

Indigenous Participation

Participation in sport and physical activity is important for the health and wellbeing of the Indigenous population. It provides a range of benefits including increased self-esteem, social and community cohesion, improvements in health and overall wellbeing. Lack of exercise increases the risk of developing health conditions such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease, and the rate of these illnesses is high in the Indigenous Australian population.¹

An understanding of Indigenous participation in sport and physical activity may help to identify ways to encourage Indigenous Australians to become more active.

Indigenous participation in physical activity

More than half (52.6 per cent) of Indigenous Western Australians and just under half (49.3 per cent) of Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over participated in sport or physical recreation activities in the last twelve months.²

Just over 45 per cent of Indigenous Australians aged 18 years and over participated in sport or physical recreation activities in the last twelve months. This compares with 64 per cent of non-Indigenous Australians.³

Note: Data allowing comparisons between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians was obtained from two separate sources; the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2002 and the General Social Survey 2002. Whereas the National and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2002 collected information on Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over, the General Social Survey 2002 collected similar information on all Australians aged 18 years and over. Comparisons between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians therefore apply to those aged 18 years and over.

Indigenous rates of participation in Australia by age and gender⁴

The proportion of Indigenous Australian males aged 15 years and over was greater than the proportion of Indigenous females who participated in a sport or physical recreation activity. This was consistent across all age groups.

The proportion of Indigenous Australians who participated in sport or recreation activities declined with age.

Australian Indigenous rates of participation in 2002 by age and gender

| Age group (years) | Males (%) | Females (%) | Total (%) |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 15-24 | 75.9 | 58.2 | 67.0 |
| 25-34 | 63.8 | 44.2 | 53.4 |
| 35-44 | 49.9 | 38.2 | 43.8 |
| 45-54 | 37.3 | 26.0 | 31.5 |
| 55 and over | 28.3 | 23.6 | 25.7 |
| Total | 57.2 | 42.0 | 49.3 |



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Western Australian Indigenous rates of participation by role

Of the 20 800 Indigenous Western Australians aged 15 years and over who participated in sport and physical recreation activities in 2002, the majority (95.2 per cent) were involved as a player or a participant. The most common non-playing role was as a coach, instructor or teacher.⁵

Western Australian Indigenous rates of participation in 2002 by role⁶

| Role | Number of participants ('000) | Participation rate (%) |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| Player or participant | 19.8 | 50 |
| Coach, instructor or teacher | 3 | 7.6 |
| Referee, umpire or official | 2.7 | 6.8 |
| Committee member or administrator | 2.2 | 5.6 |
| Other capacity | 0.8 | 2 |
| Total participants | 20.8 | 52.5 |
| Did not participate | 18.8 | 47.5 |
| Total | 39.6 | 100 |

*Note that people can participate in more than one role.
Due to this, the different roles do not sum to the totals.

**Note that participation rates in the table above were calculated based on rounded figures. Due to this, there may be some discrepancy between these percentages and the published figures.

Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over living in remote areas were more likely to participate in a sport and recreation activity compared to those living in non-remote areas (52.1 per cent compared to 48.2 per cent). This was across all roles.⁷

Note that the term 'remote' indicates geographical areas within either the 'very remote' or 'remote Australia' categories of the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC). Non-remote areas are those that lie within the 'major cities of Australia', the 'inner regional Australia' and the 'outer regional Australia' categories.⁸

Access to sport and physical recreation opportunities

- Indigenous Western Australians aged 15 years and over who had access to a motor vehicle were more likely to participate in a sport and recreation activity than those without access (58.5 per cent compared with 45.7 per cent).
- Indigenous Western Australians aged 15 years and over who could easily get to the places needed were more likely to participate in a sport or recreation activity than those with difficulty (55.9 per cent compared with 45.6 per cent).
- In Australia, 85 per cent of people living in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with a population of 50 or more had access to sporting facilities in their community. This reflects the fact that nearly two thirds (65 per cent) of discrete Indigenous communities of this size had such facilities.
- The type of sporting facilities most commonly reported by Indigenous people living in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in 2001 were outdoor courts for games such as basketball, netball and tennis (83 per cent) and sports grounds (78 per cent).

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Exercise levels in Australia in 2001¹³

Indigenous Australians aged 18 years and over living in non-remote areas were more likely to be sedentary than non-Indigenous Australians (43 per cent compared with 30 per cent). Indigenous Australians had a lower rate of exercise overall (58 per cent compared with 69 per cent).

Exercise levels of Australians living in non-remote areas in 2001¹⁴

| Exercise level | Indigenous (%) | Non-Indigenous (%) |
|----------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Sedentary | 43 | 30 |
| Low | 30 | 39 |
| Moderate | 24 | 24 |
| High | 4* | 6 |
| Total | 100 | 100 |

*Estimate has a relative standard error of between 25 per cent and 50 per cent and should be used with caution.

- Indigenous Australians in non-remote areas were more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to report their exercise level as either sedentary or low (71 per cent compared to 68 per cent).¹⁵

Benefits of Indigenous participation in physical activity¹⁶

Physical activity is linked with positive health and social outcomes for Indigenous people. These include:

- Improved physical health;
- Improved mental health and psychological wellbeing;
- Increased self-esteem and self-efficacy;
- Crime prevention;
- Decreased substance use and abuse;
- Educational outcomes; and
- Increased social and community cohesion.

Barriers to Indigenous Participation in Physical Activity¹⁷

There are social, cultural and economic reasons why Indigenous people may not take part in physical activity. Some of the cultural barriers specific to Indigenous Australians include:

- Attitudes to personal health – an Indigenous person’s connections to family, ancestors, the wider community and land are more important to the choices they make about their lives, including health;
- The importance of relationships – exercising alone for personal benefit prevents a person from spending time with family and loved ones, which may be seen as shameful; and
- Modesty – some Indigenous Australians see bare limbs as shameful, which can restrict exercise options.

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Other common barriers to Indigenous participation in physical activity include:

- Limited access to sport and recreation facilities;
- Low incomes;
- Limited access to transport;
- Limited relevance of health promotion programs – the focus of health promotion programs is often on the individual benefits of exercise whereas focusing on staying healthy for the sake of family members may be more meaningful to Indigenous Australians;
- Failure of physical education programs in schools to accommodate Indigenous cultural practices and to include traditional games and dances; and
- Racism – feeling isolated and misunderstood may cause a student to withdraw from school activities, including sport.

Footnotes

- ¹ State Government of Victoria, Australia. (26/07/2005: date of retrieval). Better Health Channel. Aboriginal health – physical activity. <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au>
- ² Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2002). National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social survey. (No. 4714.0). Canberra, Australian Capital Territory: Author. p22.
- ³ Ibid. p28.
- ⁴ Ibid. pp24-26.
- ⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – aspects of sport and recreation. (unpublished).
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2002). National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social survey. op. cit. p38.
- ⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2001). National health survey: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander results, Australia. (No. 4715.0). Canberra, Australian Capital Territory: Author. p69.
- ⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – aspects of sport and recreation. (unpublished).
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2001). Housing and infrastructure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. (No. 4710.0). Canberra, Australian Capital Territory: Author. pp26-27.
- ¹² Ibid. pp26-27.
- ¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2001). National health survey: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander results, Australia. op. cit. p33.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. p33.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. p12.
- ¹⁶ Beneforti, M. and Cunningham, J. (2002). Investigating indicators for measuring the health and social impact of sport and recreation programs in Indigenous communities. Darwin, Northern Territory: Australian Sports Commission and Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health. pp8-12.
- ¹⁷ State Government of Victoria, Australia. op. cit.