



Sport participation among lower income households in the ACT

Overview of key findings



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Acknowledgement of Country

The ACT Government acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as traditional custodians of the Canberra Region and acknowledges that the region remains a significant meeting place.

The ACT Government and community partners are committed to self-determination as the guiding principle in the delivery of programs and services and are working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to address matters that are important to them.



Sport participation among lower income households in the ACT

As part of a broader focus on improving health outcomes for ACT residents, Sport and Recreation (ACT Government) commissioned research to examine barriers to sports participation among lower income households in Canberra, and to better understand what could be done to assist them to overcome these barriers and be more active, and ultimately healthier.

Understanding participation among this segment of the community was of particular interest, as people in lower income households tend to report relatively lower rates of participation in sport and physical activity compared to other groups. The research involved 30x in-depth individual and paired interviews with members of lower-income households from across Canberra, conducted in September and October 2021.

Definitions used

Lower-income households

Households within the lowest one-third of the ACT community (based on 2016 ABS Census data) – with a weekly income of less than \$2,000 (\$104,000 per year)

Key findings



Aside from having lower income in common, it is a very **diverse segment** of the ACT community.



Lower income households exhibit **high levels of physical, social and psychological impairments**, which are barriers to participation.

People in this segment also tend to have **high levels of caring responsibilities**, and a tendency to spend available money on family rather than self.



Lower income households **are likely to be physically active** – just not in ways that are readily picked up in participation metrics.

More likely to be using free or low cost activities and facilities.



Less likely to be familiar with, or **interested** in traditional organised sport or physical activity.

Less aware of ways to be active or involved, or how to progress in sport – and have less informal exposure through social networks.



The **barriers to trialling new** sports and activities are higher.



Many prioritise sport and physical activity as the highest non-essential use of income, **but essential costs often prevent any non-essential spending**.

People living in lower income households – who are they?

The people with lower household incomes interviewed as part of this research were a very diverse group, not typified by any dominant characteristics beyond income. The reasons for having lower income were multi-layered and complex, typically falling into at least one of the following themes, but often two or more:

- > **Life stage** – being young or retired
- > **Working in lower paid jobs or sectors**
- > **Significant changes in circumstance** (e.g. relationship breakdown, accident, health conditions etc.)
- > **Being less able to access (enough) well-paid work** due to:
 - Disability or impairment
 - Caring responsibilities
 - Language or cultural barriers

Beyond direct cost, other **major barriers** to participation that are related to lower income households include:

- > Having to **work longer and more variable hours** in lower paid work, which makes it hard to commit to regular participation;
- > **Working in tiring, repetitive and physically demanding jobs**, leaving little energy for physical recreation, and a greater concern about the risk of injury limiting ability to work;
- > **Less access to allied health services** for prevention and treatment of injuries and management of psychosocial conditions;
- > Greater reliance on **public transport**, and very **local facilities**;
- > Greater need for **stimulation, novelty and joy** from leisure activity;
- > **Less able to affordable equipment**, and especially good equipment; and
- > **Reluctance to sign up for ongoing commitments**, and less capacity to pay extra for pay-as-you go sessions.

Simple financial solutions will help, but by themselves will likely have minimal impact on increasing engagement. **Solutions need to address information, access and social factors as well as financial considerations** to help people find and take part in activities that are right for them.



Sport participation

Broadly defined to include organised club sport delivered through National Sports Organisations (NSOs), State Sports Organisations (SSOs), and commercial providers, as well as commercial and community fitness activities, and casual recreation and physical activity.



How does having lower income affect participation in sport?

How lower income affects day-to-day life

- > No money for non-essential activities
- > Finding 'spare' time is a challenge after essential work and care activities are done
- > Getting to places is harder and takes more time
- > Needs of the family unit are prioritised over individual ones
- > Greater need for executive functioning may not be supported by capability and social supports
- > Less access to information, inspiration and social reinforcement related to sport and activity
- > Higher need for engagement and stimulus outside of work hours
- > Higher need for physical and psychological accessibility supports to participate

Implications for participation in sport

- > Low awareness of available ways to participate and the process of getting involved.
- > Greater reliance on local services and facilities
- > Less exposure and access to progression pathways in sport and activity
- > Reduced access to allied health care limits participation and means people are more concerned about the risk of injury
- > Trying something new feels like a bigger risk (financially, socially, and from a physical health perspective)
- > Reduced access to (good) equipment
- > Less ability to comply with common payment structures
- > A higher value proposition is needed to get people to choose to participate – it really needs to be seen as worth it.

What do people get out of the things they do in their spare time?

The research found a **wide range of factors** that motivated people to do whatever they chose to do in their spare time, be that sport and physical activity, or other pastimes. These largely reflected aspects known to be strong drivers of all human behaviour. In the simplest sense, they can be **boiled down to wanting to feel good, and connected to others**.

Most common factors:

- > **A fun, enjoyable experience:** easy to do, not a chore
- > **Social interaction and connection:** meeting new people, maintaining existing connections, and feeling a sense of belonging
- > **Intellectual engagement/stimulation:** novelty, creativity, problem solving, learning
- > **More individual factors:**
- > **Relaxation, stress relief and recovery:** self-care, day-to-day health management
- > **Maintaining physical and mental health:** more of a chore, 'you do it 'cos you know it's good for you'
- > **Endorphin hit/feeling energised:** only a driver for those already active, and for whom sport is an important part of their lives
- > **Sense of accomplishment and control:** seeing progress, being good at something
- > **Sense of awe:** experiencing the beauty of nature, time outdoors
- > **Avoiding feelings of discomfort or anxiety:** going against routines or expectations, meeting new people or doing new things, feeling uncomfortable, gross or unsafe

Opportunities to drive change at the system and program level

The research points to a number of opportunities for change **across the whole sports and activity sector**, including for governments, sports and physical activity providers, and community organisations. Many of these suggestions **would benefit the whole community**, but have **particular relevance to lower income households**. Each of these could be done in isolation, but many would benefit from being done in purposeful combinations.

Supporting discovery

- > **Develop a collated central source of information about sport and physical activity**
 - Minimise effort, time, and skill to find and use.
 - Include a broad range of activities including but not limited to sport and physical activity.
 - Include information that helps address common concerns and anxieties.
 - Easy and intuitive to find and sort relevant options by relevant factors (location, skill, time etc)
 - Allowing users to connect with other participants and activity providers
 - Prompts about activities that interest them
 - Help plan how to get there.
- > **Support people to plan to be more active when opportunities arise, potentially through a system of prompts or communications**
 - "Good weather warnings" to help people plan to make the most of upcoming good weather.
 - Ideas for ways to be active when the weather is poor or in the winter.
 - Prompts to get out and be active again after winter is over.

- > Suggest new and different ways to be active around Canberra.
- > Tips and suggestions that help people incorporate activity into their day.
- > Small rewards or incentives upon reaching certain activity goals.

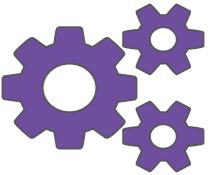
- > **Provide a toolkit for sport and physical activity providers to help them to better engage and support lower income households to take part.**

Addressing threshold support needs

- > **Practical and subsidised ways for people to access allied health services.**
- > Safe, flexible, low-cost childcare at or near where adults can be active.
- > Facilities where people of all ages and abilities can be active together (especially, where parents can be active alongside children).

Overcoming anxieties around suitability, skills required, and how to get involved

- > **Offer a "get ready to get fit" type of program,** designed for people who may be unfit, have limited familiarity with sports settings and skills, or people who don't feel confident about being active, or who might be unsure about how to approach fitting activity into their lives.
- > **Create a database of local 'activity champions'** who are into their activities, and who would be open to buddying-up with people who want try the activity but don't know how to go about it.
- > **Use local community centres** as central coordination points for provision of information and connection with relevant supports.



Access and accessibility

- > Create more opportunities for participation in local communities
 - More small-but-functional places to be active which can be accessed at minimal or no cost.
 - Take activities to local communities, so people in each area can access them sometimes.
 - Provide a ready source of information about local facilities and/or activities and events.
 - Provide transport to and from facilities that are harder to access (eg. via a community shuttle service).
- > Provide and maintain facilities in parklands and green areas where people can be active for free, including toilets, information points, and rest stops.
- > Provide subsidies to clubs and facilities in lower income areas to make the spaces more accessible from a physical, social and psychological standpoint.



Financial supports

- > Create a second-hand equipment market specifically geared towards providing people on low incomes with access to reasonable quality equipment at lower cost, with options to hire, buy, and re-sell equipment for a range of sports and activities.
- > Explore supports specifically targeted at lower income households, such as government funded gym access or low-cost gym equipment rental, or companion discounts.
- > Explore potential ways to support low-income participants via financial models for clubs. Such as:
 - Teaching clubs how to raise funds in ways other than via participant fees
 - Providing clubs with funds in advance for casual participants
 - Co-payments for memberships for eligible participants.

Practical opportunities to improve experiences of sport

The research also suggests some more practical ways to **improve experience of sport and activity** for lower income households by targeting the relatively higher need or desire for discovery, stimulation, overcoming anxieties, skill building, flexible engagement, and social connection among this segment of the community.

Supporting discovery

- > Explore options for linking with other clubs and activities via cross-club trial days.

Overcoming anxieties around what to expect and how to prepare

- > Help set people up for success by giving them the information they need to prepare themselves before even trialling an activity. Have information sessions that precede trial days and events.
- > Proactively provide (a lot of) information and guidance for new starters and re-entrants about what to expect, and practical steps around how to get involved or progress in the sport. Creating dedicated information packs could be useful. Information should provide guidance around:
 - What to expect, bring, wear etc.;
 - How to access the facilities or events, including transport options if possible;
 - Who to contact for different things;
 - What processes need to be followed;
 - Different options for participating and how to figure out which one will work best for them;
 - Upfront and ongoing costs involved, including for making changes or not being able to turn up;
 - Any supports that are available – financial and otherwise – and how to access them.
- > Actively promote the accessibility of activities and supports that may be available. Don't make people ask for this information.

Social connection

- > Actively create opportunities for people to connect with others to help them stick with activities
 - Create opportunities for people to meet others like themselves, with similar aims, interests, or who may face similar challenges
 - Facilitate creation of local support structures (eg. carpool club for locals).
 - Rewards or incentives to help build social connections among participants by encouraging ongoing attendance.

Stimulation

- > Provide a variety of experiences for people who want different things (competition, new skills, relaxation, and social interaction). Offer people a wider range of things they can get from participation.
- > Participating needs to be fun (and interesting) first, everything else second.

Flexible engagement

- > Provide flexible ways of participating in the sport or activity, and allow people to vary when and how they participate without financial penalty, or letting others down
 - Expand the ways people can take part.
 - Provide participation options with varied time commitment requirements.
 - Provide casual or intermittent participation options, with flexibility to drop in and out at short notice as things come up, without financial penalty.
 - Provide a range of social participation options, including things people can do together as a family or with friends.

Overcoming anxieties around skills and capability

- > Offer separate programs aimed at new starters, re-entrants and people seeking to level-up, including:
 - Beginner up-skilling programs that provide a critical entry pathway for those unfamiliar with a sport or activity, particularly in adult life.
 - Re-entry and progression coaching programs for community sport that allow people to 'ease back into it' or 'prepare to take the next step'. Similar to beginner programs, but more focused on:
 - (re)connecting with key people, and (re) familiarising participants with standard processes and expectations.
 - refreshing skills and rebuilding fitness – not starting from scratch, with level appropriate coaching.
 - being able to practice and reskill with similarly fit/skilled people doing the same thing.
 - providing accelerated pathways to mainstream, ideally enabling participants to move through levels of competition and re-engage or progress at their own pace.

For more information

Contact Areas

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More detail from the research can be found at:

www.sport.act.gov.au/clubsand organisations/research

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