

# Sport participation in Victoria 2015–2021

## The impact of COVID-19 and the recovery of participation in sport

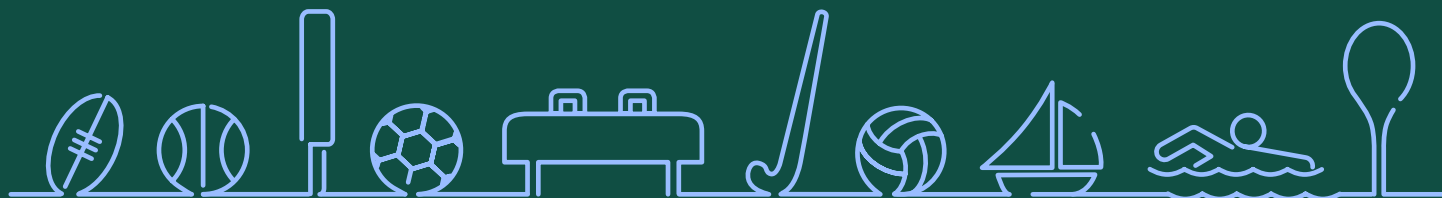
### Research Summary

This summary outlines key findings and insights from the 7th year of VicHealth and Sport and Recreation Victoria's joint research project into organised community sport participation in Victoria. The project is conducted across 10 popular sports and compares participation rates across age, sex and region between 2015–2021.



This report has a particular focus on the impact of COVID-19 on sport participation and the recovery of participation in Victoria, comparing 2019, 2020 and 2021, and then previous years.

Figure 1: Sports included in the VicHealth and Sport and Recreation Victoria research



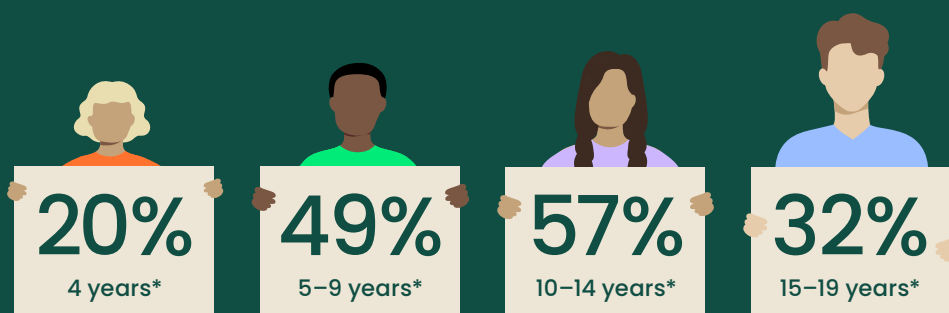
Note: golf and bowls did not provide data for 2019 and are not included

## Key findings at a glance: organised sport participation Victoria, 2021

All percentages are for the total Victorian population

Over half of all sport participants (51%) are aged between 4–14 years.

Sport participation is highest among children and adolescents 10–14 years (57%) and drops significantly during late adolescence (32%).



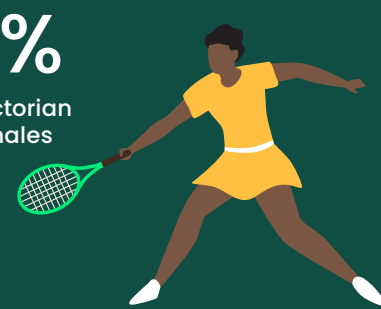
\* % of age group participating in sport

Sport participation rates (across all ages) are higher for males than females.

17%  
of Victorian  
males



9%  
of Victorian  
females



Sport participation rates are higher in regional Victoria compared to metropolitan Melbourne.

Metropolitan-growth areas have considerably lower sport participation rates compared to all other regions.

16%  
Regional  
Victoria

16%  
Regional  
– growth

17%  
Regional  
– other



12%  
Metropolitan  
Melbourne

9%  
Metropolitan  
– growth

13%  
Metropolitan  
– other



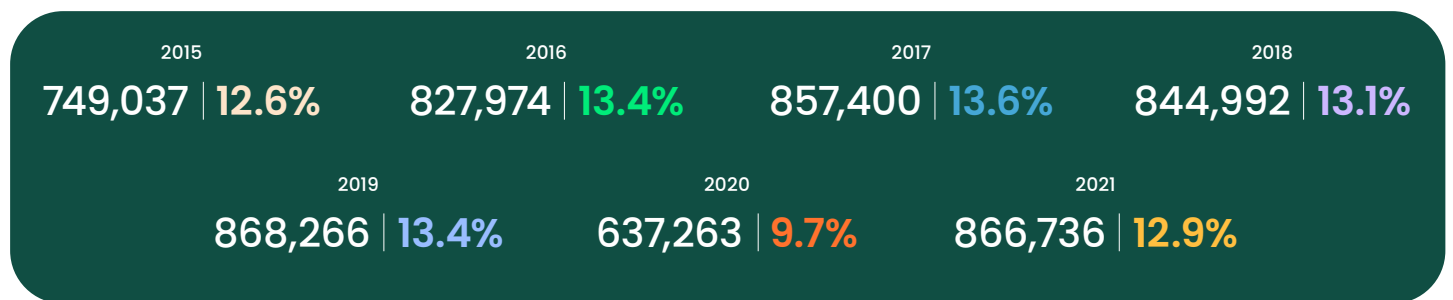


## The impact of COVID-19 and the recovery of participation in sport

From 2015–2019 there was a substantial increase in the number of sports participants with 119,229 more participants in 2019 compared to 2015. From 2019 to 2020 there was a 27% decrease in the number of sport participants due to COVID-19, which represented a decline of 231,003 participants.

From 2020 to 2021 there was an increase of 229,473 participants which is only slightly lower from pre-COVID, 2019 participation levels (1,531 participants). This represents an overall participation rate of 12.9 % which is very similar to the 2019 participation rate of 13.4% of the Victorian population.

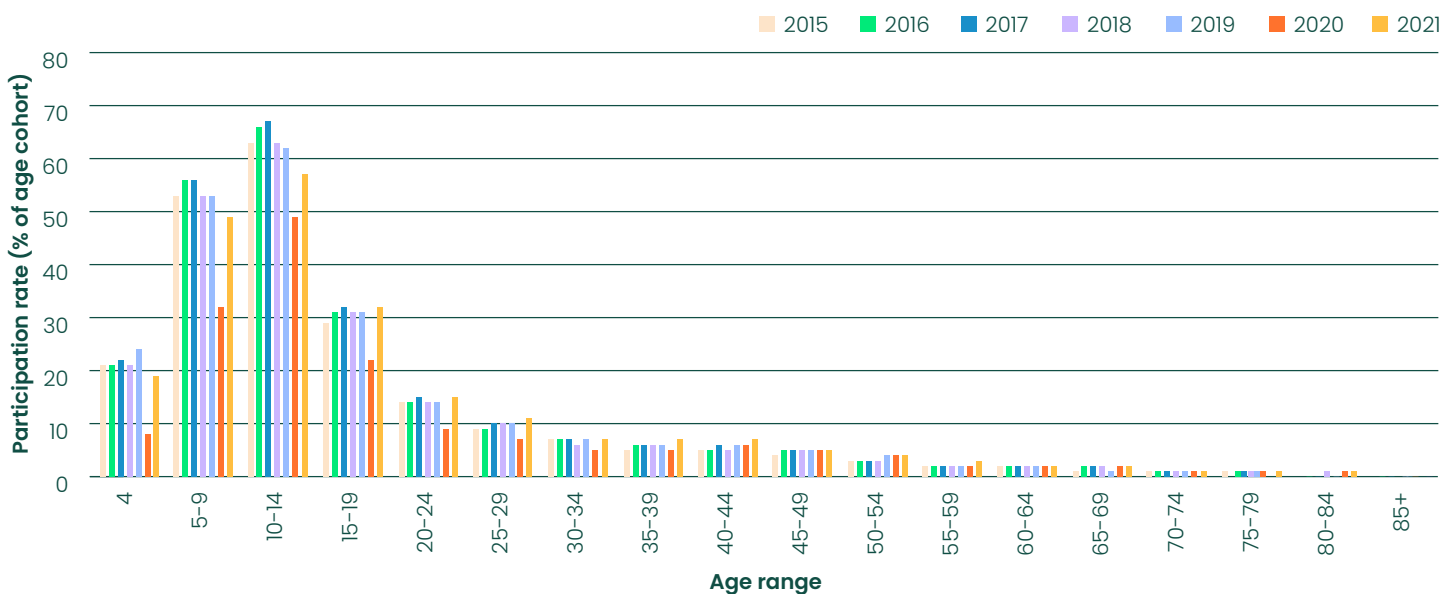
The total participation numbers and participation rate (of the Victorian population) across the sports were:



The participation rate in 2021 was 99.8% of that in 2019.

**Figure 2. Overall participation rates 2015–2021, Victoria: by age**

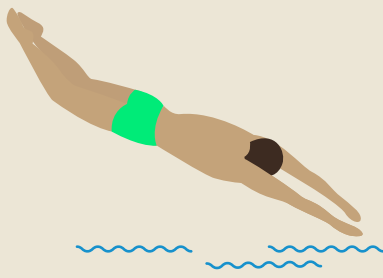
The participation rate for those aged 15+ was higher in 2021 than it was pre-COVID, 2019.



The overall male participation rate was slightly higher in 2021 (17.2%) than in 2019 (16.8%).

The overall female participation rate was slightly lower in 2021 (8.8%) than it was in 2019 (9.6%).

2021  
**17.2%**  
↑  
2019  
**16.8%**



2019  
**9.6%**  
↓  
2021  
**8.8%**



Overall participation rates in 2021 were higher than in 2019 for those aged 15+.

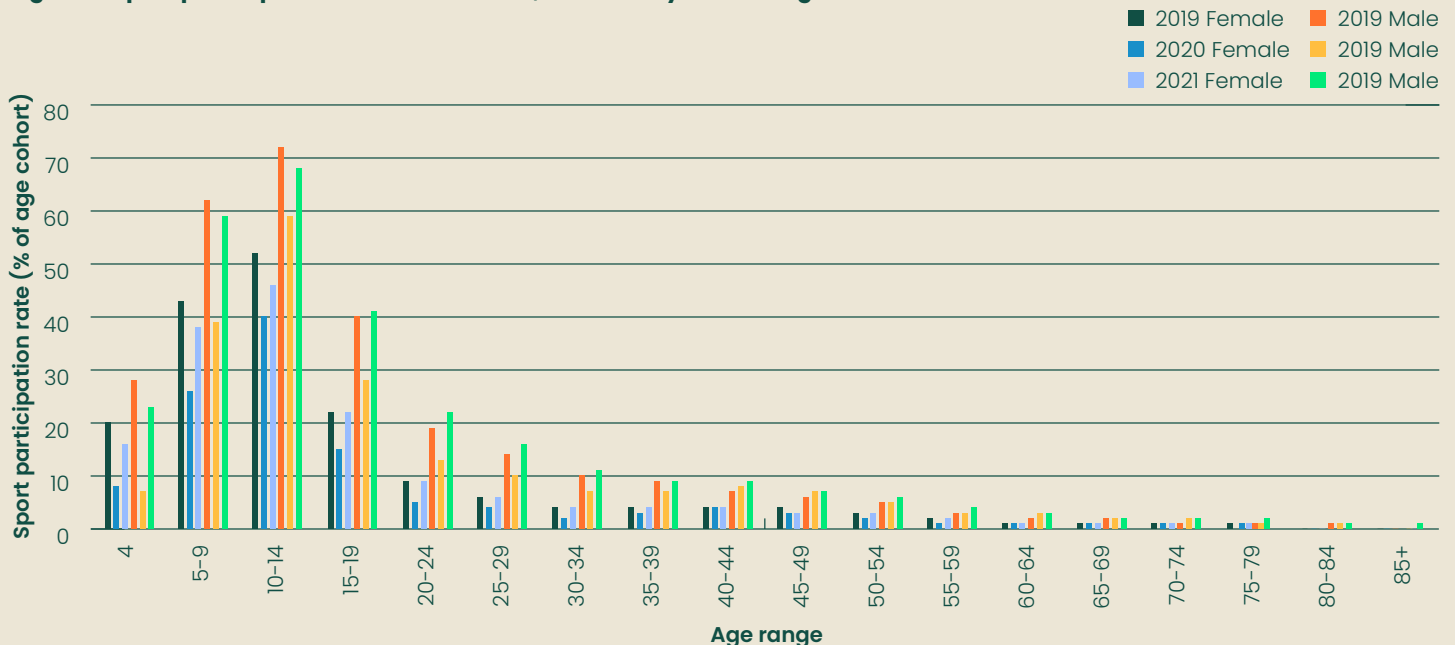
The male participation rate was higher in 2021 compared to 2019 for those aged 15+. The overall male participation rate in 2021 compared to 2019 was 104%.

The female participation rate was higher in 2021 compared to 2019 for those aged 20–29. The overall female participation rate in 2021 compared to 2019 was 93%.

**Figure 3. Sport participation rates: 2019–2021, Victoria: by age**

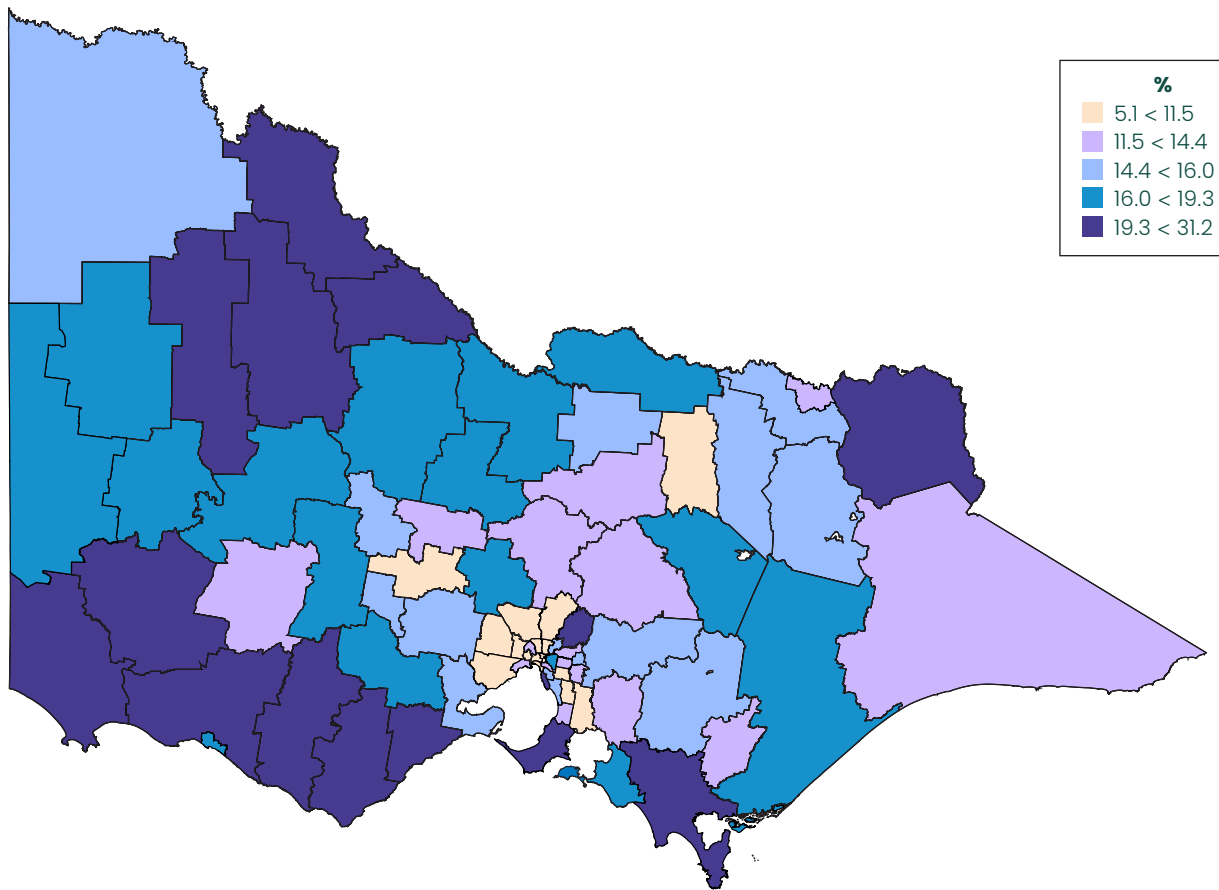


**Figure 4. Sport participation rates: 2019–2021, Victoria: by sex and age**

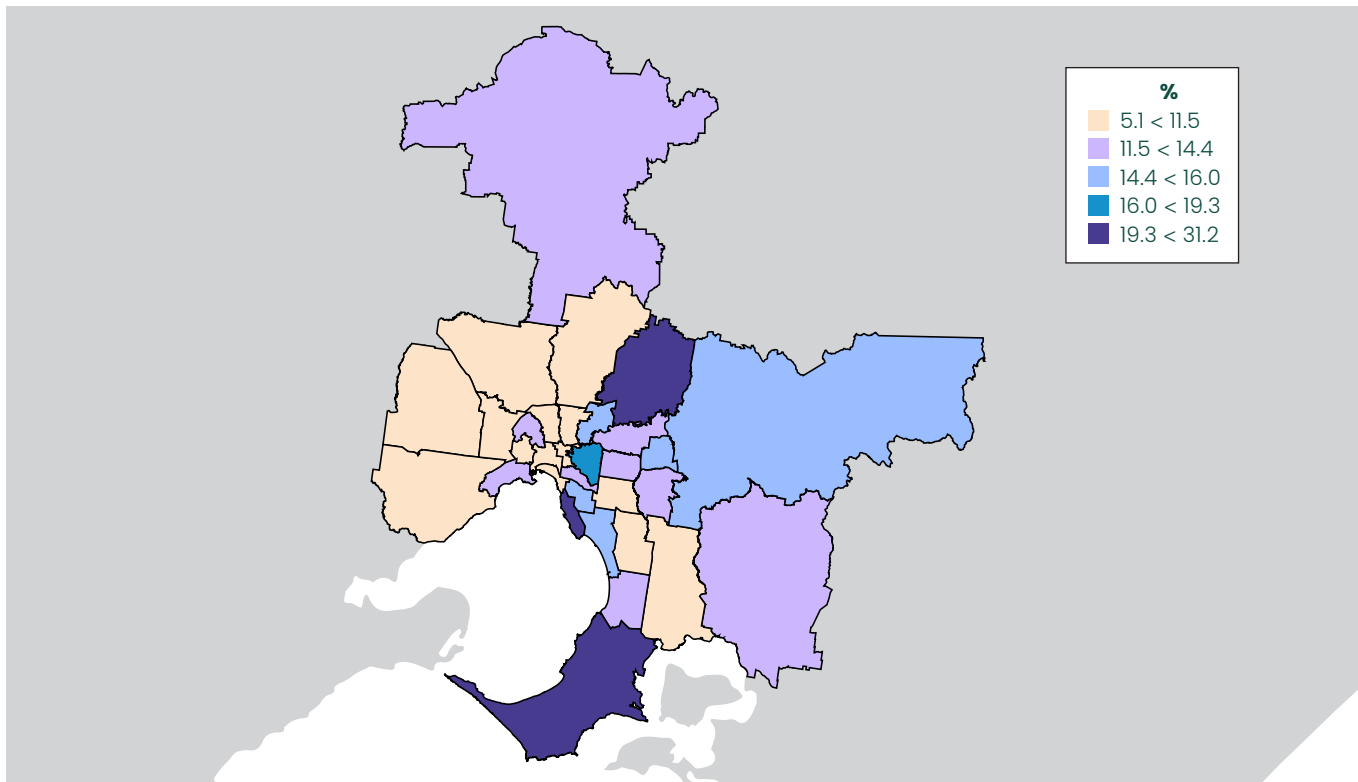


The overall participation rate in 2021 was 12.9%, an increase from 9.5% in 2020.

## Map 1: Participation rates, 2021: Victoria by LGA



## Map 2: Participation rates, 2021: Metropolitan Melbourne



The rank in participation across LGAs differed quite considerably from 2019 to 2020. However, the rank was quite similar in 2021 compared to 2020 except for the Regional – Other LGAs.

Regional – Other was the most impacted by COVID-19. There was an increase in participation rate in 2020 for every LGA, and some up to 2.5 times higher.

**Table 1: Participation rates, 2019, 2020,2021, Victoria:  
by Local Government Area**

LGA name	Participation rate <sup>1</sup> 2019	Rank <sup>2</sup> 2019	Participation rate <sup>1</sup> 2020	Rank <sup>2</sup> 2020	Participation rate <sup>1</sup> 2021	Rank <sup>2</sup> 2021
<b>Metropolitan – growth</b>						
Cardinia (S)	13.6	1	10.1	1	13.5	1
Casey (C)	10.0	3	7.6	3	9.4	3
Hume (C)	9.8	4	5.7	6	8.4	6
Melton (S)	7.9	7	5.4	7	8.1	7
Mitchell (S)	13.0	2	8.8	2	11.6	2
Whittlesea (C)	9.5	5	7.1	4	9.1	4
Wyndham (C)	9.3	6	7.0	5	9.0	5
<b>Metropolitan – other</b>						
Banyule (C)	16.3	6	12.2	5	15.4	6
Bayside (C)	22.1	2	18.4	1	23.4	1
Boroondara (C)	18.1	3	13.8	4	19.1	4
Brimbank (C)	6.5	23	4.3	24	6.0	24
Darebin (C)	10.2	17	7.7	20	10.9	19
Frankston (C)	14.8	9	10.8	13	13.1	15
Glen Eira (C)	13.9	12	12.2	6	15.1	9
Greater Dandenong (C)	5.4	25	3.7	25	5.1	25
Hobsons Bay (C)	13.3	15	10.2	15	13.7	11
Kingston (C)	15.9	7	11.7	8	15.5	5
Knox (C)	14.4	10	11.2	10	13.6	12
Manningham (C)	13.4	14	9.9	16	11.9	16
Maribyrnong (C)	8.5	22	6.8	22	9.3	22
Maroondah (C)	15.5	8	11.7	7	15.3	7
Melbourne (C)	5.7	24	5.1	23	6.1	23
Monash (C)	9.6	19	8.5	18	10.4	20
Moonee Valley (C)	13.5	13	11.1	11	14.0	10
Moreland (C)	9.1	21	7.5	21	9.4	21
Mornington Peninsula (S)	17.8	4	15.2	3	19.6	3
Nillumbik (S)	23.3	1	16.5	2	20.3	2
Port Phillip (C)	9.5	20	8.9	17	11.5	17
Stonnington (C)	14.2	11	10.7	14	13.5	14
Whitehorse (C)	12.5	16	10.9	12	13.6	13
Yarra (C)	10.0	18	8.4	19	11.1	18
Yarra Ranges (S)	16.5	5	11.3	9	15.2	8
<b>Regional – growth</b>						
Ballarat (C)	14.8	6	9.8	7	14.7	7
Bass Coast (S)	15.6	4	11.1	4	16.9	2
Baw Baw (S)	16.8	3	10.5	5	15.8	4
Greater Bendigo (C)	16.8	2	12.3	2	16.1	3
Greater Geelong (C)	14.9	5	11.4	3	15.4	5
Moorabool (S)	14.4	7	10.0	6	15.1	6
Surf Coast (S)	24.1	1	17.2	1	23.6	1

LGA name	Participation rate <sup>1</sup> 2019	Rank <sup>2</sup> 2019	Participation rate <sup>1</sup> 2020	Rank <sup>2</sup> 2020	Participation rate <sup>1</sup> 2021	Rank <sup>2</sup> 2021
<b>Regional – other</b>						
Alpine (S)	17.9	24	10.5	14	14.8	31
Ararat (RC)	14.3	37	7.8	34	13.8	35
Benalla (RC)	13.8	39	7.5	36	11.0	40
Buloke (S)	31.0	1	13.4	6	31.2	1
Campaspe (S)	19.1	17	10.0	18	17.3	21
Central Goldfields (S)	18.0	22	9.4	23	15.6	27
Colac Otway (S)	20.1	15	13.1	7	19.8	11
Corangamite (S)	25.8	5	15.3	4	26.1	4
East Gippsland (S)	14.4	36	7.5	37	13.4	36
Gannawarra (S)	24.2	8	10.3	15	20.9	8
Glenelg (S)	19.8	16	10.2	17	20.6	10
Golden Plains (S)	16.6	30	11.0	11	17.4	20
Greater Shepparton (C)	17.6	26	9.5	21	15.5	28
Hepburn (S)	11.8	40	7.1	38	11.2	39
Hindmarsh (S)	26.91	4	6.9	39	19.3	13
Horsham (RC)	20.60	14	10.9	12	18.0	15
Indigo (S)	16.8	29	9.2	24	15.9	26
Latrobe (C)	15.7	32	10.2	16	14.0	34
Loddon (S)	23.8	9	8.9	27	18.5	14
Macedon Ranges (S)	18.6	20	11.4	9	17.6	18
Mansfield (S)	17.8	25	9.5	20	16.9	23
Mildura (RC)	15.9	31	8.5	31	15.1	30
Moira (S)	18.81	18	9.6	19	17.5	19
Mount Alexander (S)	14.7	35	9.0	25	14.2	33
Moyne (S)	24.8	7	15.4	3	24.6	5
Murrindindi (S)	15.2	34	7.9	33	13.2	37
Northern Grampians (S)	18.6	19	8.1	32	16.0	25
Pyrenees (S)	16.8	28	9.0	26	16.3	24
Queenscliffe (B)	29.6	2	20.2	1	26.5	3
South Gippsland (S)	21.4	11	13.4	5	20.7	9
Southern Grampians (S)	25.7	6	19.0	2	30.0	2
Strathbogie (S)	15.3	33	8.7	30	14.4	32
Swan Hill (RC)	21.6	10	9.4	22	21.0	7
Towong (S)	20.7	13	8.9	28	19.4	12
Wangaratta (RC)	17.9	23	8.8	29	15.5	29
Warrnambool (C)	17.5	27	10.6	13	17.0	22
Wellington (S)	18.4	21	11.0	10	17.7	17
West Wimmera (S)	20.9	12	5.8	40	17.8	16
Wodonga (RC)	13.9	38	7.7	35	12.0	38
Yarriambiack (S)	29.3	3	11.5	8	22.1	6

**Legend:** B = Borough, C = City, RC = Rural City, S = Shire.

<sup>1</sup> Number of player registrations per 100 residents

<sup>2</sup> In descending order of participation rate within each region. Rank derived from rate to six decimals

## Discussion

A strength of this research project is the longitudinal nature with annual analysis and reporting demonstrating changes to participation over time. This report focuses on the participation changes resulting from the impact of and recovery from COVID-19.

### Impact of COVID-19 on participation

Not surprisingly, the impact of COVID-19 on community sport participation in Victoria during 2020 was significant, with an overall decrease of 27% of participants during the pandemic. This represents over 231,000 Victorians who did not register to play competitive sport during COVID-19, in 2020.

The decline in participation impacted all sports and all sports participants, regardless of region, age or gender. However, there were some parts of the population impacted more than others. The decline in participation during COVID-19 was greatest for females, early sport adopters (4–9 years), those in regional areas, and winter sports compared to summer.

### Recovery of sport participation in 2021

With COVID-19 restrictions lifted in 2021, Victorians were able to resume playing community sport once again. It is very promising that the participation numbers in 2021 were very near to those pre-COVID in 2019. For some sports, participation numbers were higher in 2021 than in 2019.

#### Age

Participation in sport continues to be very popular for children, especially for those aged 10–14, with 68% of boys and 46% of girls participating in organised sport. However, the decline during adolescence, particular for those aged 15–19 continues to remain significant. Despite this, it is very encouraging to see that participation amongst those aged 15–85+ was higher in 2021 than in 2019. It may be that the lack of opportunity to play sport and engage in other leisure, educational, and work activities during COVID-19 has contributed to a strong desire to re-engage in community sport. It is likely that adolescents and adults who are previous participants will return to playing sport, also because they will have developed the required physical literacy and sport specific skills to play competitive sport!

However, the question remains if they will continue to be active sport participants for years to come. Researchers have demonstrated the issue of poor retention and high drop-out in sport and have advocated for an increased focus on policy development and strategic focus on these issues for some time<sup>2-5</sup>. It is recommended that sport policy makers consider attention to retention strategies.

**It is recommended that sport policy is developed and strategies are implemented focusing on retaining players.**

Research can continue to assist the sports industry in understanding the reasons why people play and why they drop-out of sport. It is important to understand how children and youth would like to continue playing sport, and what are the structures and contexts in which they prefer this to happen. In a recent research paper, the Sport4Me concept – a people focused approach to engaging and re-engaging Australians in sport, highlights the changes in society that impact the ways in which people want to spend their leisure-time. It is recommended that sports organisations consider the ways in which children and youth can participate in sport, in different formats away from the traditional competitive structures<sup>6</sup>. Sport4Me is a model promoting the provision of flexible, inclusive, equitable sporting opportunities with a focus on being with and making friends and having fun, developing physical literacy and just have opportunities to play. The model is not intended to replace the traditional competitive club-based model of sport, but complement it by providing individuals with more choice whilst fostering an environment that promotes lifelong participation in sport<sup>6</sup>.

For the Sport4Me concept to be developed, implemented and succeed the sport sector needs to prioritise retention and re-engaging children and youth and invest in resources in developing this alternative approach to participation. Without the necessary research informing evidence-based decision making across the sport sector, and a change in sport policy to address retention, significant drop-out of sport, particularly during adolescence will continue to happen.

With regards to age, there are less players aged 4–14 years in 2021 compared to 2019, participation in this age group most impacted by COVID-19. The decline children aged 4–14 in 2021 compared to 2019 represents over 30,000 less children playing organised sport. At this critical age for the development of physical literacy and development of sport specific skills we may be looking at a challenged age group. With the absence of physical education and organised sport throughout the pandemic, young children had limited opportunities to develop important foundational movement skills. Without these skills, future and ongoing participation in organised sport is extremely difficult and for many, simply impossible.

**It is recommended that stakeholders across the sports and education sector, including government, sport clubs and sport governing bodies pay particular attention to the development of physical literacy and sport specific skills with a focus on very young individuals.**



## Region

The following LGAs improved their participation ranking the most in 2021 compared to 2019:

- Metropolitan – Growth, Whittlesea
- Metropolitan – Other, Hobsons Bay
- Regional – Growth, Bass Coast
- Regional – Other, Warrnambool

The following LGAs declined in their ranking the most in 2021 compared to 2019:

- Metropolitan – Growth, Hume
- Metropolitan – Other, Frankston
- Regional – Growth, Baw Baw
- Regional – Other, Alpine

**It is recommended that sports and LGAs focus on specific strategies within regions which declined in participation through COVID-19 and where numbers have not recovered well.**

## Health

The return of participants to pre-COVID-19 levels is encouraging for sport organisations and their competitions, but also because it contributes to the health and wellbeing of individuals. For Australian youth who played sport, males reported significantly better physical, general, mental health and life satisfaction during COVID-19 lockdowns than females<sup>7</sup>, which may have negatively impacted young females returning to sport. The absence of playing sport for youth, including training and competing with their friends, negatively impacted health and wellbeing, particularly for females<sup>7</sup>.

There is research highlighting the health (physical, social and mental) benefits of participation in sport, and particularly for team and club-based sports compared to individual activities. Furthermore, there is some evidence that health and wellbeing is better amongst those who continue to play sport compared to those who have dropped out<sup>8</sup>. However, we do not yet know how ongoing participation in sport, as ensured by retention as opposed to drop-out of sport, impacts individuals' health and wellbeing.

**It is recommended that future research investigates and monitors the health profiles (health markers such as BMI, blood pressure, etc.) of sports participants and for this to include current players and those who have dropped out.**

## Sex

Fewer females returned to playing sport in 2021 compared to participation levels in 2019. This represented a decline of over 22,000 female participants. However, male participation rose by over 20,500 participants in 2021 compared to 2019. Prior to COVID-19, there were considerable gains in female participation in sport compared to male participation, most likely the result of significant investment, policies, and strategies to increase participation for women and girls<sup>5</sup>. It would seem that COVID-19 has impacted females more than males in regard to their return to sport.

**It is recommended that research investigating re-engaging women/girls back into sport participation is prioritised and appropriate strategies are developed across the sector.**





## Conclusion

It is pleasing to see that sport organisations in Victoria have managed to bring back many participants to playing sport, at pre-COVID levels. This may have been the result of significant investment and support programs delivered by government, sport organisations, and the health sector. It may also have merely been the strong desire by many Victorians to return to playing sport. However, it should be noted that young Victorians and females have struggled to return to sport and in the short term, these groups should receive focused attention in bringing them back to sport participation.

Research, investment and strategic priorities should focus on:

- Developing physical literacy and sport specific skills for young children aged 4–9
- Understanding why children/adolescents drop-out of sport and what are reasons for their potential return to play, which is likely to be in different formats and contexts as explained in the Sport4Me approach
- Increasing the participation and engagement (and re-engagement) of females in sport

## About this research

The Sport Participation Research Project concerns the analysis of data on organised sport participation annually since 2015, and this now includes 13 sports in total. For 2019 and 2021, two sports (golf and bowls) were unable to provide their participant data. Rowing is new to the project and we do not have historical data for rowing so they are excluded from this report. Therefore, this report integrates and summarises sport participation across ten major sports from 2015 to 2021. This project reports on participation levels (numbers of registered participants and participation rates per head of population) and participation trends, for the Victorian population as a whole, and for various population segments. The project aims to provide a reliable measure of organised sport participation in Victoria to inform planning, decision making and investments for State Sporting Associations, all levels of government, funding bodies and sport participation promoters, particularly relating to participation initiatives and facility planning.

## Acknowledgements

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### **PASiglobal.com**

The State Sporting Associations involved with this research are: AFL Victoria, Australian Sailing (Victoria), Basketball Victoria, Bowls Victoria, Cricket Victoria, Football Victoria, Golf Victoria, Gymnastics Victoria, Hockey Victoria, Netball Victoria, Rowing Victoria, Swimming Victoria, and Tennis Victoria.

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