

INFORMAL SPORT

As a health and social resource

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INFORMAL SPORT

THE BROADER IMPACTS OF PARTICIPATION

While club-based sport remains an important part of the fabric of our wider society, participation statistics continue to reinforce the idea that more and more people are choosing to participate in sport outside of club-based structures ([Cameron et al., 2022](#); Sport Australia, 2020). Our research illustrates how participation in informal sport is hugely beneficial to participants and their communities when it comes to delivering on social, health and economic outcomes.

The cost of inactivity is estimated to be in the hundreds of millions in Australia. The minimal costs of providing support for informal sport participation, combined with the documented benefits on mental and physical health, mean that more investment and better planning should be given to informal sports in Australia.

In this report, we summarise findings from phase two of an Australian Research Council ([ARC](#)) [Linkage project \(LP180100038\)](#), which aims to enhance our understanding of informal sport in ways that can inform future planning and provision across all tiers of government, sport and community stakeholders. The research is funded by the ARC in partnership with VicHealth, Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries (Western Australia), Centre for Multicultural Youth and Cricket Victoria.

TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) highlight that in Australia, 55% of adults do not meet the recommended daily amount of physical activity. According to the World Health Organisation's Global status report on physical activity (2022) 'the economic burden of physical inactivity is large' (p.vii). Indeed, the predicted cost of physical inactivity over the next ten years (2020-2030) will be around US \$27 billion annually if current physical activity levels are maintained.

We locate the value of informal sport within this context. Informal sport enables participants to engage in regular physical activity, in ways that can prospectively deliver significant health and economic benefits. As our previous [research report](#) discusses at length, informal sport participants face numerous barriers to play their sport informally — from having to navigate insurance requirements, to being unable to gain access to pitches and facilities, or being continually moved off facilities (Jeanes et al., 2021; Jeanes et al., 2022).

The challenges encountered by groups seeking to engage in informal sport participation are at odds with the urgent need to promote and support physical activity participation and reduce the potential economic burden of physical inactivity.





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[We need] better understanding of our game (football/soccer) from those who manage the public spaces where we play. We're not organised like most Aussie sport traditionally is — no subs, cost, registration, nothing at all. We just turn up and join in a game with each other, like people do on open spaces from Africa, to Europe, to the Americas, Asia, everywhere. In many interactions with council or park officials down the years, we've found them unable to comprehend how we are able to meet like this; [they think] that we must be official or organised. It often feels like we're doing something illicit, challenging or dangerously outside of Australian norms.

– Research participant





WHAT IS INFORMAL SPORT?

Unlike organised sport, which can usually be clearly defined with codes, rules and regulations, informal sports comprise of a wide range of less tangible activities, such as ocean swimming, cricket, casual basketball, Friday night soccer, cycling or running groups.

However, a consistent understanding of informal sport is important for clarity in communication amongst stakeholders and policy makers. Therefore, for this project, we have defined informal sport participants as individuals and groups who meet all the following three criteria:

- 1 are not committed members, either financially or to a schedule/competition, of a formal competitive sporting club, organisation or governing body;
- 2 self-organise their regular participation in sport outside of traditional structures; and
- 3 participate in activities recognisable as sports such as soccer, basketball, cricket, volleyball, swimming, running and cycling (or modified versions of these), rather than activities more typically associated with fitness or leisure such as aerobics, yoga or personal training.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The project methodology consists of three inter-related phases that are outlined on our [project website](#). The data discussed in this report was collected during phase two of the project using focus groups, interviews, a survey and observations using Systems for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities (SOPARC).

SOPARC

Developed by McKenzie and Cohen (2006), SOPARC was used to observe informal sports played at 16 locations across two states and four local government areas, including at official sporting areas and in residential park spaces. The method utilises momentary time sampling techniques to track individuals undertaking their informal sports activities and equating that activity to a ratio of energy expended to resting energy (referred to as MET). We then used the MET-hours of each person per day as a consequence of informal sport participation to form a measure for equating with health and economic outcomes, here referred to as “MET-hours gained”.

INTERVIEWS

The interviews were conducted with 39 informal group leaders, who organised and managed informal sport groups by providing opportunities for badminton, soccer, basketball, skate and BMX, tennis, volleyball and culturally specific sports such as Sangarag*.

* Sangarag is a sport specific to the Hazara community in Afghanistan where participants throw a small rock at a target placed into a small mound 20 metres away.





FOCUS GROUPS

A total of 62 informal sport participants were involved in the focus groups, of which 39 identified as men, 23 identified as women and 90% identified as non-Caucasian.

GROUP NUMBER	SPORT	CULTURAL HERITAGE	GENDER	MEAN AGE
Group 1	Soccer	Kenyan	Male	25-30
Group 2	Sangarag	Hazara	Male	35-40
Group 3	Cricket	Indian	Male	30-35
Group 4	Cricket	Indian	Male	30-35
Group 5	Soccer	Hazara	Male	20-25
Group 6	Badminton	South East Asian	Female	25-30
Group 7	Futsal	Mixed	Female	25-30
Group 8	Soccer	Hazara	Female	18-35
Group 9	Cricket	Indian	Male	25-30
Group 10	Soccer	Indian	Male	30-35
Group 11	Soccer	Turkish	Male	30-45
Group 12	Soccer	Turkish	Male	30-35

Table 1: Overview of the informal sporting groups involved in focus groups

SURVEY

An online survey was distributed via social media to capture the participation of informal and formal sport participants and to determine the levels of social connection, which was measured using the Social Connectedness Scale (Lee & Robbins, 1995). A total of 147 participants completed the survey, 58% of whom were male, 41% were female and 1% were non-identifying. Nearly a third (28%) identified as coming from an Australian cultural background, while 23% identified as European, 49% represented a range of cultural backgrounds and 16% did not answer. Ages of participants ranged from 18 to 67, with a mean age of 35.6 years.





KEY FINDINGS

The research conducted from 13,534 observations has provided the first detailed data set that attempts to systematically quantify informal sport participation:

- Overall, informal sports (including jogging, running, swimming, and skateboarding) represented 50.2% (Vic=46%, WA=53%) of the observations, while formal participation in sport represented 49.8% (Vic=54%, WA=47%).
- The most popular sporting activities observed were cricket (26%), soccer (16.5%) and basketball (17.7%).
- Informal sport contributed 7,884 MET-hours gained of physical activity in one week across all 16 sites. In the same period, formal sport contributed 5,191 MET-hours gained.
- Informal sport contributed 0.59–0.77 MET-hours gained of physical activity per day per person, compared to 0.48–0.88 MET-hours gained per day per person for formal sport.

THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF INFORMAL SPORT PARTICIPATION

Estimates from the USA suggest sedentary behaviour accounts for 2.4%–5% of annual healthcare costs and in 2013, the economic cost of inactivity in Australia was estimated to be equivalent to AUD \$805 million. A risk factor impact (RFI) model developed by Deakin Health Economics (Cadilhac et al., 2011) suggests that healthcare savings can be made of up to [\\$300 per person](#) when a formally sedentary person meets the national guidelines for physical activity.

The minimum recommendation for physical activity translates to 390 MET-hours per year for adults (Wu et al., 2011). For people who would otherwise be sedentary, every MET-hour gained is worth approximately \$1.30 for adults. At around 0.66 MET hours gained per day per person, the informal sport we observed was comparable to formal sport (0.68) and a range of physical activity interventions aimed at increasing sedentary behaviour, including individual behaviour change adaptations (0.5), enhancing access to physical activity spaces (0.62), increasing social support (0.65) and community physical activity campaigns (0.44) (Wu et al., 2011).

We observed approximately \$8,600 worth of informal sport physical activity in the equivalent of 1 week of limited observations across the 16 settings, compared to \$5,200 for formal sport*. For every 10,000 people involved, that equates to a health saving of over AUD 3.24 million every 12 months.

Note: this excludes benefits detailed in the qualitative focus group data such as improvements to mental health and social connection, which would further increase the economic value of informal sport for communities (Brown, Hoyer & Nicholson, 2014; Davies et al., 2021, Taylor et al., 2015).

*Assumptions: Every observation was considered an independent participant. Participants engaged in the observed activities for 60 minutes. If participants were not undertaking this activity they would otherwise be sedentary.





The costs of providing for informal sport participation are prospectively small. Informal sport uses pre-existing infrastructure and is largely self-organised in ways that ensure no or low cost for participants. However, it is important to note that the use of spaces and facilities for informal sport isn't typically recognised as a proportional use cost when such facilities serve a range of purposes. Informal sport participation invariably does not give rise to the need for infrastructure that is established or maintained to the regulatory standards stipulated for formal sport (including size and marking of grounds, level of lighting etc). At the same time, our data affirms the importance of quality infrastructure fit for the purpose of informal sport participation.

It is also important to note that our observation areas were limited in their capacity to capture informal sport participation such as bunch bicycle riding, mountain biking, jogging or group running and open water or lap swimming. While we did capture some running and swimming participants in our informal observations, the selected sites did not generally support these activities. Informal or unstructured forms of these sports have participation rates much higher than their formal counterparts and operate at high intensities (Cheesman & Jones, 2018; EY, 2021) making the potential economic contribution of informal sport to communities significantly higher than we report here.

THE SOCIAL AND HEALTH BENEFITS OF INFORMAL SPORT PARTICIPATION: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES

Informal sport offers flexible participation options that fit people's lifestyles, while still offering the perks many people seek from club-based sporting experience, such as fun, fitness, skill development and social connection.

Flexibility

Many participants were highly committed and regular participants, playing at least once a week and sometimes two or three times weekly. The survey data indicates that all participants spend at least an hour a week participating in their informal sport, with 53% of respondents participating for three hours and over. However, despite high levels of participation, the importance of the flexibility in commitment that informal participation afforded was emphasised.

“I want to play soccer but before this group, all that was open was a formal club and that involved training ... But I knew if I did not commit to training, I was letting people down but all I wanted to do was play soccer. Then this group started! It's informal — yes, [it's] the same time each week but if you can't make it, you can't, but if you do, and I try to as much as I can, I get my soccer game that I wanted but not with the commitment all the formal stuff requires.”

– **Women's Futsal Participant**

Connection to community

Informal groups were mainly comprised of participants from multicultural and migrant backgrounds, who spoke of their participation enabling them to feel connected to a wider community. This was particularly emphasised by participants in culturally specific groups, who said that informal sports enabled them to connect with other migrants with whom they shared similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Informal groups provided participants with the opportunity for (re)connection with culture, the opportunity to speak first languages and come together in meaningful ways. Informal sport provided an important space for fostering a sense of community and generating feelings of belonging of both a sporting and cultural community. Alongside feeling part of a community, participants discussed how informal groups had afforded them opportunities to extend their social networks and particularly develop new friendships.

“We've been running soccer games and football for two decades since I came to Australia. Just been playing informally in the past, that's how it started, and growing from one team to two teams and now there is over 17, 18, almost 18 teams that all are part of that structure. It was important for Afghans new here to have this place to come and meet other Afghans and we are still mostly Afghan people now, though we do have some South Sudanese join us.”

– **Men's Soccer Group Leader**

Improvements to mental health and wellbeing

Participants believed informal sport participation contributed positively to their physical and mental health, including supporting them to engage in high levels of physical activity and relieve stress. A core theme of the interviews was the positive impact participation had on mental health, through fostering social connections, providing a space for emotional support and allowing the opportunity to destress and disconnect from day-to-day pressures. These benefits were important to participants and a key driver of their ongoing participation.



“I think it's just that social connection, I think probably that's the most important thing. A lot of the women, some play, some have played, a lot of them haven't played, they just come and have a go. But they really enjoy meeting other women and bonding. I think that bonding aspect is really valuable. A lot of women come, they interact with one another, and yeah, some people have made new friends, they reconnect with some of their old friends who they, perhaps, haven't seen since primary school. So yeah, I think that feeling is what they come for, and that's something many wouldn't get in a structured environment.”

– Women's Soccer Group Leader

Accessing traditional cultural sports

Not all sports are offered in a formal setting in Australia. Sangarag is a cultural game unique to the Afghan Hazara community. Many of the participants of this group were forced migrants currently in precarious visa situations and were unsure as to whether they would be granted residency to remain in Australia. The leader discussed the significant negative impact of visa uncertainty on participant's mental health and the role of the Sangarag group in supporting participants to cope with these challenges.

“Too many people coming here. Everyone have a depression for someone is eight year, is no bridging visa or something, no family here, and everyone is sick. That's why they come and see each other [at Sangarag] and talk and they fresh and going home. This is really good ... especially like depression people, you know? It's big help. It's very, very big help ... mostly it's time passing ... People all day is working very hard work, construction is very hard job, but they coming here one hour, two-hour, three hours playing, after finished they all relax, very good, going home.”

– Men's Sangarag Group Leader

THE SOCIAL AND HEALTH BENEFITS OF INFORMAL SPORT PARTICIPATION: ANALYSING THE DATA

Existing literature has identified club-based sport as an important site for fostering social connection (Hoye, Nicholson & Brown, 2015). Social connection is associated with enhanced mental and physical health and greater access to networks and resources (Holt-Lunstad, 2021).

Our survey data indicated that people from this sample who play informal sport have comparative levels of social connection to people who play formal sport or a combination of informal and formal sport (see Table 2).

As indicated, many informal participants are from multicultural and migrant backgrounds. Sport and resettlement policies frequently focus on the value of club-based sport in fostering social connections for newly arrived and refugee communities (Spaaij et al., 2019). The current data suggests that informal sport can provide similar benefits and is more accessible than traditional sport settings.

	INFORMAL SPORT	FORMAL SPORT	COMBINATION
MODIFIED SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS SCALE*	M=18.37, (SD=4.0)	M=18.74, (SD=5.2)	M=20.1, (SD=4.5)

Table 2: Social connectedness in sporting forms

* 4 item Social Connectedness Scale (Hoye, et al., 2015; Lee & Robbins, 1995)





Informal groups were viewed by participants as being 'safe spaces' (Spaaij & Schlenker, 2014) where they felt welcomed, valued and accepted. Many of the participants discussed poor experiences in other forms of sport, ranging from feelings of not belonging through to experiencing overt and institutionalised racism. Informal sport was 'different' in this respect for participants, with informal groups providing a setting that was responsive to their culture and beliefs and where they did not feel like outsiders. The perception of safety experienced within informal settings was a critical aspect of how informal sport created other benefits for the participants.

In summary, the perspective of informal group participants and leaders provides a rich account of the value and importance of informal sport groups with their lives. The data illustrates the various appealing elements of informal sport including the flexibility it affords participants to engage around other commitments in their lives. The accounts of participants point to the capacity of informal participation to foster similar benefits to those identified in studies examining the value of club-based sport within communities, including social connection, community connection (Bailey, 2005) alongside well established mental and physical health benefits (Eime et al., 2013). Groups can also facilitate a sense of connection to culture and heritage that participants may not have access to in other spaces in their lives. Participant perspectives point to the importance of informal sport groups for both individuals and communities, with groups supporting a rich array of positive outcomes for participants.

IMPLICATIONS

This research has generated data that evidences and illustrates the scope and value of informal sport participation within local communities. In summary:

- The data reinforces the importance of recognising informal sport alongside other forms of sports participation within policy, funding and resources.
- Informal sport makes a valuable contribution to individual's health and wellbeing and wellbeing of communities. Informal participation is making considerable positive contribution to mental, physical, social and cultural health amongst participants.
- Informal sport contributes to considerable savings in health-related costs.
- The value of informal sport reflects many of the benefits associated with club-based participation. While the economic value of club-based sport has been reported ([Sport West, 2021](#)), if such data sets incorporated informal forms of participation, the attributable value of 'sport' to society would be substantially increased.
- Informal sport challenges us to think about different models and systems to support a breadth of sporting participation. It does not require the administration, funding and resources needed within club-based sport but is heavily reliant on groups having access to spaces to play and bottom up development of opportunities by individuals within communities. Beyond spaces and facilities, informal participation requires limited resourcing and participation is often (self-)sustained over many years. It is potentially a low investment for a substantial return.
- Informal sport, as a participation format, 'works' for participants. It supports participants to include physical activity amongst other activities and commitments in their lives. Informal groups present opportunities for individuals to access sporting formats that are adapted to suit their ability and needs and within a safe and welcoming environment. Informal sport thereby addresses many of the exclusionary mechanisms associated with other formats of sport.
- There is potential to extend access to these benefits if informal sport can be represented more effectively in sport and health policies and considered within facility planning and allocation.
- Leveraging the potential benefits of informal sport participation locally and nationally requires a shift in policy and planning across all levels of government, to recognise and invest in this growth sector of sport participation.





WHERE TO FROM HERE?

This research has generated data that extends insights into the nature, benefits, value, and significance of informal sport participation for individuals and communities. Informal sport participation is affirmed as a growth area that connects with the megatrends recently identified by the Australian Sports Commission (Cameron et al., 2022). These findings calls for appropriate recognition and targeted investment.

The final stages of the research project aim to advance this objective through the co-design of resources and guidance, with participants and stakeholders to assist local government and sporting associations with engaging with informal sport into the future.

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