

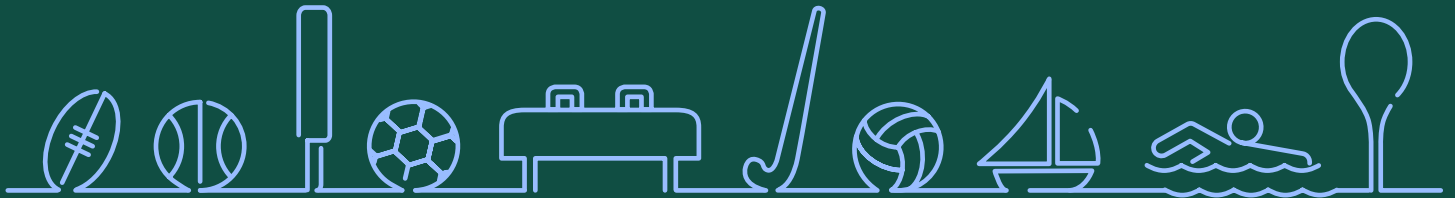
# Sport participation in Victoria 2015–2020 and the impact of COVID-19 on participation Research Summary

This summary outlines key findings and insights from the 6th year of the 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 2015–2020.



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

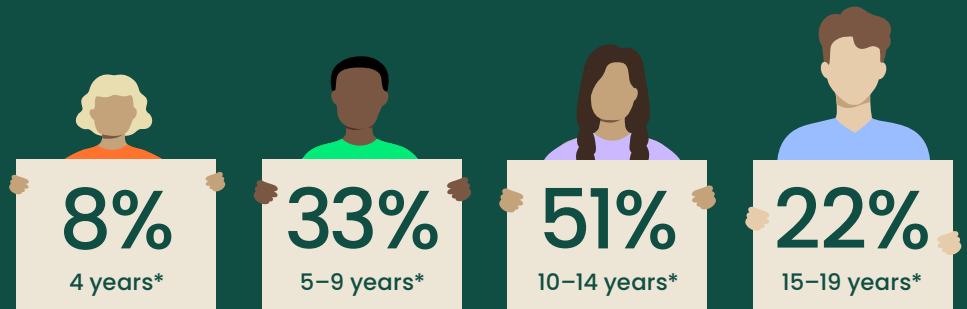
Figure 1: Sports included in the VicHealth and Sport and Recreation Victoria research



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

## Key findings at a glance: organised sport participation in Victoria, 2020

Over half of all sport participants (53%) are aged between 4-14 years. Sport participation is highest among children and adolescents aged 10-14 years and drops significantly during late adolescence.



\* % of age group participating in sport

Sport participation rate is higher for males than females.

13%  
Male



7%  
Female



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.

11%  
Regional  
Victoria

12%  
Regional  
- growth

10%  
Regional  
- other

9%  
Metropolitan  
Melbourne

7%  
Metropolitan  
- growth

10%  
Metropolitan  
- other

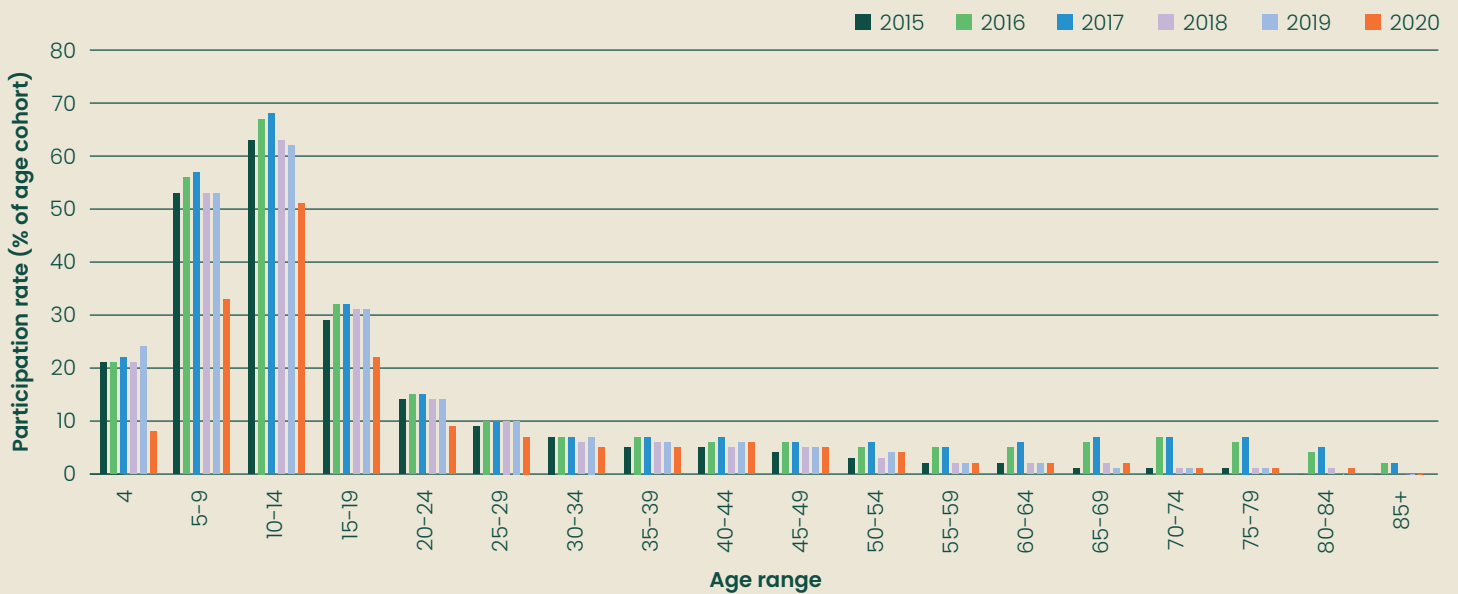




## The impact of COVID-19 on sport participation

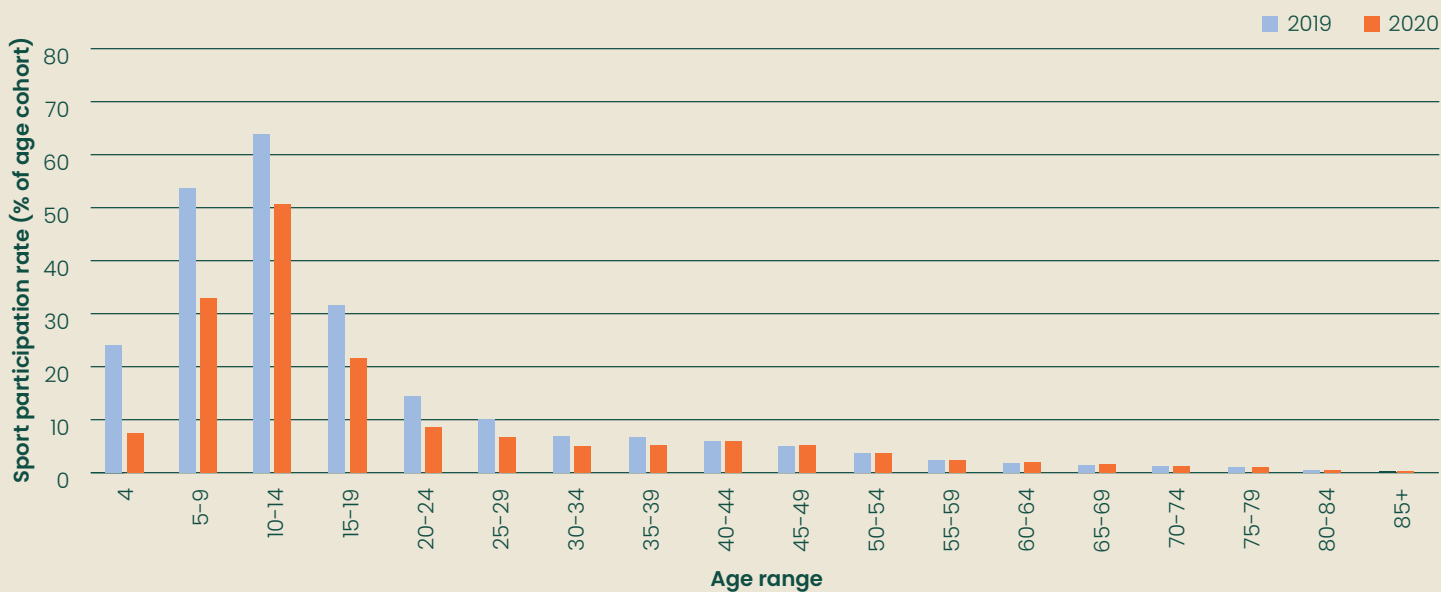
From 2015 to 2019 there was a substantial increase in participation but in 2019/2020 there was a 27% decrease in the number of sport participants which represents a decline of more than 231,000 participants.

**Figure 2. Overall Participation Rates: 2015 – 2020, Victoria: by age**

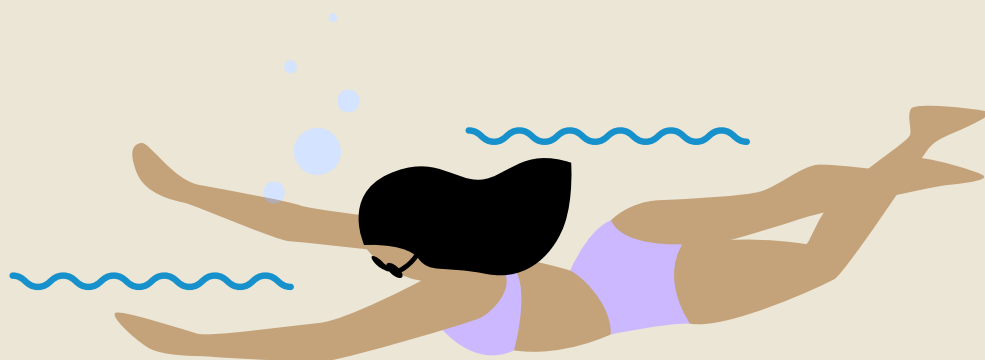
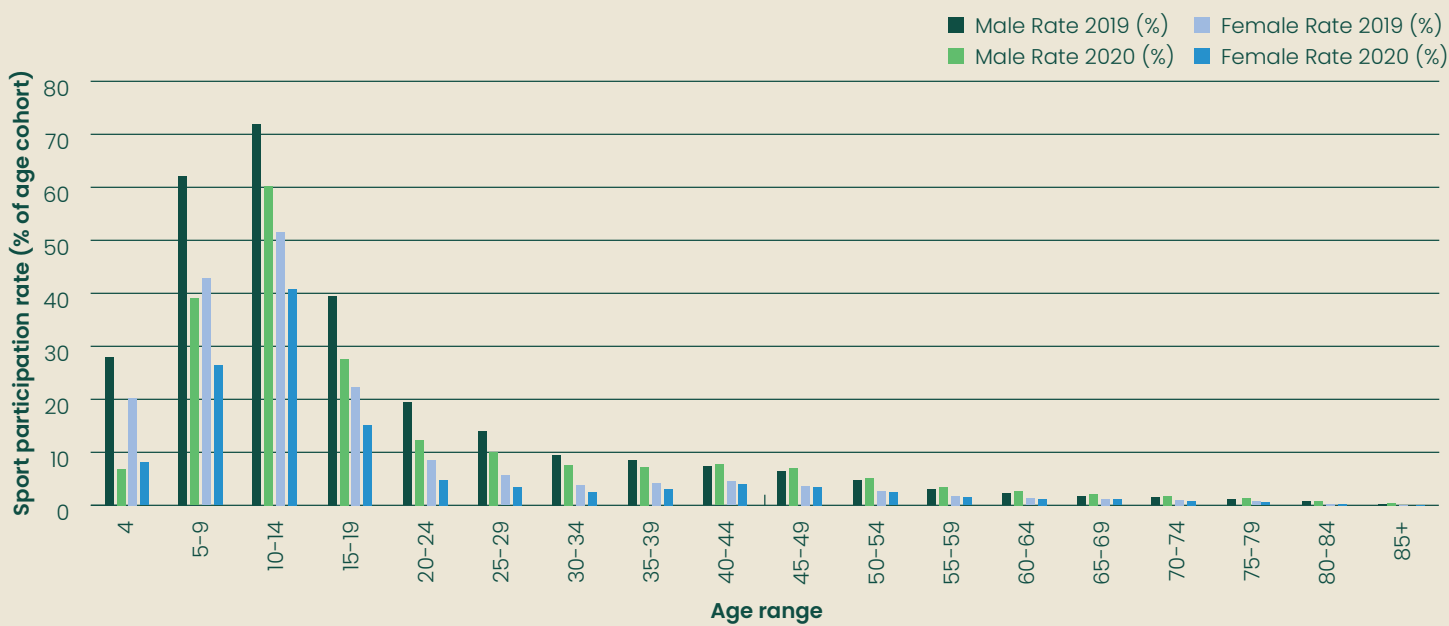


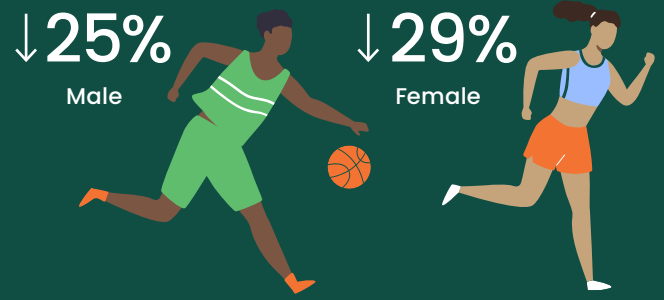
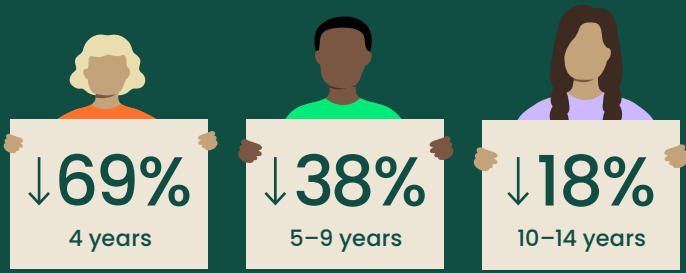
Participation in 2020 was considerably lower than all previous years from 2015. In 2020 there were 637,263 participants representing a participation rate of 9.7% (of the Victorian population), compared to 868,266 in 2019 at a rate of 13.4% and in 2015 there were 749,037 participants at a rate of 12.6%.

**Figure 3. Sport Participation Rates: 2019 – 2020, Victoria: by age**



**Figure 4. Sport Participation Rates: 2019 – 2020, Victoria: by sex and age**

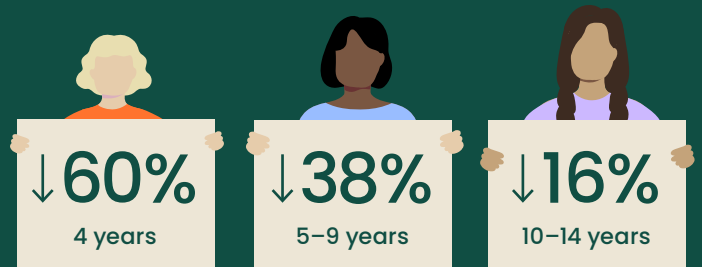
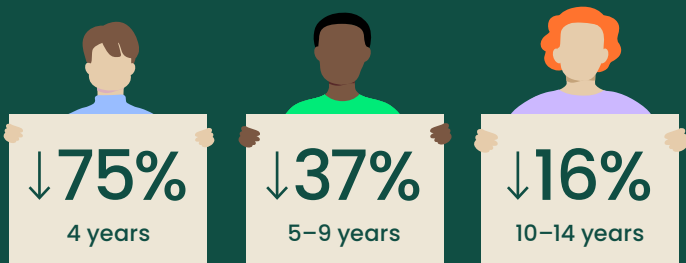




The largest decrease in participation was among the group of early sport adopters (ages 4-9 years).

Across age groups, 4-year-olds decreased by 69%, 5-9-year-olds by 38%, and 10-14-year-olds by 18%.

Between 2019 and 2020 overall participation rates decreased for both females and males. Proportionally to 2019 participation rates, overall females' participation decreased more than that of males, with females losing 29% of all participants compared to males 25%.



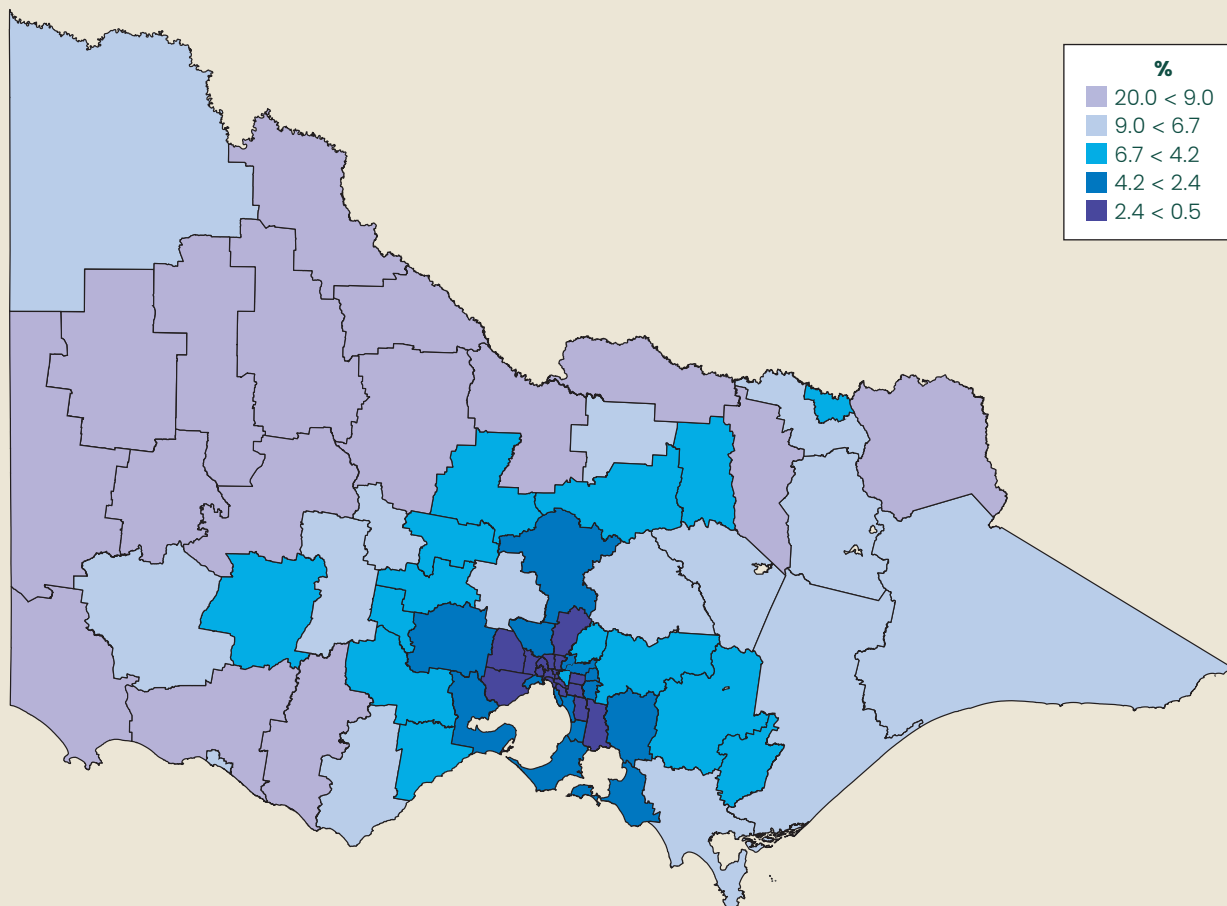
Males decrease in participation by age:  
4 years 75%, 5-9 years 37%, 10-14 years 16%

Females decrease in participation by age:  
4 years 60%, 5-9 38%, 10-14 years 16%

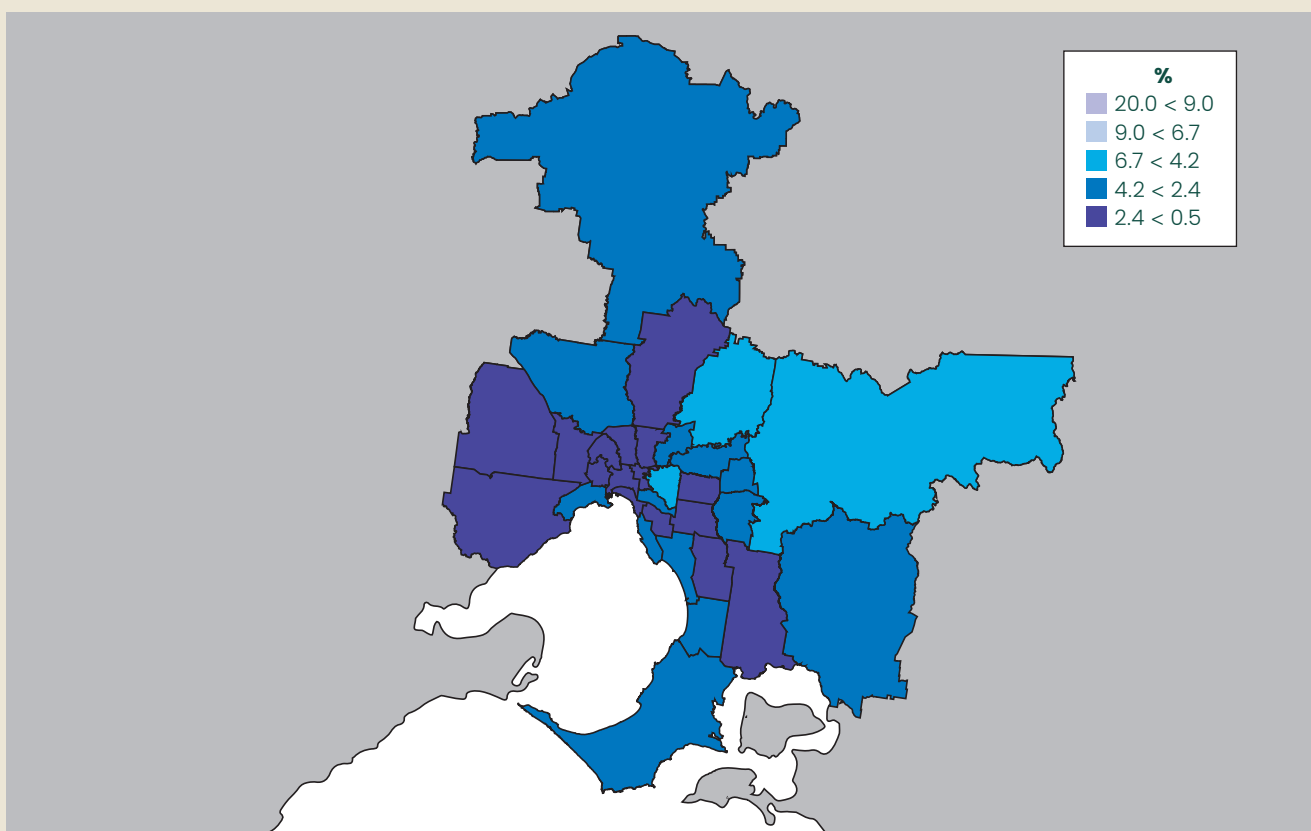
- Between 2019 and 2020, overall participation rates across the 10 sports decreased for all age groups between 4 and 39 years.
- For all children and youth aged 4-19, there was a decrease of 175,708 participants.
- There was a larger decrease in participation in regional Victoria than in Metropolitan Melbourne.
- The overall participation rate decreased from 13 to 10 percent of the Victorian population.

- Largest participation decreases seen in regional Victoria.
  - Participation in the Metropolitan – Growth region decreased by 26%, and in Metropolitan – other by 21%.
  - Participation in the Regional – Growth region decreased by 27%, and in Regional – other by 44%.
- Generally, there were greater decreases in the winter and team-based sports.

**Map 1. Decline in sport participation rates from 2019 to 2020, Victoria**



**Map 2. Decline in sport participation rates from 2019 to 2020, Metropolitan Melbourne**



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

| LGA name                     | Participation rate <sup>1</sup><br>2019 | Rank <sup>2</sup><br>2019 | Participation rate <sup>1</sup><br>2020 | Rank <sup>2</sup><br>2020 |
|------------------------------|---|---------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| <b>Metropolitan – growth</b> |   |                           |   |                           |
| Cardinia (S)                 | 13.62                                   | 1                         | 10.43                                   | 1                         |
| Casey (C)                    | 10.01                                   | 3                         | 7.83                                    | 3                         |
| Hume (C)                     | 9.75                                    | 4                         | 5.87                                    | 6                         |
| Melton (S)                   | 7.88                                    | 7                         | 5.69                                    | 7                         |
| Mitchell (S)                 | 12.97                                   | 2                         | 9.07                                    | 2                         |
| Whittlesea (C)               | 9.53                                    | 5                         | 7.24                                    | 4                         |
| Wyndham (C)                  | 9.30                                    | 6                         | 7.11                                    | 5                         |
| <b>Metropolitan – other</b>  |   |                           |   |                           |
| Banyule (C)                  | 16.29                                   | 6                         | 12.21                                   | 6                         |
| Bayside (C)                  | 22.14                                   | 2                         | 18.56                                   | 1                         |
| Boroondara (C)               | 18.05                                   | 3                         | 13.76                                   | 4                         |
| Brimbank (C)                 | 6.47                                    | 23                        | 4.56                                    | 24                        |
| Darebin (C)                  | 10.20                                   | 17                        | 7.84                                    | 20                        |
| Frankston (C)                | 14.83                                   | 9                         | 10.86                                   | 13                        |
| Glen Eira (C)                | 13.88                                   | 12                        | 12.30                                   | 5                         |
| Greater Dandenong (C)        | 5.35                                    | 25                        | 3.67                                    | 25                        |
| Hobsons Bay (C)              | 13.26                                   | 15                        | 10.20                                   | 15                        |
| Kingston (C)                 | 15.93                                   | 7                         | 11.76                                   | 8                         |
| Knox (C)                     | 14.41                                   | 10                        | 11.26                                   | 10                        |
| Manningham (C)               | 13.42                                   | 14                        | 10.05                                   | 16                        |
| Maribyrnong (C)              | 8.54                                    | 22                        | 6.87                                    | 22                        |
| Maroondah (C)                | 15.51                                   | 8                         | 11.79                                   | 7                         |
| Melbourne (C)                | 5.70                                    | 24                        | 5.24                                    | 23                        |
| Monash (C)                   | 9.60                                    | 19                        | 8.62                                    | 18                        |
| Moonee Valley (C)            | 13.46                                   | 13                        | 11.22                                   | 11                        |
| Moreland (C)                 | 9.10                                    | 21                        | 7.64                                    | 21                        |
| Mornington Peninsula (S)     | 17.79                                   | 4                         | 15.35                                   | 3                         |
| Nillumbik (S)                | 23.26                                   | 1                         | 16.53                                   | 2                         |
| Port Phillip (C)             | 9.54                                    | 20                        | 8.94                                    | 17                        |
| Stonnington (C)              | 14.21                                   | 11                        | 10.82                                   | 14                        |
| Whitehorse (C)               | 12.46                                   | 16                        | 11.02                                   | 12                        |
| Yarra (C)                    | 9.99                                    | 18                        | 8.53                                    | 19                        |
| Yarra Ranges (S)             | 16.50                                   | 5                         | 11.34                                   | 9                         |
| <b>Regional – growth</b>     |   |                           |   |                           |
| Ballarat (C)                 | 14.81                                   | 6                         | 10.00                                   | 7                         |
| Bass Coast (S)               | 15.61                                   | 4                         | 11.42                                   | 4                         |
| Baw Baw (S)                  | 16.79                                   | 3                         | 10.81                                   | 5                         |
| Greater Bendigo (C)          | 16.81                                   | 2                         | 12.45                                   | 2                         |
| Greater Geelong (C)          | 14.92                                   | 5                         | 11.64                                   | 3                         |
| Moorabool (S)                | 14.40                                   | 7                         | 10.30                                   | 6                         |
| Surf Coast (S)               | 24.14                                   | 1                         | 17.87                                   | 1                         |

| LGA name                | Participation rate <sup>1</sup><br>2019 | Rank <sup>2</sup><br>2019 | Participation rate <sup>1</sup><br>2020 | Rank <sup>2</sup><br>2020 |
|-------------------------|---|---------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| <b>Regional – other</b> |   |                           |   |                           |
| Alpine (S)              | 17.90                                   | 24                        | 10.63                                   | 14                        |
| Ararat (RC)             | 14.34                                   | 37                        | 7.86                                    | 34                        |
| Benalla (RC)            | 13.80                                   | 39                        | 7.52                                    | 36                        |
| Buloke (S)              | 31.04                                   | 1                         | 13.33                                   | 6                         |
| Campaspe (S)            | 19.07                                   | 17                        | 10.04                                   | 18                        |
| Central Goldfields (S)  | 18.01                                   | 22                        | 9.31                                    | 23                        |
| Colac Otway (S)         | 20.14                                   | 15                        | 13.18                                   | 7                         |
| Corangamite (S)         | 25.84                                   | 5                         | 15.17                                   | 4                         |
| East Gippsland (S)      | 14.41                                   | 36                        | 7.51                                    | 37                        |
| Gannawarra (S)          | 24.16                                   | 8                         | 10.24                                   | 16                        |
| Glenelg (S)             | 19.80                                   | 16                        | 10.18                                   | 17                        |
| Golden Plains (S)       | 16.60                                   | 30                        | 11.24                                   | 10                        |
| Greater Shepparton (C)  | 17.56                                   | 26                        | 9.55                                    | 21                        |
| Hepburn (S)             | 11.79                                   | 40                        | 7.13                                    | 38                        |
| Hindmarsh (S)           | 26.91                                   | 4                         | 6.91                                    | 39                        |
| Horsham (RC)            | 20.60                                   | 14                        | 10.96                                   | 12                        |
| Indigo (S)              | 16.79                                   | 29                        | 9.30                                    | 24                        |
| Latrobe (C)             | 15.69                                   | 32                        | 10.28                                   | 15                        |
| Loddon (S)              | 23.80                                   | 9                         | 8.88                                    | 29                        |
| Macedon Ranges (S)      | 18.60                                   | 20                        | 11.61                                   | 8                         |
| Mansfield (S)           | 17.79                                   | 25                        | 9.80                                    | 19                        |
| Mildura (RC)            | 15.86                                   | 31                        | 8.55                                    | 31                        |
| Moira (S)               | 18.81                                   | 18                        | 9.59                                    | 20                        |
| Mount Alexander (S)     | 14.74                                   | 35                        | 9.10                                    | 25                        |
| Moyne (S)               | 24.82                                   | 7                         | 15.44                                   | 3                         |
| Murrindindi (S)         | 15.23                                   | 34                        | 7.93                                    | 33                        |
| Northern Grampians (S)  | 18.62                                   | 19                        | 8.11                                    | 32                        |
| Pyrenees (S)            | 16.84                                   | 28                        | 9.05                                    | 26                        |
| Queenscliffe (B)        | 29.64                                   | 2                         | 20.64                                   | 1                         |
| South Gippsland (S)     | 21.42                                   | 11                        | 13.57                                   | 5                         |
| Southern Grampians (S)  | 25.73                                   | 6                         | 19.00                                   | 2                         |
| Strathbogie (S)         | 15.32                                   | 33                        | 8.89                                    | 28                        |
| Swan Hill (RC)          | 21.62                                   | 10                        | 9.35                                    | 22                        |
| Towong (S)              | 20.67                                   | 13                        | 8.98                                    | 27                        |
| Wangaratta (RC)         | 17.94                                   | 23                        | 8.79                                    | 30                        |
| Warrnambool (C)         | 17.47                                   | 27                        | 10.72                                   | 13                        |
| Wellington (S)          | 18.44                                   | 21                        | 11.11                                   | 11                        |
| West Wimmera (S)        | 20.92                                   | 12                        | 5.75                                    | 40                        |
| Wodonga (RC)            | 13.91                                   | 38                        | 7.82                                    | 35                        |
| Yarriambiack (S)        | 29.29                                   | 3                         | 11.42                                   | 9                         |

**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

The longitudinal nature of this research project with annual analysis and reporting has demonstrated the considerable changes in participation over recent years with a focus on changes resulting from the impact of COVID-19.

### Impact of COVID-19 on participation in sport

#### Decline in participation greater for females

From 2015–2019 there were increases in sport participation and especially for females. This growth was mainly in traditionally male-dominated sports. However, from 2019–2020 overall participation dropped by 27% and this was higher for females (29%) than it was for males (25%). Given that some individuals would have registered to play sport, particularly during Winter, but were not able to play, the decline in participation is likely to be even greater than the decline in registration.

During COVID-19 restrictions women were more impacted than males, by having competing demands of working from home, home schooling children, caring for young children and other family members as well as other home duties and commitments (Khan, Mamun et al. 2020). Boys have historically been provided greater opportunities than girls to play sport (Spaaij, Farquharson et al. 2015, English 2017). Further, women are likely to prioritise their children's participation in sport over their own. This is because many mothers feel guilty about themselves returning to play sport as they juggle with the expectations of motherhood (Hanlon, Taylor et al. 2020). These findings confirm the need for continued bespoke strategies enabling women and girls to participate in sport with a specific focus on retention of participants.

#### Decline in participation for children and youth

The largest decrease was among the early adopters aged 4–9 years. For all children and youth (aged 4–19 years) there was a loss of 175,708 participants in 2020 compared to 2019. Participation in sport is most popular for young children, which requires that early sport adopters are provided with adequate sports programs to develop their physical literacy so that they have the foundational motor skills but also the confidence and motivation to play sport (Westerbeek and Eime 2021). Victorian children have been severely impacted by COVID-19 related lockdowns of education and sport settings throughout 2019 and 2020. Sporting opportunities for young children should not be limited to competition formats, but also focus on the development of physical literacy (basic motor skills) delivered in a fun environment (Eime and Harvey 2018, Westerbeek and Eime 2021). There is a significant further decline during adolescence, which may be exacerbated due to missing a (or more) season/year(s) of sport.

#### Decline in participation in regional areas

The participation rate dropped from 18% in 2019 to only 10% in 2020 in established regional areas (Regional – other). For those 4 years of age, participation dropped by 70% and for those aged 5–9 it dropped by 54%. Sport participation is generally higher in regional Victoria than metropolitan Melbourne as community sport is embedded in regional culture as a means to congregate and develop and maintain social connections (Eime, Charity et al. 2021). Given that there are fewer other leisure-time activities available in regional and rural area compared to major cities, it is likely that the absence of sport has negatively affected regional residents more than metropolitan residents.

#### Decline in participation greatest for winter and team-based sports

Due to the Victorian COVID-19 restrictions being greatest in 2020 during the winter, winter sports were significantly more impacted by declines in participation than the summer sports. Further, when some COVID-19 restrictions related to participation in sport were lifted, the opportunities to play individual sports were available much sooner than the return to playing competitive team-based sports.





## Conclusion

The impact of COVID-19 enforced lockdowns on participation in sport has been severe, with Victoria most impacted of all States and Territories in Australia. The impact of COVID-19 on the sport sector have been significant, and quite different across sports and across participant demographics.

Beyond the recovery from pandemic lockdowns, there are a range of underpinning issues to consider when strategically planning for sport and we recommend a specific focus on recruiting and retaining sport participants. These include the level of the (decreasing) physical literacy of young children, the absence of sport during critical drop-out stage during adolescence, bringing participants back into sport, and equally important, bring back and retain volunteers, and to keep the cost of participation at affordable levels. Perhaps sport needs to consider changing preferences for competition and organised social play and in doing so, new business models. COVID-19 has not initiated these changes, it has merely accelerated them.

Participation in sport and especially team and club-based sport can play an important role in advancing physical, mental and social health and overall wellbeing, across the lifespan (Eime, Young et al. 2013, Eime, Young et al. 2013, Lindsay Smith, Banting et al. 2017). Various other opportunities to be physically active have gained popularity during the lockdowns. Does that mean that sport participation will not return to previous levels? We need to consider how to engage and re-engage many different population groups who are impacted differently.

Sport plays such an important part in the ways that individuals, families and communities engage in active lifestyles beyond merely being active. There is mounting evidence that the absence of participation in sport due to COVID-19 restrictions has significantly impacted the health and wellbeing of large cohorts of people, even when they had to opportunity to maintain their physical activity levels. Sport is a special type of leisure time physical activity – an activity with an X factor that delivers major bang for buck. That is why the Victorian sports sector needs to be supported to rebound, and return bigger and better, because the health of Victorians depends on it.

## About this research

The Sport Participation Research Project has involved the analysis of data on organised sport participation in 12 major sports annually since 2015. For 2020, two sports (golf and bowls) were unable to provide their participant data. Therefore, this report integrates and summarises sport participation across ten major sports and from 2015 to 2020. This project reports on participation levels (numbers of registered participants and participation rates per head of population) and participation trends, for the Victoria 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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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, Swimming Victoria, and Tennis Victoria.

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