **competition** (18.4 per cent) than women (9.4 per cent).
- While men and women aged 15–17 are similarly likely to cite **mental health as a motivation** for remaining active (30.1 and 27 per cent), women are significantly more likely to develop this motivation as they get older; in the 18–24 bracket, only 27.8 per cent of men retained this motivation, compared with 47.1 per cent of women.

In tables 2 and 3, green-shaded boxes are noted as more favourable, while red-shaded are less favourable. Note that data on children's participation records only participation outside of the school curriculum. Note also that while AusPlay does collect data on gender, including non-binary and self-described, both non-binary and self-described gender are included in 'total' columns but not reported separately due to their sample size.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

Table 2: Adult participation (15+) in community sport and active recreation in Victoria, July 2023 to June 2024 (source: AusPlay)¹⁷

Adult CSAR participation (15+), Victoria, 2023–24		Percentage of total population		
		Male	Female	Total
Total participants	At least once per month	80.90%	79.20%	80.10%
	At least once per week	67.10%	67.80%	67.40%
	At least three times per week	48.60%	50.50%	49.50%
Informal participation	By myself	68.30%	66.60%	67.50%
	With family and friends	49.10%	52.50%	50.80%
Top forms of organised participation	Sports club or association	17.30%	9.60%	13.40%
	Gym/fitness club/sports/leisure centre	9.50%	13.50%	11.50%
	Private or commercial business	6.80%	12.70%	9.80%
	Community organisation	8.00%	7.00%	7.50%
	Individual personal trainer or coach	6.30%	7.10%	6.70%
Top activities	Walking (Recreational)	44.20%	59.10%	51.70%
	Fitness/Gym	28.20%	30.10%	29.20%
	Running/jogging	18.90%	14.20%	16.60%
	Bush walking	14.00%	16.20%	15.10%
	Swimming	12.30%	13.80%	13.10%
	Cycling	11.30%	7.10%	9.20%
	Pilates	1.20%	10.60%	6.00%
	Basketball	8.50%	3.20%	5.80%
	Tennis	6.50%	4.50%	5.50%
	Yoga	1.80%	8.50%	5.20%
Top motivations	Physical health or fitness	61.20%	67.30%	64.20%
	Fun/enjoyment	59.40%	56.80%	58.10%
	To lose weight/keep weight off/tone	48.40%	55.00%	51.60%
	To be outdoors/to enjoy nature	47.90%	53.50%	50.70%
	Social reasons	43.00%	45.00%	44.00%
	Psychological/mental health/therapy	31.30%	42.70%	37.10%
	Sense of achievement	29.70%	31.50%	30.70%
	Hobby	32.50%	23.80%	28.20%
	Walk the dog	17.80%	26.10%	21.90%
	Training purposes	23.40%	15.00%	19.30%

¹⁷ ibid.

Table 3: Children's participation (15+) in community sport and active recreation in Victoria, July 2023 to June 2024 (source: AusPlay)¹⁸

Children's CSAR participation (0–14), Victoria, 2023–24		Percentage of population		
		Male	Female	Total
Total participants	At least once per month	59.8%	63.2%	61.2%
	At least once per week	37.7%	46.5%	41.8%
	At least three times per week	14.0%	15.1%	14.5%
Top forms of organised participation	Sports club or association	27.4%	23.4%	25.5%
	Private or commercial business	15.3%	22.4%	18.6%
	Gym/fitness club/sports/leisure centre	14.2%	17.3%	15.6%
	Educational institution	12.9%	13.0%	12.8%
	Recreation club or association	12.2%	11.2%	11.7%
Top activities	Swimming	20.3%	28.6%	24.2%
	Basketball	13.5%	6.4%	10.2%
	Football/soccer	13.0%	5.2%	9.4%
	Australian football	11.4%	3.9%	7.9%
	Gymnastics	3.1%	10.2%	6.5%

Non-participation

In addition to the reported barriers, the data includes statistics on non-participants. The demographics with the highest rates of non-participation included those who were unemployed, did not complete high school, had a disability or limiting physical condition, or had an annual household income of less than \$40,000—each of which had non-participation rates of around 3 in 10 people, about double the rate of non-participation for the general population. Other barriers can be seen in the clear trends between participation and household income as well as highest education level attained, as seen in Tables 4 and 5.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

Table 4: Adult participation rates according to annual household income and education level completed, 2023–24, Victoria (source: AusPlay)¹⁹

Adult participation rates, 2023–24, Victoria	Participation rate (three times per week)		
Annual household income~^	Men	Women	Total
<\$40,000	37.5%	36.8%	37.5%
\$40,000 - \$69,999	41.4%	44.2%	42.9%
\$70,000 - \$99,999	43.4%	50.8%	46.6%
\$100,000 - \$149,999	50.1%	54.6%	52.1%
\$150,000 - \$199,999	56.2%	61.2%	58.4%
\$200,000+	60.4%	66.5%	62.7%
Highest education completed	Men	Women	Total
University degree or higher (including postgraduate diploma)	55.0%	57.8%	56.3%
Undergraduate diploma or associate diploma	45.0%	53.3%	49.2%
Certificate, trade qualification or apprenticeship	42.8%	47.0%	45.0%
Highest level of secondary school	46.5%	43.5%	44.9%
Did not complete highest level of school	34.9%	32.7%	35.8%

~ As is common in population surveys, a large proportion of respondents refused to provide or did not know their household income

^ Question asked of 18+-year-olds only

Younger and older disengagement

It is difficult to assess the true extent of children's activity, given that the AusPlay dataset does not include sport and exercise undertaken as part of the school curriculum. However, one point of concern is the noted drop-off in organised sport participation by teenagers. An Australian Sports Commission (ASC) youth participation research project found that, in 2017, the average age of students who were disengaged from organised sport was 13.9 years of age, with some barriers being lack of family support, competing time demands and limited access.²⁰ More recent VicHealth data has shown that kids' community sport activity drops off markedly from 10–14 years of age, the peak participation time, to the 15–19 age bracket; though even participation trends in the 10–14 cohort are declining due to a mix of 'societal leisure-time changes' and unsuitability of some club-based sport for children.²¹

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Australian Sports Commission (2017) *Addressing the decline in sport participation in secondary schools: Findings from the Youth Participation Research Project*, November, Canberra, ASC, p. 3.

²¹ VicHealth (2024) *Sport participation in Victoria 2015–2022: Research Summary*, March, Melbourne, VicHealth, p. 10.

Table 5: Non-participation in Victoria, July 2023 to June 2024 (source: AusPlay)²²

Non-participation in Victoria, 2023–24		Non-participation rate for demographic		
		Male	Female	Total
Total adult population		13.7%	15.5%	14.6%
Age group	15–17	8.2%	11.8%	9.6%
	18–24	11.8%	12.1%	11.9%
	25–34	11.4%	10.8%	11.2%
	35–44	11.0%	12.4%	11.8%
	45–54	10.5%	13.8%	12.1%
	55–64	16.2%	17.3%	16.7%
	65+	21.5%	24.0%	22.8%
Employment status	Employed full-time	10.4%	10.0%	10.3%
	Employed part-time	14.3%	12.0%	12.7%
	Employed casual	8.5%	12.2%	10.8%
	Full-time student	6.5%	6.3%	6.3%
	Engaged in home duties	17.0%	19.2%	18.8%
	Unemployed	29.9%	28.0%	29.0%
	Retired or on a pension	21.1%	25.6%	23.5%
Household structure	Younger family (most children under 15 years)	9.9%	11.5%	10.7%
	Mature family (most children 15 years or over)	11.3%	14.7%	12.9%
	Mid family (equal number of children under/over 15 years)	7.7%	13.3%	10.6%
	Adult shared house	19.1%	16.1%	17.6%
	Single/couple - no children	15.6%	17.1%	16.4%
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin[^]		19.8%	21.1%	20.0%
Language spoken at home[^]	Only English at home	13.5%	15.6%	14.6%
	Language other than English at home	15.6%	14.8%	15.2%
Disability or physical condition that restricts life in some way[^]	Yes	29.5%	31.0%	30.3%
	No	10.8%	11.0%	10.9%

[^] Question asked of those 18+ years old only

Older people (people over 65 years) were the highest age group among adults 15+ for disengagement, with 22.8 per cent not participating in any physical activity. Inactivity increases with age as poor health and disability become more common (see ‘Injury and inactivity’ in the next section), both of which are commonly cited barriers to CSAR participation.²³ Reasons for older people’s reluctance to participate vary widely, including personal (physical health concerns and costs), social (family commitments, and lack of friends playing, perception that sport is not for older people) and organisational factors (lack

²² Australian Sports Commission (2024) *AusPlay survey results July 2023 – June 2024: Victoria data tables*, op. cit. Note: Percentages represent the proportion of a particular demographic who are non-participants in CSAR. For instance, 9.6 per cent of 15–17-year-olds are non-participating.

²³ Australian Sports Commission (2024) *AusPlay survey results July 2023 – June 2024: Victoria data tables*, op. cit.

of opportunity to play with peers, lack of sports or organisations specifically catering for and prioritising order participants).²⁴ Barriers and motivations may also be determined by a mixture of capability, opportunity and motivation, as well as the social culture in which community sport is offered.²⁵

Table 6: Top barriers to participation in Victoria across adults and children, 2023–24
(source: AusPlay)²⁶

Top barriers to participation, 2023–24		Non-participation rate for demographic		
		Male	Female	Total
Top barriers for adults (15+)	Poor health or injury	25.20%	32.30%	29.00%
	Increasing age/too old	21.50%	19.40%	20.30%
	Disability	13.10%	19.60%	16.70%
	Too lazy	15.20%	15.10%	15.10%
	Not enough time/too many other commitments	12.40%	15.20%	13.90%
	Don't like physical activity	7.90%	14.90%	11.70%
	Not a priority	13.00%	11.80%	12.30%
	Nobody to do it with	5.30%	7.50%	6.50%
	Can't afford it	3.80%	8.40%	6.30%
	Fear of injury	7.20%	6.00%	6.50%
Top barriers for children (0–14)	Wrong age/too old/too young	42.7%	40.4%	41.3%
	Doesn't like physical activity	7.7%	10.1%	8.8%
	Can't afford it/can't afford transport	8.4%	6.9%	7.9%
	Already does enough	7.8%	5.6%	6.7%
	Not a priority	4.7%	3.6%	4.3%

Volunteers

One of the biggest concerns for many sporting clubs is the lack of volunteer support to enable them to function. Unfortunately, the incompatibility of data between 2023–24 and previous years makes trends difficult to determine, but their worth is an often-celebrated feature of our sporting landscape. Just recently the Australian Sports Commission launched the Discover Local Heroes digital map, aimed at highlighting the work of volunteers and rewarding their local impact.²⁷

The AusPlay survey results estimated that around 750,000 people volunteered in CSAR at some point in 2023–24, with about 451,000 of these being men, compared to only around 298,000 women. This is not unexpected given that organised sport—where volunteers are required—is largely dominated by men's participation, but the lack of representation of women in volunteering roles is a point of concern amid efforts to create inclusive environments. Table 7 breaks down who is volunteering and in what roles.

²⁴ C.R. Jenkin et al. (2016) *Why don't older adults participate in sport?*, report prepared for the Australian Sports Commission, Melbourne, Victoria University, Institute of Sport, Exercise and Active Living (ISEAL), pp. 4–5.

²⁵ S.J. Meredith et al. (2023) 'Factors that influence older adults' participation in physical activity: a systematic review of qualitative studies', *Age and Ageing*, August, 52(8).

²⁶ Australian Sports Commission (2024) *AusPlay survey results July 2023 – June 2024: Victoria data tables*, op. cit.

²⁷ Australian Sports Commission (2025) 'Discover Local Heroes', ASC website.

Table 7: Breakdown of estimates of CSAR volunteer numbers and proportions by role, sex and age, 2023–24 (source: AusPlay)²⁸

CSAR volunteers (15+) (percentage of total population)		Top roles				
		Coach, instructor, trainer or teacher	Official	General or misc. ad hoc assistance	Administrator or committee member	Team manager or coordinator
Total	13.4%	4.4%	4.7%	3.8%	3.1%	3.1%
Male	16.3%	5.8%	6.2%	4.4%	3.9%	3.7%
Female	10.6%	3.1%	3.4%	3.3%	2.2%	2.6%
15–17	17.7%	8.9%	6.6%	4.3%	1.2%*	2.2%*
18–24	16.9%	7.5%	5.9%	3.7%	2.4%	4.0%
25–34	15.2%	5.7%	4.3%	4.5%	3.9%	3.9%
35–44	16.1%	4.9%	4.7%	5.0%	3.3%	4.4%
45–54	15.4%	4.8%	7.0%	4.0%	3.1%	3.6%
55–64	9.7%	2.2%	3.7%	2.9%	2.8%	1.6%
65+	7.7%	1.5%	3.2%	2.6%	2.9%	1.7%

* Estimate has relative margin of error between 50% and 100% and should be used with caution

3 | Who benefits?

As well as being integral to local communities for participants, clubs and businesses, the CSAR sector is also a key part of Victoria's health promotion framework. VicHealth describes the benefits of a strong sport and recreation sector as improving health, community connections and design of neighbourhoods to 'enable active lifestyles', as well as simultaneously reducing the demand for chronic disease resources and allowing spending elsewhere.²⁹ The following section explores the health benefits—both mental and physical—and community connections that CSAR can facilitate.

Physical health

The Australian Department of Health, Disability and Ageing (DHDA) encourages people to remain active through its recommended activity and exercise guidelines (see Table 8). Maintaining these physical activity habits has been linked to reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease, breast cancer, bowel cancer, type 2 diabetes and dementia, while also providing conditioning and skills that may help reduce the risk of falling or drowning.³⁰ SRV estimated that \$245 million in healthcare costs had been avoided in 2017 due to active recreation and that there was a \$3.1 billion productivity benefit from making physically inactive Victorians active; 2.85 million Victorians, however, were not doing enough physical activity, which was a particular health concern.³¹ This was reinforced by results from the 2022 National Health Survey, which revealed that only 24.5 per cent of Victorians over 15

²⁸ Australian Sports Commission (2024) *AusPlay survey results July 2023 – June 2024: Victoria data tables*, op. cit. NOTE: Percentages represent proportions of a demographic who volunteered generally or in a certain capacity. For instance, 5.8 per cent of men volunteered as coaches, instructors, trainers or teachers.

²⁹ VicHealth (date unknown) 'Sport & recreation', VicHealth website.

³⁰ KPMG (2018) *The Value of Community Sport Infrastructure*, report compiled for Australian Sports Commission, June, Canberra, ASC, p. 14.

³¹ Marsden Jacob Associates (2018) *Active impacts: The economic impacts of active recreation in Victoria*, report prepared for Sport and Recreation Victoria, March, Melbourne, SRV.

were meeting the guidelines for physical activity; however, this number was moving in the right direction, up from 16.8 per cent in 2017–18.³²

Table 8: Physical activity and exercise guidelines for all Australians (source: DHDA)³³

Age group	Physical activity recommendations	Muscle-strengthening activity	Sedentary time
Children			
Under 12 months	Interactive floor-based play, and at least 30 minutes of tummy time for babies per day.		Do not restrain for more than 1 hour at a time.
1–2 years	At least 3 hours of energetic play per day.		Do not restrain for more than 1 hour at a time.
3–5 years	At least 3 hours per day, with 1 hour being energetic play.		Do not restrain for more than 1 hour at a time.
5–17 years	At least 1 hour of moderate to vigorous activity involving mainly aerobic activities per day. Vigorous activities should be incorporated at least 3 days per week. Several hours of light activities per day.	At least 3 days a week.	Minimise and break up long periods of sitting.
Adults			
18–64 years	Be active on most (preferably all) days, to weekly total of 2.5 to 5 hours of moderate activity, or 1.25 to 2.5 hours of vigorous activity, or an equivalent combination of both.	At least 2 days a week.	Minimise and break up long periods of sitting.
Pregnancy	Be active on most (preferably all) days, to weekly total of 2.5 to 5 hours of moderate activity, or 1.25 to 2.5 hours of vigorous activity, or an equivalent combination of both. Do pelvic floor exercises.	At least 2 days a week.	Minimise and break up long periods of sitting.
65+	At least 30 minutes of moderate activity on most (preferably all) days.	A range of activities incorporating fitness, strength, balance and flexibility.	

Injury and inactivity

CSAR has considerable impact on hospitals due to injuries. In 2021–22, there were 56,000 sports injuries in Australia that led to hospitalisation.³⁴ In Victoria, these numbers are tracked by the Victorian Injury Surveillance Unit at Monash University Accident Research Centre through Injury Atlas Victoria. In the most recent year of recorded Victorian statistics, 2022–23, there were 13,344 hospitalisations from sporting injuries. The bulk of these were

³² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024) 'National Health Survey: State and territory findings', ABS website, 25 June.

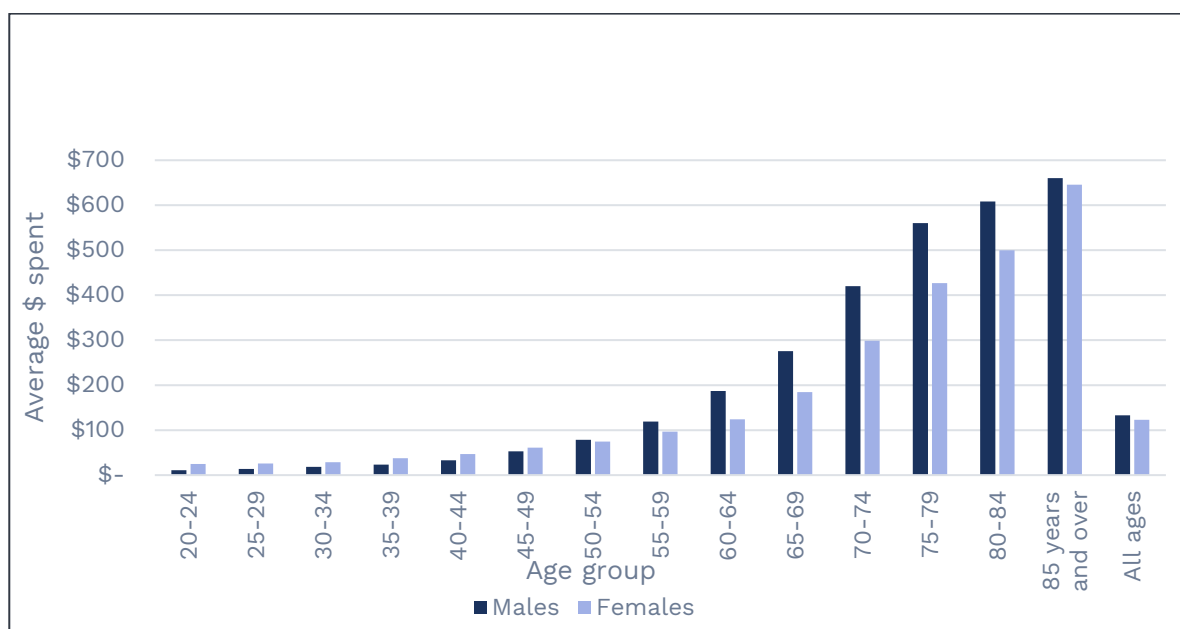
³³ Department of Health, Disability and Ageing (2021) 'Physical activity and exercise guidelines for all Australians', DHDA website, 7 May.

³⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024) 'Sports injury in Australia', AIHW website, updated 17 July.

men, accounting for 71.7 per cent of admissions, while in terms of age, those aged 15–24 were significantly more likely to be represented in admissions than other cohorts, with a rate of 506 hospitalisations per 100,000 people (the population average was 201.4 hospitalisations per 100,000 people).³⁵ Unsurprisingly, team ball sports (Australian rules football, soccer, basketball, rugby league, etc.) are the clear leading cause of injury, accounting for 42.5 per cent of hospitalisations in Victoria, with Australian rules football being the main culprit (15.5 per cent of all injuries).

While exercise may carry the risk of injury, it may also prevent injury, with inactivity carrying its own risks. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) explains, ‘The benefit of physical activity can be interpreted as the difference between the costs associated with current levels of inactivity in Australia (\$2.4 billion) and the expected physical inactivity costs if the whole population was sedentary’.³⁶ Largely through prevented injury and mitigation of mental and substance use disorders (34 per cent of avoided spending), the AIHW estimated that physical activity directly saved the health system about \$1.7 billion in 2018–19.³⁷ The indirect benefits were best felt in improved blood pressure (more so for men) and better bone density (more so for women).³⁸ The risks of inactivity begin to be felt most noticeably from the age of 50 onwards, as Figure 1 shows.

Figure 1: Total average physical inactivity-related spending per person per annum by age group and sex, 2018–19 (source: AIHW, visualisation by author)³⁹



³⁵ Victorian Injury Surveillance Unit (VISU), Monash University (2024) ‘[Injury Atlas: Sports](#)’, VISU.

³⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) ‘[Economics of sport and physical activity participation and injury](#)’, AIHW website, updated 5 September.

³⁷ *ibid.*, Figure 10.

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) ‘[Economics of sport and physical activity participation and injury: data tables](#)’, AIHW website, updated 5 September.

Mental health

Mental health is a growing factor in the promotion of CSAR, especially as its benefits are better understood and the harms of mental ill health are destigmatised. Over the last four National Health Surveys since 2011–12, the proportion of Victorian adults in high or very high psychological distress has risen from 11.4 per cent to 14.0 per cent.⁴⁰ Further, the percentage of the state's population with a mental and behavioural condition has also risen with each survey, from 17.5 per cent in 2014–15 (the earliest comparable data) to 25.6 per cent in 2022.⁴¹

Supporting mental health is shown through AusPlay statistics to be a significant motivator for people remaining active. However, this is notably less so for young men, with stigma around mental health remaining an issue. The National Stigma Report Card reports findings from the Our Turn to Speak survey and describes the impact of stigma and discrimination on the lives of people living with complex mental health issues. According to the report, in 2019–20, about 72 per cent of respondents battling mental ill health 'said they had stopped themselves from accessing opportunities for participation in sports, community groups or volunteering because of stigma and discrimination about mental illness'.⁴²

Notwithstanding these barriers, studies have shown that team sports and informal group activities are positively associated with mental health due to, for example, the 'opportunity for social interaction'.⁴³ Sport was also mentioned by the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System as a contributor to public mental health and wellbeing, with the impact of COVID-19 cited as highlighting the 'safety net' role it plays in both social and public health settings through its absence due to health restrictions.⁴⁴ This importance is not lost on most in the sports industry, with a 2020 Monash University survey of representatives of Victorian state sporting associations (SSAs) and regional sport assemblies (RSAs) finding that approximately two-thirds rated mental health and wellbeing as either a moderate or high priority.⁴⁵

Further, many within the community, including sports clubs, believe that sports contexts are suitable places to support 'mental health literacy and improve access to support services', including through the advocacy and guidance of coaches.⁴⁶ O'Connor et al. write:

Community sport offers an ideal space to better support [mental health and wellbeing] within the community as part of a primary prevention approach. It provides a trusted network where people feel socially connected. It also offers a site where potential risk factors can be targeted and replaced with more supportive factors linked to notions of wider inclusion and connectedness.⁴⁷

The capacity for sports clubs and leagues to build awareness around men's mental health and destigmatise those conversations has been a recent focus, for example with the establishment of Spud's Game in memory of former AFL player Danny 'Spud' Frawley. A

⁴⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024) *National Health Survey 2022—Victoria*, Canberra, ABS, table 1.3.
⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² C. Groot et al. (2020) *Report on Findings from the Our Turn to Speak Survey: Understanding the impact of stigma and discrimination on people living with complex mental health issues*, October, Melbourne, Anne Deveson Research Centre, SANE Australia Melbourne, p. 299.

⁴³ K.W. Lange, Y. Nakamura & A. Reissmann (2023) 'Sport and physical exercise in sustainable mental health care of common mental disorders: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic', *Sports Medicine & Health Science*, 5(2), 151–155, p. 153.

⁴⁴ Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (2021) *Promoting inclusion and addressing inequities*, volume 3, report prepared for the Victorian Government, February, Melbourne, Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, pp. 451, 461.

⁴⁵ J. O'Connor et al. (2020) 'Mental Wellbeing Provision in Victorian Sport', July, Melbourne, Monash University, p. 6.

⁴⁶ J. O'Connor et al. (2023) 'An evaluation of a mental health literacy program for community sport leaders', *Mental Health & Prevention*, 29, March, 200259, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (2021) *A new approach to mental health and wellbeing in Victoria*, volume 1, report prepared for the Victorian Government, February, Melbourne, Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, p. 162; O'Connor et al. (2020) 'Mental Wellbeing Provision in Victorian Sport', *op. cit.*, p. 7.

further push on mental health within the AFL community centred around a themed mental health round in the wake of the deaths of twin former AFL players Adam and Troy Selwood, among others.⁴⁸ However, experts from bodies such as the Australian Association of Psychologists, Beyond Blue and SANE have advocated for sporting bodies to go further and initiate mental health programs and training that reach people early before crisis point.⁴⁹

The royal commission also noted the need for wellbeing ‘contributors’, including coaches and mental health promotion specialists, in complementing treatment specialists.⁵⁰ The current environment of tightening budgets and reduced volunteer involvement has prompted some researchers to conclude that ‘well designed blended interventions, delivered by qualified people’ aiming to develop coaches’ ability to support mental health require ‘increasing coach/leader-player support, including connecting to health services tied to mental health’.⁵¹ Encouragingly, there are plenty of such services in operation around Victoria. A 2020 study of mental health providers working in community sport contexts found ten programs providing education to sporting clubs specifically, including Tackle Your Feelings, Orygen and Ahead of the Game, along with 28 other providers promoting mental health and wellbeing more generally.⁵²

Ultimately, off the back of their survey of SSAs and RSAs, Monash University researchers suggested areas for improvement, including the development of quality criteria for mental health and wellbeing provision in sport and a better-packaged mental health-provider offerings to allow clubs to make informed decisions and find the right fit for their environment.⁵³ In relation to issues manifesting in sport but which are also deep-seated within broader society, the report’s authors recommended work to address the ‘health equity vacuum’, in which providers felt:

... they were unable to undertake education and work that begins to address broader aspects of exclusion in club settings and addresses some of the root causes of mental health problems, including, for example, alignment with strong masculine norms ...

Their report found that peak bodies, as well as local government and regulating agencies, should focus not merely on mental health and wellbeing but seek to ‘reform cultural and social practices that continue to marginalise people within sporting contexts’. A few of these are explored in the following section, ‘Who wants to join?’.⁵⁴

The effect of COVID-19

As mentioned above, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted CSAR activity significantly, affecting not only the physical and mental health of the population, but also club livelihoods. While elite sporting leagues, such as the AFL and NRL, were conditionally allowed to continue playing in hubs, these allowances were not granted to community sports clubs and other venues, such as gyms, due to viral transmission risks.⁵⁵ One study published in late 2021 noted over a handful of changes to rules, closures and reopenings for Victorian community sport in the space of about 18 months, noting ‘higher levels of loneliness and greater health

⁴⁸ Black Dog Institute (2025) ‘[Spud’s Game](#)’, Black Dog Institute website; K. Bourke (2025) ‘[Adam Selwood’s death prompts call from former West Coast Eagles player for AFL mental health round](#)’, ABC News, 19 May.

⁴⁹ J. Snape (2025) ‘[AFL urged to go beyond mental health round with player voices to tackle stigma](#)’, *The Guardian*, 23 May

⁵⁰ Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System (2021) *A new approach to mental health and wellbeing in Victoria*, volume 1, op. cit., p. 163.

⁵¹ O’Connor et al. (2023) ‘[An evaluation of a mental health literacy program for community sport leaders](#)’, op. cit., p. 7.

⁵² J. O’Connor et al. (2020) ‘[Providers Offering Mental Health Support to Community Sports Clubs – Victoria](#)’, supplement to *Mental wellbeing provision in Victorian sport*, November, Melbourne, Monash University.

⁵³ O’Connor et al. (2020) ‘[Mental Wellbeing Provision in Victorian Sport](#)’, op. cit., p. 66.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 66.

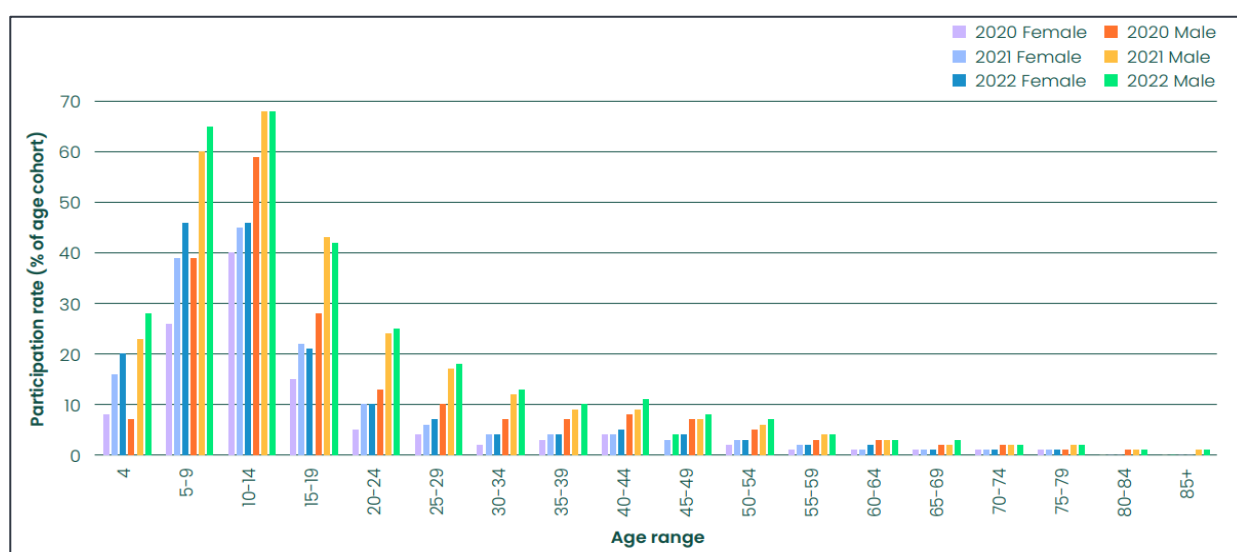
⁵⁵ (2020) ‘[AFL, NRL play matches in empty stadiums in response to coronavirus](#)’, ABC News, 19 March; B. Mitchell & P. Russo (2021) ‘[Melbourne lockdown: why can’t gyms open yet but hospitality venues can?](#)’, *The Conversation*, 10 June.

concerns compared to other states'.⁵⁶ A further study found 'consistent reports of decreased wellbeing during the pandemic, when individuals could not pursue the sport and physical activities in a way that would enhance wellbeing', while also noting a correlation between those undertaking sports activity and improved health and wellbeing.⁵⁷

COVID-19 brought about a wide-scale shift from club-based active recreation to individual and autonomous activity, with participation in sport down across all cohorts, especially younger people.⁵⁸ A VicHealth report found that COVID-19 restrictions affected women's sports participation more than men's, due to the unequally distributed demands of 'working from home, home schooling children, caring for young children and other family members as well as other home duties and commitments'.⁵⁹ Ultimately the long-term effects of COVID-19 on ongoing participation patterns or health outcomes for adults are unclear, particularly given the incompatibility between the most recent AusPlay data and that of previous years.⁶⁰ However, the uptake of non-sport-related physical activity during COVID-19 due to ease and access was cited as a driver for sports authorities to 'consider how to engage and re-engage many different population groups who are impacted differently'.⁶¹

At least when it came to organised sport, in 2022 there were signs of a large resurgence in almost every age group (see Figure 2). This is consistent with views that sport has a significant role to play in COVID recovery, not only through its ability to transcend 'culture, race, social class, and generations' through 'a common goal', but also through 'providing tangible and emotional support to community members'.⁶² The only age group not to report an increase in participation in that survey were those aged 15–19, for whom a further drop-off was concerning given the already high disengagement in the late teenage years.⁶³

Figure 2: Sport participation rates: 2020–2022, Victoria: by age (source: VicHealth)⁶⁴



⁵⁶ K. Staley et al. (2021) 'Staying safe while staying together: the COVID-19 paradox for participants returning to community-based sport in Victoria, Australia', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 45(6), 608–615, p. 614.

⁵⁷ R. Eime et al. (2025) 'Self-assessed health of adult Australian sportclub participants during and after COVID-19 restrictions: a longitudinal study', *BMC Public Health*, 25, 353, p. 2.

⁵⁸ R. Eime et al. (2022) *Sport participation in Victoria 2015-2020 and the impact of COVID-19 on participation: research summary*, date unknown, Melbourne, VicHealth, pp. 5, 9.

⁵⁹ Eime et al. (2022) *Sport participation in Victoria 2015-2020 and the impact of COVID-19 on participation: research summary*, op cit., p. 9.

⁶⁰ Eime et al. (2025) 'Self-assessed health of adult Australian sportclub participants during and after COVID-19 restrictions: a longitudinal study', op. cit., p. 2.

⁶¹ R. Eime et al. (2024) *Sport participation in Victoria 2015–2022: Research Summary*, March, Melbourne, VicHealth, p. 10.

⁶² Staff writers (2021) 'How sport brings us together in times of crisis', *this.* (Deakin University online magazine).

⁶³ Eime et al. (2024) *Sport participation in Victoria 2015–2022: Research Summary*, op. cit., p. 10.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 4.

4 | Who wants to join?

While most Victorians are active in at least some form of community sport, closer inspection of the data finds a variety of participation patterns. Factors such as sex, age, education, socioeconomic status, disability and cultural background each introduce variation. The following section addresses some barriers preventing certain cohorts from participating in community sport and explores measures being taken to address them.

In particular, it looks at the ways organised sport has traditionally favoured male participation and examines the recent influx of women in some of these male-dominated environments. The push for inclusion in sporting environments has highlighted inequities. In some cases, it has begun to change the scope of who participates, how they participate and how sports are governed.

Women in sport

Women's participation in sport and active recreation has been consistently strong through the years. However, traditionally women have favoured non-sport-related activity (see 'Who participates?' section), there has recently increasing popularity among women of team sports—both professional and amateur—where men have previously dominated.

Netball has long been the most popular team sport for women's participation. With a hugely successful national team and the well-established Super Netball league, the sport is well-represented in the Victorian community through approximately 145,000 women participating in 2023–24 (about 91,000 over 15 years of age).⁶⁵ It now sits about equal with basketball in terms of adult women's participation, with an estimated 90,000 playing.⁶⁶

In Victoria, netball and football clubs are commonly twinned, reflecting historical assumptions around these sports being women's and men's sports respectively.⁶⁷ However, these gendered distinctions have frayed over recent times. The international success of the Matildas in women's soccer and the Australian women's cricket team, together with domestic growth of AFL Women's (Australian rules football) and NRL Women's (rugby league), has spurred new opportunities in sports traditionally dominated by men.⁶⁸ In Australian rules football, while the AusPlay survey for 2016–17 estimated about 15 000 Victorian adult women participating, the 2023–24 results estimated about 51,000 Victorian women playing; additionally, an estimated 50,000 women played soccer.⁶⁹

Increasing women's participation in sport and funding sporting pathways for girls has been a concerted effort from both state and federal governments for the past decade. The Victorian Government released its report *Inquiry into women and girls in sport and active recreation: a five year game plan for Victoria* in 2015, laying out recommendations to remedy an imbalance of female representation across all levels of involvement. These included:

- driving change in organisations that support inclusive sport and active recreation, including clear standards of good practice in values and behaviour;
- engaging and empowering girls and women through ambassador and leadership programs, including training and support for volunteers; and

⁶⁵ Australian Sports Commission (2024) *AusPlay survey results July 2023 – June 2024: Victoria data tables*, op. cit.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*; (2025) 'Boom! 1.3 million Aussies play the game we all love', *Basketball.com.au*, 13 June.

⁶⁷ R. Jeanes et al (2020) 'Gender Relations, Gender Equity, and Community Sports Spaces', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 45(6), p. 553; F. McLachlan (2016) 'The Silent Game: A Critical Reading of the History of Netball in Australia'. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 33(17), p. 2165

⁶⁸ B. Mitchell (2019) 'The decade that saw the rise of women's sport', *ESPN*, 16 December.

⁶⁹ Australian Sports Commission (2017) *AusPlay survey results July 2016 – June 2017: Victorian data tables*, Canberra, ASC; Australian Sports Commission (2024) *AusPlay survey results July 2023 – June 2024: Victoria data tables*, op. cit. Note that these carry different survey methodologies, and these numbers should only be seen as a general indication rather than directly comparable figures.

- mandatory gender balance measures in sports governance, including that boards contain a minimum 40 per cent women.⁷⁰

The report also highlighted the need for female-friendly facilities and uniforms, as these are some of the most common barriers preventing women and girls from participating in sports. The report's recommendations collectively responded to some common experiences affecting participation. Some factors are interpersonal, while others are ingrained society-wide, including competing demands for time, lack of appropriate skills (real or perceived), social and economic disadvantage and cost of participation (factoring in the gender pay gap), as well as physiology, social aspects and body image issues.⁷¹

A result of the report was the establishment of the Office for Women in Sport and Recreation (OWSR) in late 2017, which worked 'alongside Sport and Recreation Victoria to increase the number of women and girls participating in sport and active recreation, from grassroots through to senior leadership roles'.⁷² The OWSR administered the Change Our Game strategy, which aimed to acquit the recommendations from the report.⁷³ These have been backed up by numerous grants and investments, including the Change Our Game Community Activation Grants program, which has provided about \$2.9 million worth of grants to clubs over eight years as part of a broader pool of about \$18.8 million invested into the OWSR since 2018.⁷⁴ Of the 337 funded projects across the 2022–23 and 2023–24, 142 involved new or upgraded pavilions and change rooms suitable for women and girls.⁷⁵

However, in the Victorian state budget for 2025–26, funding for the OWSR ceased, and the functions of that office will subsequently be absorbed into SRV.⁷⁶ Also being wound up is the Preventing Violence Through Sport Grants Program, which had been running for three years and sought to help CSAR providers in 'addressing gender-based violence, including family violence, sexual violence, and other forms of violence against women'.⁷⁷ This prompted a number of protests from sporting organisations and participants across the state.⁷⁸

Achieving critical mass—women and board appointments

Research from 2013 looking at women in sports leadership positions in Australia found that in order for organisations to transition away from masculine hegemony—defined as environments where 'men exercised hegemony because they were in the majority and held the most influential positions'—towards gender equality, a number of factors must work together.⁷⁹ The most crucial of these was women's presence on boards, including through quotas, and in leadership positions.⁸⁰ Moreover, academics have suggested this would be more effective if implemented where directors (particularly men) had understandings of gender inequality in sports governance and a proactive commitment to change.⁸¹

Board appointment quotas were ultimately recommended by the Victorian Government's 2015 inquiry report. An initiative titled *Balance the Board*, described by the government as a

⁷⁰ Women in Sport and Recreation Taskforce (2015) *Inquiry into women and girls in sport and active recreation: a five year game plan for Victoria*, November, Melbourne, WSRT, pp. 7, 18.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 22.

⁷² Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions (date unknown) 'Sport', DJSIR website.

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ R. Spence, Minister for Community Sport (2025) *Helping more women and girls get into sport*, media release, 29 January.

⁷⁵ Sport and Recreation Victoria (2025) *Community Sports Infrastructure 2024 Outcomes Statement*, Melbourne, SRV, 19 May, p. 4.

⁷⁶ M. Vinall (2025) 'Victorian state budget cuts programs around gender equity and inclusion in sport', *ABC News*, 22 May.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ J. Tu (2025) 'Women footy players to wear red armbands in protest of gender equity program cuts', *Women's Agenda*, 29 May; G. Grant (2025) 'Is this the turning point for women's sport in Victoria?', *The Age*, 30 May.

⁷⁹ J.A. Adriaanse & T. Schofield (2013) 'Analysing gender dynamics in sport governance: A new regimes-based approach', *Sport Management Review*, 16(4), pp. 509–11.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 512.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

world-first, sought to implement a 40 per cent minimum quota of women on sports organisation boards, which they would be required to meet in order to qualify for state government funding.⁸² By 2023, 94 per cent of funded sport and active recreation bodies had at least 40 per cent women on their boards—more than double 2017’s figure of only 45 per cent.⁸³

A 2024 review of the *Balance the Board* initiative encouraged further work, including strategies to recruit and retain women and foster inclusive environments.⁸⁴ The review found that in sports dominated by men, there was more likely to be resistance to change and cultural issues to overcome, and the lower representation of women also led to a smaller pool of women being considered to fill board vacancies.⁸⁵ Other significant barriers to appointment on boards included prohibitive training and accreditation requirements and constitutional processes.⁸⁶ A significant majority of respondents (72 per cent) cited ‘perceived workload and time commitment associated with a board director role’ as a barrier, with this particularly felt among young women with competing commitments.⁸⁷

In environments which might have resisted change, the benefit of having a critical mass of women on boards was felt to ‘enhance board dynamics and decision-making’, hence ‘making them feel more welcome and comfortable’.⁸⁸ However, the degree to which people felt women’s voices were heard on boards revealed a gendered divide in perception: only 69 per cent of women said they felt women’s voices were heard on their board, compared to 81 per cent of male directors who felt the same way.⁸⁹

Change in sporting culture

As much as board-level representation has changed, gender inequality remains an entrenched feature of many sporting organisations and participation. This is felt by both sports participants and those in other essential roles, such as volunteers and officials. A Change Our Game survey published in July 2023 found that more than half of the almost 700 respondents had ‘reported gendered discrimination in community sport and 55 per cent said they had experienced or seen sexist language and jokes’.⁹⁰ The finding that men were more likely than women to feel like an effort had been made to achieve equal treatment of men and women at their club backed up the *Balance the Board* review finding that there was a gendered gap in the perception of women’s experiences of sporting clubs.⁹¹

Recent media would suggest Victorian women are still—even in sports undergoing transition to more inclusive practices—subject to damaging gender harassment. Examples include the Kyneton Women’s Football Club, which cited a ‘horrible, volatile environment’ as reason for its split from its male counterpart (something the Kyneton Football Netball Club denies and which is under review by AFL Victoria).⁹² Elsewhere there have been widely reported claims of abuse experienced by women AFL umpires, inadequate design of sports uniforms to accommodate different body types, especially teenage girls, and relegation of women’s sport to inconvenient playing and training times through concessions to men’s sport.⁹³

⁸² R. Spence, Minister for Community Sport (2021) *New director of Office for Women in Sport and Recreation*, media release, 20 April.

⁸³ Office for Women in Sport and Recreation (2024) *Balancing the Board: benefits of having gender balance on state sport and active recreation boards: research summary*, June, Melbourne, OWSR, p. 4.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹⁰ Office for Women in Sport and Recreation (2023) *State of Play Survey: 2022–23*, June, Melbourne, OWSR, p. 4.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹² M. Vinall (2025) ‘Kyneton women’s side leave football club after claims of ‘horrible, volatile environment’’, *ABC News*, 18 February; M. Vinall (2025) ‘Women’s footy sides folding amid claims of inequitable treatment and a lack of support’, *ABC News*, 24 April.

⁹³ T. Callanan (2022) ‘Female football umpires abused, harassed, forced to change in front of male colleagues, report finds’, *ABC News*, 2 May; T. Maddocks (2021) ‘Inappropriate, uncomfortable uniforms

Encouragingly, scheduling measures were the most common gender equity measures implemented by Victoria's government-funded facilities (65.3 per cent).⁹⁴

Research just this year has suggested that 'women players are still made to feel like the "other" in a sporting context, and more needs to be done to make them truly equal', especially for women under 30, who were more likely to experience gender harassment.⁹⁵ Gender harassment has been touted as the 'most widespread and insidious form of harassment that involves hostility towards a particular gender, usually women'.⁹⁶ Women who participate as coaches or officials, in particular, were on the receiving end of this hostility more often than most. Findings from a study of an anonymous national sporting organisation with a board of at least 40 per cent women but a participation rate of 70 per cent men found that women who are referees or officials and coaches 'report experiencing more gender harassment than off-court officials or managers' and that referees are subject to more 'sexual remarks, offensive behaviour and infantilisation'.⁹⁷

The push for change can be seen as a chance to move on from male hegemony and promote 'an organisation-wide understanding of the importance of gender equality and an intolerance of hostility towards women'.⁹⁸ Male hegemony may be enabled to some extent by board representation, but it also has roots in club culture and in broader attitudes towards women in sport. Reports of widespread gender harassment raise questions about the level of cultural change occurring in society more broadly, how much more work there is to do, and how it can be done.

Media representations of women in sport

Attitudes towards women in sport, especially those in traditionally male-dominated environments, are subject to a range of influences. In many cases these are influenced by the extent and nature of media coverage such as online, television and radio commentary. Analysis in 2022–23 by media monitoring service Isentia for the Victorian Government found that only 15 per cent of sports media coverage in Victoria was focused on women's sport, compared with 81 per cent on men's sport and 4 per cent on a mixture of gender non-specific (2 per cent) and multiple-gender (2 per cent) coverage.⁹⁹ Transgender and non-binary coverage each made up less than 0.1 per cent of coverage.¹⁰⁰ Even so, coverage around transgender participation in sport in recent times has been described as being reported in terms that are polarising, sensationalist, engaging in stereotypes and lacking nuance.¹⁰¹

Of the nine sports that comprise 94 per cent of media coverage, only one—netball—is dominated by women's coverage (96 per cent), though netball itself only makes up 3 per cent of overall coverage (see Figure 4).¹⁰² Yet, despite being so heavily outweighed in coverage, women were 4 per cent more likely than men to be depicted in sports imagery.¹⁰³

turning girls off sport, Victoria University study finds', *ABC News*, 26 February; M. Hislop (2022) 'Inconvenient training times and second-rate facilities? How sport could change for women and girls', *Women's Agenda*, 8 August.

⁹⁴ Sport and Recreation Victoria (2025) *Community Sports Infrastructure 2024 Outcomes Statement*, op. cit.

⁹⁵ S. Marshall et al. (2025) 'The gender harassment experiences of women who play, coach, officiate and manage sport in Australia', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, p. 13.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 3.

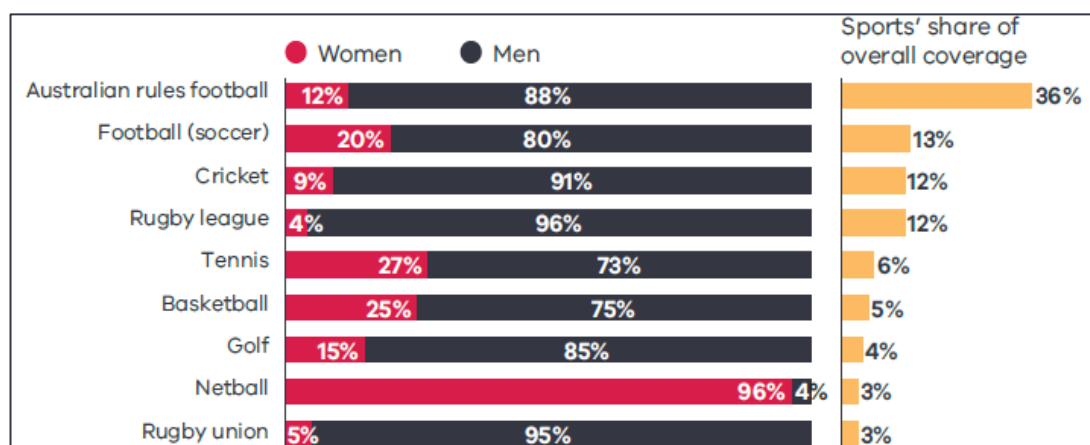
⁹⁹ Office for Women in Sport and Recreation (2024) *Representation of women in sports news coverage: 2022–23*, February, Melbourne, OWSR, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ J. Brewer (2024) 'The panic over trans sports inclusion', *The Washington Post*, 6 June; H. Thorpe, J. Veale, M. Nelson & S. Scovel (2022) 'Polarising, sensational media coverage of transgender athletes should end—our research shows a way forward', *The Conversation*, 8 August.

¹⁰² Office for Women in Sport and Recreation (2024) *Representation of women in sports news coverage: 2022–23*, op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p. 14.

Figure 3: Sports' share of overall coverage, broken down by sport and gender (source: SRV)¹⁰⁴

Source: data and visualisation by Sport and Recreation Victoria.

Coverage of women's sport also lacks depth, with women's sports coverage extending largely only to results and performance, while men's coverage ranges across advocacy within sport, training, social commentary, and on and off-field behaviour, among other topics.¹⁰⁵ Media narratives for women are also more likely to be focused on them being 'quiet achievers' and 'punching above their weight', while men are more likely to be covered in terms of being 'well-liked' or 'troubled', presuming a higher likelihood of household recognition.¹⁰⁶

There is also limited representation of women among sports journalists—only the ABC's sports media team consisted of a female majority (62 per cent).¹⁰⁷ This is in part down to the ABC's 50:50 Equality initiative aimed at 'producing more content targeted at women, and featuring more women and non-binary people as contributors across [its] programming and in [its] stories'.¹⁰⁸

These representations of women's sport and women in sport can be—depending on the quality of reporting—either an enabler or barrier to female participation while also being 'a window into held attitudes and beliefs' that can in turn 'set policy agendas'.¹⁰⁹

Inclusion and equity

In the interests of inclusion, VicHealth and the state government have established a range of 'fair access principles' that seek to achieve gender equity in CSAR. These include that 'Community sports infrastructure and environments are genuinely welcome, safe and inclusive', while also encouraging user groups to adopt policies that enable equitable access.¹¹⁰ Much effort has been directed towards empowering women in sporting roles, but also other marginalised and/or disadvantaged communities.

One area where this is being progressed is infrastructure. SRV's *Community Sports Infrastructure 2024 Outcomes Statement* indicates that significant proportions of the state government's community sport infrastructure upgrades have been aimed at supporting participation within socio-economically disadvantaged cohorts (54.6 per cent of projects), culturally and linguistically diverse communities (40.9 per cent), people with a disability

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁰⁸ K. O'Halloran & A. Shalala (2024) 'As we mark International Women's Day — let's do better in covering women's sport', ABC News, 8 March.

¹⁰⁹ C. MacDonald (2025) 'Community as the Concession: The Construction and Maintenance of Trans Exclusionary Binaries in Australian Sport', *Sociology of Sport Journal* (published online ahead of print 2025), retrieved 15 May, p. 2.

¹¹⁰ VicHealth (2024) *Fair access principles for community sport and active recreation clubs*, April, Melbourne, VicHealth, p. 2.

(36.5 per cent), LGBTIQ+ communities (33.2 per cent), Aboriginal Victorians (30.9 per cent) and people over 60 years of age (30.9 per cent).¹¹¹

Another area is inclusive club policies. The Australian Sports Commission states that a concerted inclusion policy can have the double effect of ensuring ‘long-term sustainability’ for clubs through boosting their membership, volunteer and participant base, while also developing increased reputational benefits from outside the club; these effects can result in both a better-connected sport community that can draw greater sponsorship opportunities.¹¹² Further community benefits can be to help improve physical and mental health and the elimination of ‘social stigmas’.¹¹³

However, getting community organisations to implement these top-down goals can be a challenge.¹¹⁴ Further, the formation of inclusive policies can be fraught if they are not well formulated or consulted. Research of some Australian sporting organisations’ approach to inclusive programs aimed at young people with a disability, for example, have found that policies require ‘a policy entrepreneur and enthusiast’ with the time and resources to question existing cultures, drive change and administer the program.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, inclusion policies that are ill-equipped to enact the change intended could, the paper suggested, ultimately perpetuate marginalisation of the community they seek to include.¹¹⁶

The absence of such ‘enthusiasts’ or ‘policy actors’ for inclusion has also been noted in relation to other marginalised groups. In the case of trans inclusion policies in sport, one study found that ‘many people tasked with creating such policies had little experience or education on the topic of trans inclusion’, seeing this task as more a ‘burden’ than an ‘opportunity’, where best practice would have them developing such policies ‘in consultation with trans and gender diverse athletes’.¹¹⁷ This could lead to ‘a lack of consistency, as well as legal and ethical concerns for potential discrimination or stigma experienced by athletes’—a breach of an organisation’s duty of care to participants.¹¹⁸

The following sections analyse some of the communities for whom barriers have been identified and inclusive policies and programs have been established.

Barriers for certain cohorts

Community sport is often praised for its role in community-building. Yet challenges remain for attracting, accommodating and retaining people from many demographics. Some groups face significant barriers. For this next section, the paper takes a lead from a 2010 VicHealth qualitative analysis of barriers to participation, which singled out the experiences of those with low incomes, those with a disability, and new arrivals to the country.¹¹⁹ In re-examining how these cohorts experience community sport and more recent measures aimed at including them, this section also expands that analysis to First Nations peoples as well as the issue of racism in sport more generally.

People with a disability

As a demographic in which around 3 in 10 people are non-participants in CSAR, (see ‘Who participates?’ section) there is a public-health policy emphasis on people with a disability becoming more involved. Due to the diversity and nature of disabilities, each person’s

¹¹¹ Sport and Recreation Victoria (2025) *Community Sports Infrastructure 2024 Outcomes Statement*, op. cit., p. 7.

¹¹² Australian Sports Commission (date unknown) ‘Benefits of inclusion in sport’, ASC website.

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ L. Stewart et al. (2021) ‘Developing trans-athlete policy in Australian National Sport Organizations’, *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 13(4), 565–585, p. 568.

¹¹⁵ R. Jeanes et al. (2017). “Yes we are inclusive”: Examining provision for young people with disabilities in community sport clubs’, *Sport Management Review*. 21(1), 38–50, p. 11.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 12.

¹¹⁷ Stewart et al. (2021) ‘Developing trans-athlete policy in Australian National Sport Organizations’, op. cit., p. 581.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ VicHealth (2010) *Understanding barriers to sport participation: final report*, May, Melbourne, VicHealth.

‘experience, motivations and aspirations’, including barriers to participation, are unique, requiring decision-makers to resist a ‘one size fits all’ approach to this population.¹²⁰

For those with physical disabilities, the VicHealth study found that the largest impediments to participation in community sport were access- and mobility-related, such as ‘access to grounds, facilities, training, transport and even areas where participants socialised’.¹²¹ For those with intellectual disabilities, the study found barriers were more connected to the structure of activities, and the activities being accommodating. Enhancing flexibility of participation opportunities was also cited as a key recommendation.¹²² In this context, local sports advocacy body VicSport highlights the need for sports clubs and organisations to consider a person-centred approach, break down stereotypes and embrace strategies to encourage older participants with a disability.¹²³

Along these lines, the Victorian Government sponsors a program called Access for All Abilities, which helps people of different abilities find suitable sports and recreation opportunities in their area.¹²⁴ Government funds have been allocated to grants programs such as those enabling facilities upgrades (see previous page). Another is the Regional All Abilities Participation Grants—coming from the All Abilities Fund—which were announced in November 2024 and will be made available to regional Victorians with a disability to help fund specialised equipment and uniforms, inclusive technology and, in some cases, a skilled workforce to help facilitate participation for people with a disability.¹²⁵

Low-income earners

In the most recent figures from the 2022–23 financial year available through AusPlay, approximately 3.2 million adult Victorians (about 54.9 per cent of the adult 15+ population) paid to participate in sport or active recreation activities over the course of a year. Together they spent about \$3.7 billion, at an average of about \$1,253 per person, increasing from \$989 the previous year (2021–22) and \$858 the year before (2020–21).¹²⁶ This is a significant impost for many low-income earners.

In many cases, children’s participation in sports, such as swimming (the most popular children’s extracurricular sport), can be even more expensive than an adult’s participation costs, placing additional pressures on families. Inflation and cost-of-living pressures have driven up the average annual expense of child’s participation to \$1,340 in 2022–23, up from \$949 in 2020–21. This has meant that many families across Australia—more than half, according to a 2022 UNICEF report—are making sacrifices in other parts of their budgets in order to fund their children’s sport.¹²⁷ Parents of kids who are participating less have cited costs and time as significant barriers, which includes balancing registration fees, uniforms, footwear and transportation, along with essential household costs of groceries and bills.¹²⁸ Recent YouGov data on sports participation suggests people are more selective with the sports they participate in, with 63 per cent of respondents saying they had swapped paid sporting activities for free ones.¹²⁹

Vouchers and discounts were seen by parents polled by UNICEF as effective incentives for households on restricted budgets, while the government can also attempt to circumvent low participation through specialised funding for schools to provide free swimming lessons

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 29.

¹²¹ VicHealth (2010) *Understanding barriers to sport participation: final report*, op. cit., p. 29.

¹²² *ibid.*, p. 30.

¹²³ VicSport (date unknown) ‘Participation: people with disability’, VicSport website.

¹²⁴ aaaplay (2025) ‘Home page’, aaaplay website, accessed 15 May.

¹²⁵ R. Spence, Minister for Community Sport (2024) *More sporting opportunities for people with disability*, media release, 6 November.

¹²⁶ Australian Sports Commission (date unknown) ‘AusPlay: Participation expenditure’, Power BI presentation, Clearinghouse for Sport (ASC) website, accessed 12 June 2025, slides 7, 11, 14, 26, 30.

¹²⁷ UNICEF (2022) *Half of Australian families making financial sacrifices to keep their children in sport - or face pulling them out*, media release, 20 November.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*

¹²⁹ Ministry of Sport (2024) *Cost of living and the impact on the sports industry*, May, online resource, Ministry of Sport, pp. 14–15.

through initiatives such as VICSWIM.¹³⁰ According to the Victorian Government, over 150,000 vouchers of \$200 have been distributed in recent years to families to help cover costs of ‘sports memberships, registration fees, uniforms and equipment’.¹³¹

First Nations peoples

Indigenous participation in sport and active recreation is another focus area for authorities. A 2013 federal committee inquiry into the ‘contribution of sport to Indigenous wellbeing and mentoring’, especially as it related to Closing the Gap targets, found improvement was needed to align funding with Closing the Gap targets, improve data gathering for evaluation of programs and extend funding cycles to reduce the uncertainty of shorter term funding cycles.¹³² The report also noted a number of barriers that may prevent First Nations peoples from participating, including lack of First Nations representation in the workforce, lack of opportunity and facilities, cultural stereotyping and racism (see below).¹³³ The committee recommended efforts to increase Aboriginal participation in supporting roles such as volunteering and administration, as well as increasing sports participation among Indigenous women and girls especially.¹³⁴

A 2019 scoping review of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander physical activity and sports programs, reflecting on the committee report’s recommendations, found that there was ‘some evidence that sport and physical activity increases Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school attendance, improves self-esteem and can enhance cultural connectedness, values and identity’. However, the committee remained inconclusive on other measures, citing the need for further evidence and more targeted planning of programs.¹³⁵

As of 2023–24, AusPlay data still suggests that Aboriginal Victorians are underrepresented in sports participation compared to the population average. Victorian Government goals are included in future planning documents such as *Active Victoria: A strategic framework for sport and recreation 2022–2026* and *Korin Korin Balit-Djak: Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety strategic plan 2017–2027* are aimed at addressing this shortfall. Other programs include the Indigenous Sport and Recreation Program and the Aboriginal Sport Participation Grant Program, which aid access and awareness of sport and active recreation in various settings, while the Victorian Aboriginal Community Service Association was recently granted \$50,000 to provide Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander kids with transport to regional sporting carnivals.¹³⁶ There are also a range of private programs in place across the state, as well as initiatives under organisational Reconciliation Action Plans.¹³⁷

Racism in community sport

One of the major barriers to not only First Nations peoples but people from multicultural backgrounds is the incidence of racism in community sport. This was explored in the 2013 federal committee inquiry into the contribution of sport to Indigenous wellbeing and mentoring. The report found that racism ‘can be expressed through beliefs and stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination, and occurs at many social levels, including interpersonally and systemically, and as internalised racism’.¹³⁸

¹³⁰ UNICEF (2022) op. cit.; B. Carroll, Deputy Premier (2024) *Helping busy families with 900,000 swimming lessons in schools*, media release, 5 December.

¹³¹ R. Spence, Minister for Community Sport (2024) *Helping even more kids get active*, media release, 28 October.

¹³² Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (Cth) (2013) *Sport—more than just a game: contribution of sport to Indigenous wellbeing and mentoring*, final report, June, Canberra, The Committee, pp. xiii–xiv.

¹³³ *ibid.*, pp. 51–55.

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, pp. xiv–xv.

¹³⁵ R. Macniven & J. Evans (2019) ‘Are sports programs closing the gap in Indigenous communities? The evidence is limited’, *The Conversation*, 18 July.

¹³⁶ G. Williams, Minister for Transport Infrastructure (2024) *New transport initiative kicking goals*, media release, 23 December.

¹³⁷ Clearinghouse for Sport (date unknown) ‘Programs, policies and supporting structures’, Clearinghouse for Sport website.

¹³⁸ Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (Cth) (2013) op. cit., para. 3.46.

A survey of community sport participants in 2023 found racism prevalent coming from many directions. A total of 59 per cent of respondents had either experienced (34 per cent) or witnessed (25 per cent) racism in community sport in the previous 12 months.¹³⁹ About a quarter (26 per cent) experienced it a few times a month, and 7 per cent once a week.¹⁴⁰ Most instances were coming from opposition clubs (83 per cent), but respondents also reported instances of racism coming from within their own club (55 per cent).¹⁴¹ As many as 20 per cent reported racism as changing or lessening their participation habits, while 2 per cent cite it as the explicit reason for not continuing.¹⁴² Most did not report incidences of racism formally (65 per cent), and this was for a variety of reasons, including believing nothing would change, believing they couldn't prove it was racism, not knowing where or how to report it, or having concerns about not being taken seriously or being able to trust the organisation.¹⁴³ In cases where an instance of racism was reported, about one-third (34 per cent) reported receiving no support.¹⁴⁴

Organisers of the 'Enhancing the Capacity of Victorian Community Sport to Tackle Racism' project, which organised the survey, said that 'Anti-racism practices need to be embedded into every level of sport' as well as 'multi-layered approaches to anti-racism which are responsive to intersectionality and recognise the ongoing racism experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples involved in sport'.¹⁴⁵ The authors also noted a 'need for cultural change within the community sport sector' to tackle barriers 'that disproportionately exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and culturally and racially marginalised communities'.¹⁴⁶

The Centre for Multicultural Sport and Koorie Heritage Trust gathered VicSport, VicHealth and seven state sporting organisations—including Cricket Victoria, Basketball Victoria and others—at Parliament House in February 2025 to pledge their commitment to challenging racism and discrimination.¹⁴⁷ The collaboration commenced in October 2023 and seeks to 'educate and empower seven of the larger Victorian State Sporting Associations (SSAs) to reduce incidents of racism in community sport environments'.¹⁴⁸

5 | What are the broader challenges?

In addition to the challenge of attracting and retaining participants, a number of broader organisational and existential challenges threaten the sustainability of clubs and the CSAR sector. Some key topics for clubs' consideration are a diminishing volunteer base, current grants funding processes and the growing impact of climate change.

Organisational sustainability

Several shocks have hit community sport in recent years, not least the rolling lockdowns and restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic across 2020 and 2021 (see also 'The effect of COVID-19' earlier). The pandemic left many clubs questioning whether people would return as participants and volunteers after the enforced hiatus, with participants caught in a

¹³⁹ R. Jeanes et al. (2025) *Enhancing the capacity of Victorian community sport to tackle racism: survey highlights and key takeaways*, January, Melbourne, Monash University, p. 11. Note that 70 per cent of respondents were based in Victoria, and all were over the age of 18.

¹⁴⁰ Jeanes et al. (2025) op. cit., p. 12.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁴² *ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁴⁵ R. Jeanes et al. (2025) 'The persistence of racism within community sport in Australia has consequences that extend far beyond the field', *ABC Religion & Ethics*, 27 February.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Centre for Multicultural Youth (2025) *A pledge for creating change in Victorian Sport*, media release, 27 February.

¹⁴⁸ Centre for Multicultural Youth (2023) *CMSport x Koorie Heritage Trust partnership funded to reduce racism in community sport*, media release, 9 October.

contradiction of wanting to stay together but also wanting to stay safe.¹⁴⁹ One study said a low rate of return to community sport could ‘jeopardise the traditional sport competition structure and impact the sustainability of community sport’.¹⁵⁰

An Australian Sports Foundation (ASF) survey taken across February and March 2023, documented in the report *Clubs under pressure*, found similar concerns for the future of community sport stemming from insufficient volunteer numbers and financial solvency among community sports clubs in the wake of the pandemic.¹⁵¹ The survey results show lack of volunteers to be one of the biggest challenges for club sustainability, with 63 per cent of clubs not having enough.¹⁵² It is reportedly the top challenge for, specifically, small and medium-sized clubs, which rely on volunteer labour to fill roles such as officials, referees and administrators.¹⁵³ Some have taken novel approaches to maintaining a volunteer pool, requiring members to commit to at least 4 hours of volunteering for the club throughout the year or else be charged an extra non-volunteering fee for participation.¹⁵⁴

Volunteer labour is not the only challenge. *Clubs under pressure* found as many as 24 per cent of small clubs had given either some or a lot of consideration to closing in the 12 months prior to the survey, due to a mix of volunteer shortages, increased costs and reduced cash reserves, among other things.¹⁵⁵ For large and very large clubs, the chief challenges are in administrative load and facilities maintenance (grounds, facilities and equipment).¹⁵⁶

Rising costs are testing many clubs, with over two-thirds of clubs (68 per cent) reporting increased running costs through things such as insurance, maintenance, utility bills and affiliation fees.¹⁵⁷ However, from 2021 to 2022 there were marked participant increases and revenue increases.¹⁵⁸ In the lead-up to the 2032 Brisbane Olympics, improved facilities and venues and initiatives to keep teenagers in sport were among the top funding priorities cited by clubs across the country, in addition to volunteer increases.¹⁵⁹ Exactly half of clubs ranked ‘more female participation programs’ in their top five funding priorities.¹⁶⁰

Facilities and funding

Community sports clubs have to make their limited revenue go a long way. Much of their money comes from sponsorships, membership and fundraising (for example, 96 per cent of clubs rely on raffles and sausage sizzles for some fundraising), while further funding comes from donations and hospitality (like killer pythons from the canteen).¹⁶¹ In the *Clubs under pressure* survey, government funds were also found to be valuable sources for 63 per cent of clubs.¹⁶² The ability to make money, however, depends on a club having money to begin with, especially now with increasing operational costs. Some of the biggest barriers to fundraising for clubs are cited as lack of time, supporters, resources, volunteers and grants, indicating that diminishing resources are impacting clubs’ ability to bolster those resources.¹⁶³

¹⁴⁹ Staley et al. (2021) op. cit., p. 615.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 615.

¹⁵¹ Australian Sports Foundation (2023) *Impact of COVID-19 on community sport*, survey report, September, Canberra, ASF.

¹⁵² Australian Sports Foundation (2023) *Clubs under pressure: Australian community sport research findings*, May, Canberra, ASF, pp. 17, 30.

¹⁵³ Australian Sports Foundation (2023) *Clubs under pressure: Australian community sport research findings*, op. cit., p. 31.

¹⁵⁴ ABC Perth (2025) ‘In junior sporting clubs, it’s becoming ...’, Facebook, 13 April.

¹⁵⁵ Australian Sports Foundation (2023) *Clubs under pressure: Australian community sport research findings*, op. cit., p. 32.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*

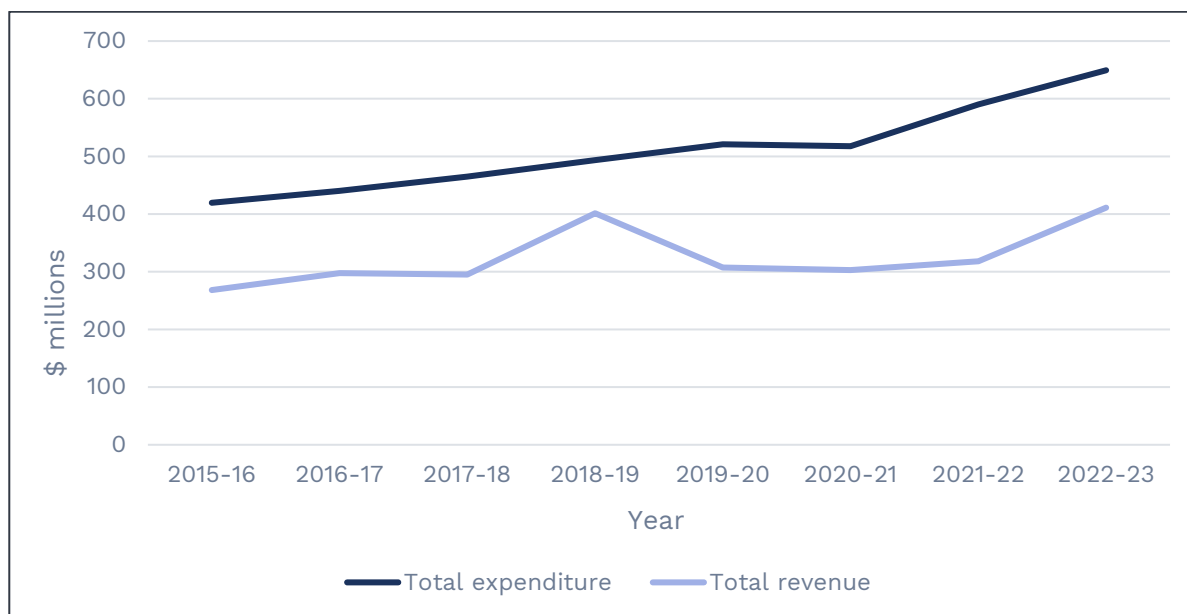
¹⁶¹ *ibid.*, pp. 38–40.

¹⁶² *ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 41.

Administrative load and facilities maintenance were cited as the key concerns for larger clubs (membership of 500 and over), the largest and second-largest factors threatening these clubs' continued sustainability.¹⁶⁴ In aggregate across the state, local councils managing sports grounds run them at a considerable loss when comparing expenditure (including employee benefits, materials and services, and depreciation and amortisation) with revenue (including statutory fees and fines, user fees, and state and federal government funding) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Victorian councils' revenue v expenditure from sports grounds and facilities¹⁶⁵



Source: Victorian Local Government Grants Commission expenditure and revenue data collection, 2015–16 to 2022–23. Visualisation by author.

Sports facilities are not only ageing but also coming under more pressure from usage. Limited availability of space and timeslots for training and matches, together with instances of inadequate facilities to accommodate gender diversity, have prompted the Victorian Government to provide new guidelines for community sport providers. These include the *Fair Access Principles*, brought in through the Change the Game campaign, while further detail on facilities upgrades to aid inclusivity has been provided through Sport and Recreation Victoria's *Female friendly sport infrastructure guidelines*.

The challenge of limited space may also be exacerbating existing barriers to participation (see 'Who wants to join?' section). Research has found that 'Women and girls have felt "devalued" within sporting clubs because of disadvantage in terms of access to resources, support and facilities as well as a general lack of recognition by the club'.¹⁶⁶ The sentiments were found to be prevalent both at administrative and participant levels. A study of one community AFL club observed that coaches ignored requests to limit training to half a ground to enable concurrent training for men and women's teams, one common justification being that the men should be prioritised because they brought crowds and sponsorship.¹⁶⁷ Suggestions by SRV in its female-friendly facilities guidelines for more equitable scheduling included:

- flexible program delivery;
- equal share of 'peak' time slots of facilities for female and male programs;

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁶⁵ Victorian Local Government Grants Commission (2025) 'Consultation and Council Data', datasets 2015–16 to 2022–23, VLGGC website.

¹⁶⁶ R. Jeanes et al. (2020) 'Gender Relations, Gender Equity, and Community Sports Spaces', *op. cit.*, p. 560.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 554–56.

- promotion of female scheduling on main courts/grounds; and
- offering sports programs for children concurrent with adult training times in consideration of childcare needs/costs.¹⁶⁸

The spatial pressures facing sporting organisations is evident, for example, in the City of Melbourne's recent draft masterplan for Royal Park. The plan stressed the need for:

- spaces and places that enable participation in all kinds of sport;
- improving and extending hours of play to broaden access;
- improved lighting to increase accessibility in winter and safety for participants; and
- measures inclusive for women and other groups, including reducing barriers for older visitors, people with disability, people from diverse cultural backgrounds and those identifying as LGBTIQ+.¹⁶⁹

And yet, suitable spaces for such activity are either disappearing or are not adequate to satisfy demand. The total area of community sports grounds has reportedly contracted by 70 hectares in the last two decades—much of it given over to elite sport, such as the refurbished Melbourne Park precinct, AAMI Park and other developments.¹⁷⁰ As a result, the City of Melbourne estimates that, with its population reaching 292,100 by 2043, the council faces 'a shortfall of 16 Australian rules ovals, two bowling greens, 12 cricket ovals, 16 outdoor netball courts, 14 soccer pitches and 10 tennis courts across the municipality'.¹⁷¹

The undersupply of sporting grounds, combined with oversubscription due to increasing populations, is further compounding stress on legacy sports and recreation infrastructure. For instance, from the middle of the 20th century a boom in public swimming pool construction in Victoria ensured that 120 were constructed across the 1950s and 60s, and even more in the 70s and 80s.¹⁷² Much of this swimming infrastructure is council-run and will require significant investment in the coming years when at least 260 pools around Victoria, having passed 50 years of age, will reach their end of life.¹⁷³ The Royal Life Saving Society Australia (RLSSA) estimates that funding a replacement pool would set a pool provider back at least \$10 million, considerably more for more complex facilities.¹⁷⁴ The RLSSA estimates that Victoria will require more than \$2.5 billion over the next 10 years to replace aquatic facilities.¹⁷⁵ For context, council reporting on expenditure indicates that, over eight years between 2015–16 and 2022–23, the Victorian Government contributed a total of \$790 million in non-recurrent funding across not just swimming infrastructure but all sports grounds and facilities (see Figure 5).

While many pools run at a deficit, with some councils providing an operational subsidy of as much as \$33 per visit in order to stay open,¹⁷⁶ the RLSSA calculates that if even 10 per cent of aquatic facilities nationally were to close, there would be a collective loss of \$910 million annually in social, health and economic benefits.¹⁷⁷ This social-return-on-investment (SROI) argument is often cited in relation to community sport, with other examples in Victoria including La Trobe University's estimates of a \$4.40 SROI for every dollar given to a

¹⁶⁸ Sport and Recreation Victoria (date unknown) 'Female friendly sport infrastructure guidelines—Section 2: Maximising use', SRV website.

¹⁶⁹ City of Melbourne (2024) *Royal Park Master Plan: draft for engagement*, November, Melbourne, City of Melbourne.

¹⁷⁰ C. Waters (2025) 'Seventy hectares lost: Melbourne's sports grounds are dwindling', *The Age*, 9 February.

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*

¹⁷² J. Summers & R. Houston (2022) *The state of aquatic facility infrastructure in Australia: rebuilding our aging public swimming pools*, Sydney, Royal Life Saving Society – Australia, p. 11.

¹⁷³ E. Somerville & S. Schubert (2025) 'Victoria's ageing pools need cash splash to stay afloat, councils warn', *ABC News*, 6 March.

¹⁷⁴ Summers & Houston (2022) *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 31.

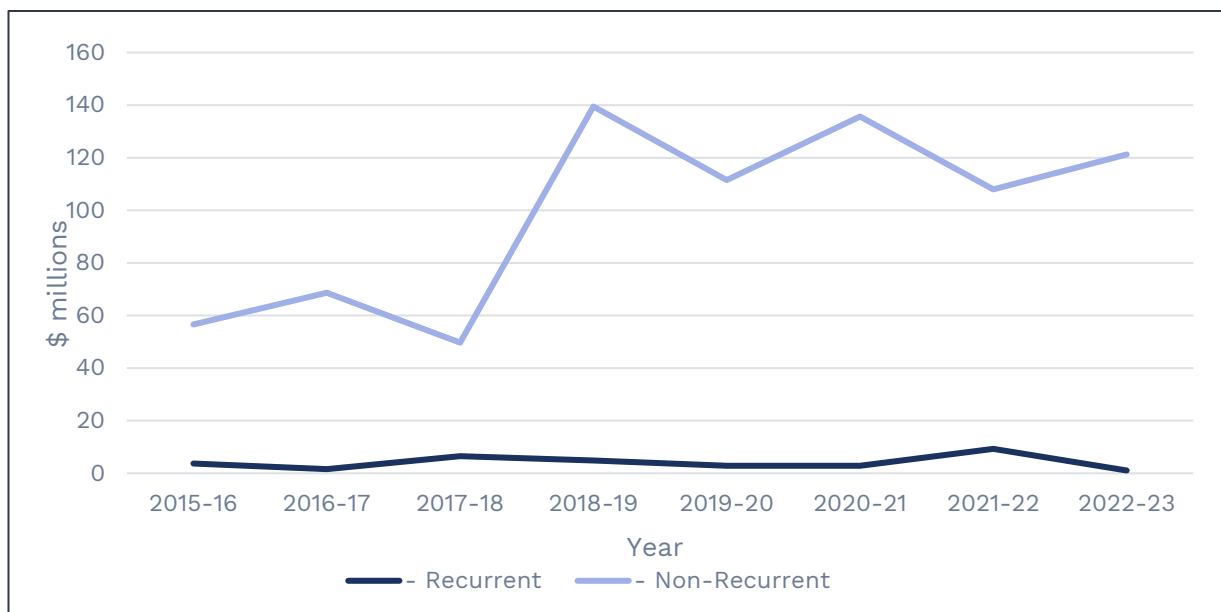
¹⁷⁶ Summers & Houston (2022) *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 13; E. Sherry et al. (2021) *Social Impact of the National Aquatic Industry*, November, Melbourne, Swinburne Sport Innovation Research Group & Royal Life Saving Society – Australia, p. 5.

community AFL club, and a \$8.94 SROI for every dollar to the Reclink Australia Victorian Football League.¹⁷⁸

The contention here is that the more money spent on community sport, the better the broader community is for it. This has recently been boosted by funding for community sport infrastructure announced as a replacement for upgrades planned as part of the abandoned Commonwealth Games contract.¹⁷⁹ However, current pressures have prompted criticism of state and federal funding mechanisms, with grants mechanisms branded as ‘piecemeal and competitive’ according to some councils, and the community infrastructure fund not as accessible as it could be, according to the Municipal Association of Victoria.¹⁸⁰

Figure 5: Funding from state government to local councils for sports grounds and facilities¹⁸¹



Source: Victorian Local Government Grants Commission expenditure and revenue data collection, 2015–16 to 2022–23. Visualisation by author.

Climate change and community sport

Climate change has added another layer to community sports clubs’ future planning. A report scoping the research available on the relationship between climate and sport found that ‘adaptation to climate change impacts on organized competitive sport has been happening for some time and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future’.¹⁸²

The dialogue around sport and climate change is growing at both domestic and international levels. While elite sport and community sport are differently equipped to deal with these challenges, international bodies such as the International Olympic Committee and United Nations see value in elite sport demonstrating best practice in this area.¹⁸³ The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change’s *Sport for Climate Action Framework*

¹⁷⁸ La Trobe University Centre for Sport and Social Impact (2015) *Value of a community football club*, Melbourne, La Trobe University; M. Nicholson et al. (2017) *The social value of a Reclink Australia structured sport program—“Reclink Australia Victorian Football League”*, Melbourne, La Trobe University & Reclink.

¹⁷⁹ D. Andrews, Premier (2025) *Commonwealth Games Costs Too High At Over \$6 Billion*, media release, 18 July 2023.

¹⁸⁰ Somerville & Schubert (2025) op. cit.

¹⁸¹ Victorian Local Government Grants Commission (2025) op. cit.

¹⁸² *ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁸³ International Olympic Committee (2024) *IOC welcomes admission as observer organisation to UN Climate Change*, media release, 27 February.

notes sport's 'complex' and 'difficult to measure' impact on climate, noting the cost of 'travel, energy use, construction, catering and so on'.¹⁸⁴

In this vein, the Brisbane 2032 Olympics will be the first Olympic Games to be contractually obligated to be 'climate positive'.¹⁸⁵ Advocacy groups, such as the Sports Environmental Alliance, and player-driven initiatives, such as Footy for Climate, are also emerging to advocate for climate change policies, amid views from some within sporting circles that peak sporting bodies are underperforming in their climate mitigation obligations.¹⁸⁶ An Environmental Defenders Office (EDO) survey found that only 6 per cent of peak sporting bodies mentioned 'climate change or sustainability in their strategic plans', warning of ramifications for player and spectator welfare, sports infrastructure and reputational risk.¹⁸⁷

In planning for both 'sudden-onset hazards' (fires, floods, storms) and 'gradual-onset hazards' (rising temperatures, drought), multiple layers of adaptation may be required.¹⁸⁸ SRV has found 94.9 per cent of Victorian Government-funded facilities are making environmentally sustainable design changes to reduce costs, including lighting, recycling and energy efficiency measures.¹⁸⁹ Climate change's impacts on the sustainability of sport, organisations and participants alike, may include extreme weather impacts on both playing surfaces and sports events; increased injuries from heat exhaustion or harder playing surfaces; and costly climate adaptation for new or refurbished sport venues.¹⁹⁰ Change may be incremental, like heat policies, as well as wholesale, like seeking more suitable environments for events and conducting in-depth planning for severe weather events, which are tipped to become more frequent.¹⁹¹

Elite sport is being urged to take on a leadership role in this respect by mitigating the impact of climate change on participants and organisations. The Australian Conservation Foundation, for example, has pushed for other elite sports iconic summer events such as the Tour Down Under (cycling), the Boxing Day Test (cricket) and the Australian Open (tennis) to set an example for community sport in how it stages its events for the sake of public health and welfare, for instance by considering moving events to cooler times of the year, such as November or March, or shifting playing times to earlier or later in the day.¹⁹² The importance of addressing these challenges is both existential and financial. The EDO has highlighted the increasing legal liability of clubs, due to factors such as increased risk of injury or illness from climate change-linked events, as well as the rising costs of repairs and insurance premiums as additional 'chronic' risks to clubs' longevity.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁴ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change authors (2020) *Sport for Climate Action Framework*, version 02.0, March, Bonn, UNFCCC.

¹⁸⁵ A. Stevenson & B. Kley (2021) 'Brisbane's 2032 'climate-positive' Olympics commitment sets high bar on delivering sustainable legacy', *ABC News*, 8 November.

¹⁸⁶ Sports Environment Alliance (2025) 'Who We Are', SEA website; Footy for Climate (date unknown) 'About Us', FFC website; J. Davis (2024) 'From the grassroots to the elite, sport is already feeling the impacts of climate change, so why aren't peak bodies prepared?', *ABC News*, 13 March.

¹⁸⁷ Environment Defenders Office & Frontrunners (2024) *Sports, climate change and legal liability*, March, Sydney, EDO, pp. 7–8.

¹⁸⁸ C. Mallen et al. (2023) 'Climate impacts in sport: extreme heat as a climate hazard and adaptation options', *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 30(2), 207–224, p. 209.

¹⁸⁹ Sport and Recreation Victoria (2025) *Community Sports Infrastructure 2024 Outcomes Statement*, op. cit.

¹⁹⁰ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (2020) *Sports for Climate Action Framework*, v. 2, March, Bonn, UNFCCC, paras. 1.1.7, 1.1.9.

¹⁹¹ Mallen et al. (2023) op. cit., p. 212.

¹⁹² Australian Conservation Foundation & Monash Climate Change Communication Research Hub: (2020) *Vicious cycle: climate change, extreme heat and the Tour Down Under*, January, Melbourne, ACF; (2020) *Love 40 degrees: climate change, extreme heat and the Australian Open*, January, Melbourne, ACF; (2020) *Caught behind: climate change, extreme heat and the Boxing Day Test*, January, Melbourne, ACF.

¹⁹³ Environment Defenders Office & Frontrunners (2024) *Sports, climate change and legal liability*, March, Sydney, EDO, p. 28.

Terminology

Informal activity	Informal activity is self-organised and is carried out either alone or with friends/family on a casual basis.
AND	
Organised activity ¹⁹⁴	Organised activity is carried out on a formal or semi-formal basis, organised by an entity such as a sports or recreation club/association, a gym/fitness club/sports/aquatic centre, a private or commercial business, a personal trainer/coach, an event, work, educational institution, community organisation or social group.
Sport-related activity	Sport-related activities include, for example, team sports (basketball, football, Australian football, cricket, netball, etc.), running/jogging, swimming, cycling, golf, etc. These are typically activities related to National Sporting Organisations (NSOs), although the participant may or may not play the activity through an affiliation with the NSO.
AND	
Non-sport-related activity ¹⁹⁵	Non-sport-related physical activities include, for example, gym/fitness activities, bushwalking, recreational (non-sport) dance, etc. These are typically activities not related to NSOs.

Abbreviations

AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ASC	Australian Sports Commission
ASF	Australian Sports Foundation
CSAR	Community sport and active recreation. Community sport on its own generally refers to organised activity that is sport-related.
DHDA	Department of Health, Disability and Ageing (Cth)
EDO	Environmental Defenders Office
OWSR	Office for Women in Sport and Recreation (Vic) (now defunct)
RLSSA	Royal Life Saving Society Australia
SRV	Sport and Recreation Victoria

¹⁹⁴ Australian Sports Commission (2024) [AusPlay survey results July 2023 – June 2024: Victoria data tables](#), Canberra, ASC, table 3.

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.*, table 14.

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