



SPÓRT ÉIREANN  
SPORT IRELAND

Ipsos MRBI

# Irish Sports Monitor 2015 Annual Report



SPORT  
IRELAND



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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Participation in sport

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- 45% of the population participate regularly in sport. This equates to approximately 1.6 million people directly benefiting from the physical, psychological and social gains obtained from sport.
- Participation levels have declined for both genders. A larger decline among males results in a narrower gender gap in participation (7.1 percentage points, down from 9.3 percentage points in 2013).
- Improving economic conditions and having less free time as a result may partially explain the declines in participation in sport.
- While some sports participated in on an individual basis show increases in participation (for example, gym-based activities such as personal exercise and Pilates), the proportion participating in team-based sports has declined.
- Declines in sports participation are more pronounced among older individuals as well as those living in lower income households and lower socio-economic groups. This is leading to a widening social gradient.

## Broader physical activity

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- While the proportion that are highly active is slightly lower than in 2013, the change is not statistically significant. Encouragingly there is no increase in the numbers that are sedentary meaning that levels of activity are being maintained.
- The numbers engaged in walking for transport have increased slightly while recreational walking, and cycling for transport are both broadly unchanged since 2013.
- Walking remains the most popular physical activity among all aged over 35 years old, with more people participating in it than in all forms of sport combined. Increases in participation among those aged under 25 indicates further popularity of this activity among younger individuals.
- Similar to the narrowing gender divide in sports participation, there is also a narrowing in the gender divide that exists in cycling for transport.
- Increased walking for transport among those aged 25-44, those working and those living in Dublin is perhaps a reflection of increased levels of employment and economic activity.

## Social participation in sport

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- The numbers involved in a social form of sports participation are broadly unchanged since 2013. Approximately 1.6 million engage in a regular form of social participation, mainly through club membership.
- Lower levels of social engagement among males aged 20 to 44 and those who are working – again possibly due to increased time pressures due to higher levels of economic activity.
- Increased membership of gyms and other forms of exercise clubs.
- There has been a slight narrowing of the gender gap in terms of volunteering for sport, however notable differences remain in terms of the types of roles played.
- Females aged 35 to 44 are now more likely to volunteer for sport than males of the same age, however the only role where they are more likely than males to be involved in is in providing transport.

## Transitions into sport

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- Taking up and transitioning between sports is a process that occurs throughout the life course.
- Almost half (47%) of those taking up a sport as an adult are not already active in sport when taking up that activity.
- Individual activities such as exercise, running and cycling are all more likely to have been taken up in adulthood, while team-based activities are more likely to have been played since childhood.
- Just under a third taking up a sport did so through a local sports facility, with approximately a quarter taking up the sport through a sports club or organisation. Sports clubs are central to facilitating participation in both team-based and individual sports.
- Friends and family play the largest role in encouraging individuals to take up a sport. Among males the father plays a larger role, however among females both fathers and mothers play equal roles.

## Transitions out of sport

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- Over three-quarters (78%) were regular participants in sport at some stage, with almost a quarter (22%) of adults never having been involved in sport.
- A higher proportion of those who are inactive have previously played sport than never played. Increases in sports participation can come through encouraging individuals to recommence activity rather than start it for the first time.
- Extent of dropping out from team sports is much higher than for sports participated in on an individual basis.
- A variety of factors influence the decision to cease playing sport. Lifestyle factors are key within this, notably developing other interests and increased work or family pressures.

## 1.6 Parents and sport

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- Approximately three-quarters (74%) of parents participate in sport with their children on a weekly basis – the majority of which is on a casual basis outside of a club structure.
- Soccer, Gaelic football and swimming are the most common sports played with children. There is a notable difference between the genders in terms of sports such as swimming, with mothers much more likely to participate with their children.
- Those with sons are more likely to play sport with their children, and similarly those with sons are more likely than those with daughters to rate their child's sporting ability as being above average when compared with peers
- Those with sons are more likely to say that having children has a positive effect on their participation in sport. Mothers are more likely to say that they participate in more sport since having children.



## 2. INTRODUCTION

The Irish Sports Monitor (ISM) is a large scale population-based survey designed to measure physical and social participation in sport and other forms of exercise in Ireland. It provides the most robust measurement of sports participation in all its forms within Ireland.

The publication of results from this wave of the ISM comes at a time of increased focus on developing healthier lifestyles. Results from the first wave of the Healthy Ireland Survey in 2015 found that three in every five Irish people are either overweight or obese, with the key determinants coming through insufficient activity and poor dietary choices. International studies have also suggested that increasing levels of sedentary behaviour may in turn be increasing mortality risks to a similar extent as smoking or obesity. Increasing the levels and extent of involvement in sport is a crucial element in improving the health of the nation.

However, the role of sport is not limited to the important physical benefits it provides. It benefits Irish society at community and national levels. Community structures are maintained through our sports clubs, local and inter-county or province rivalries provide endless sporting entertainment and excitement and international success fosters national pride.

### 2.1 The Irish Sports Monitor

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Sport is defined in the Sport Ireland Act as including not only activities participated on a competitive basis, but also on a recreational basis.

*“All forms of physical activity which, through casual or regular participation aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being and at forming social relationships.”*

The definition of sport used in this study is similarly broad and includes not only popular competitive activities, but also others such as walking, running, dancing and gym activities, all of which deliver physical health benefits.

The survey asks respondents about their activity over the past seven days in terms of sport, recreational walking and walking or cycling for transport. In addition, they are also asked about membership of clubs, attendance at sporting events and any volunteering roles that they may be involved in. Interviews are spread over the course of a 12-month period in order to account for seasonal variations in sports participation.

Previous studies were conducted annually between 2007 and 2009 as well as in 2011 and 2013. This 2015 study involved interviews with 8,540 respondents aged 16+.<sup>1</sup>

The design of this wave of the ISM includes a change to the survey methodology in order to enhance the coverage of the population. Previous surveys were conducted by telephone using a random selection of landline telephone numbers and interviewing quotas to ensure a nationally representative sample of the Irish population. In 2015, the survey sample was expanded to include mobile telephone numbers in order to ensure that those in mobile-only households were adequately represented within the survey results.

This enhances the robustness of the data however it also means that data collected in 2015 may not be directly comparable with previous years of the survey which excluded those with no access to a landline telephone. As a key objective of the ISM is to identify trends in sports participation this comparability is crucial, and for this reason those with no access to a landline telephone have been excluded from much of the analysis of 2015 survey data.

The analysis presented in the initial three sections of this report focus on trends so exclude those with no access to a landline telephone (providing a resulting sample size of 5,893). The final three sections focus on standalone modules therefore analysis includes the full sample as trend analysis is not a feature of these modules.

Trend analysis will be conducted on the full survey sample when the 2017 survey is published and comparable analysis can be conducted.

As in previous years, a number of flexible modules were also conducted at the end of the survey to examine current relevant issues in further depth. A number of topics relating to specific aspects of sport were included throughout the current wave, analysis of three of which are included in this report:

- Transitions into sport
- Transitions out of sport
- Parents and children's sport

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<sup>1</sup> This survey is referred to as the 2015 study, although fieldwork was conducted over a 12 month period between May 2015 and April 2016.

## 3. PARTICIPATION IN SPORT

- 45% of the population participate regularly in sport. This equates to approximately 1.6 million people directly benefiting from the physical, psychological and social gains obtained from sport.
- Participation levels have declined for both genders. A larger decline among males results in a narrower gender gap in participation (7.1 percentage points, down from 9.3 percentage points in 2013).
- Improving economic conditions and having less free time as a result may partially explain the declines in participation in sport.
- While some sports participated in on an individual basis show increases in participation (for example, gym-based activities such as personal exercise and Pilates), the proportion participating in team-based sports has declined.
- Declines in sports participation are more pronounced among older individuals as well as those living in lower income households and lower socio-economic groups. This is leading to a widening social gradient.

### 3.1 Introduction

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The ISM purposively sets its definition of sport quite wide in order to measure participation in all types and across all realms in which people may participate. In asking survey respondents about their participation it asks them to consider all activities (excluding walking<sup>2</sup>) “undertaken for exercise, recreation or sport” including “personal exercise, such as swimming, dancing or jogging, as well as all forms of sporting activity, indoor or outdoor, whether undertaken in an organised setting or casually with family or friends”.

It does not set any minimum threshold on the level of exertion required in order for a particular activity to be considered a sport, however this is measured separately for each activity identified by each respondent.

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<sup>2</sup> Recreational walking and walking for transport are each measured separately in the survey and analysis of participation in these activities is provided elsewhere in this report

Through this encompassing definition of sport, the ISM facilitates robust analysis of sport in all its forms recognising the diverse nature of these activities. This definition has been consistent throughout all previous waves of the ISM providing a reliable understanding of the evolution of sport in Ireland in recent years, both in terms of overall participation and the nature of this participation.

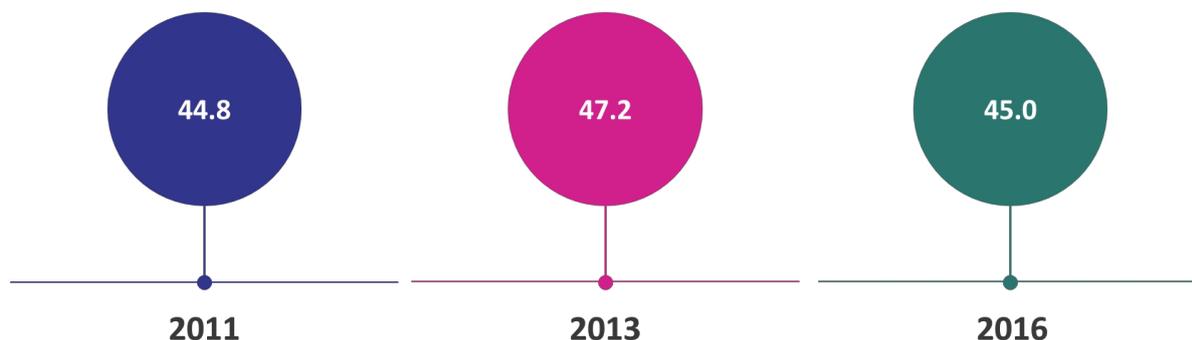
## 3.2 Overall participation

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The 2015 survey finds that 45% of the Irish population aged 15 and older regularly<sup>3</sup> participate in sport. This equates to approximately 1.6 million people benefitting from the positive physical, mental and social aspects of sport.

A comparison to previous waves of this survey indicates that participation levels are broadly unchanged since 2011 (44.8%), but have declined since the previous survey wave in 2013 (47.2%).

**Figure 3.1 Participation in sport (%)**



Discussion of previous survey findings has considered an association between participation in sport and the wider economic context. It has been suggested that a positive outcome of the poor economic conditions between 2007 and 2013 was that people had more time to invest in other activities, such as sport. This was coupled with an increased focus on health and wellbeing providing greater incentive for people to become more active. In turn this provided an ideal set of circumstances in which participation in sport grew steadily.

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<sup>3</sup> Defined as having participated in the previous 7 days

Since the previous survey was conducted, the economic situation has improved considerably. The level of unemployment, which stood at 13.5% at the midpoint of survey fieldwork in 2013, declined to 8.9% at the midpoint of survey fieldwork in this wave. It continued to fall throughout the fieldwork period, and was measured at 7.9% at the end of fieldwork in April 2016. As more people move from unemployment into employment, and many already in employment work longer hours than in previous years, this limits the level of free time available for other activities such as playing sport and other forms of physical activity.

Additionally, further explanation could come from the poor weather conditions recorded during survey fieldwork. Reports from Met Eireann note that the temperatures during the summer (June to August) and spring (March to May) were below their long term averages, and that Winter (December 2015 to February 2016) was wetter than normal (including six storms during that three-month period). As many sports are outdoor in nature, poor weather conditions may mean that some are less willing to participate, and similarly some sessions may be cancelled or facilities (e.g. golf courses) may be closed for periods of time.

While many factors determine the level of participation in sport, these two factors are noteworthy in terms of providing potential explanations of the slight decline in sports participation since the previous survey.

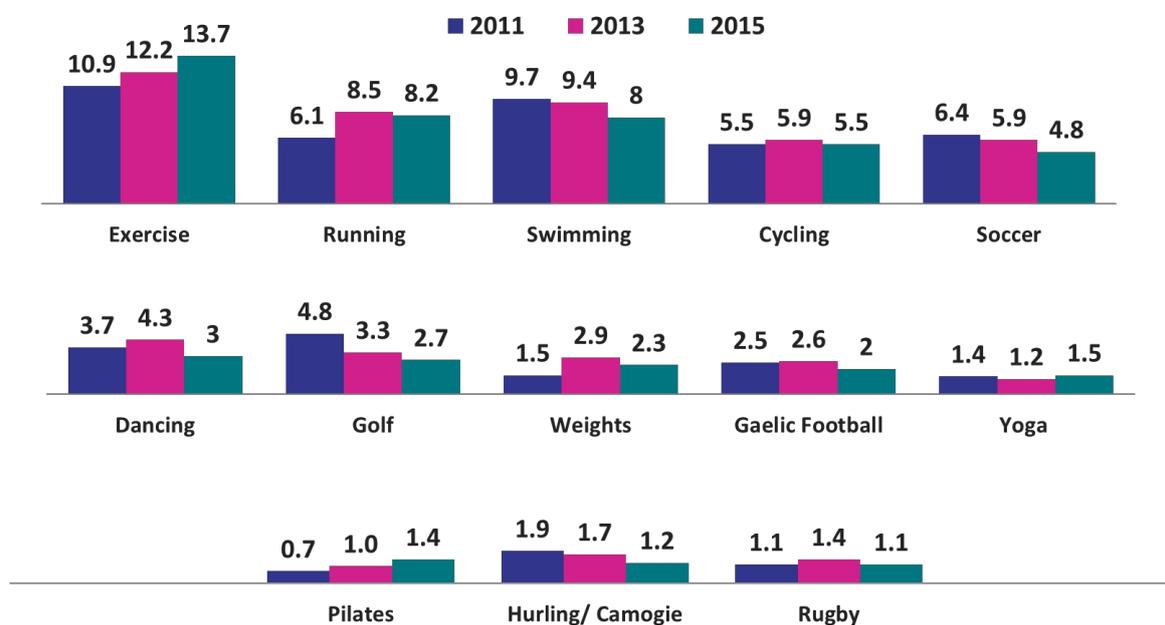
### 3.3 Most popular sports participated in

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In addition to measuring overall participation in sport, the ISM asks respondents a number of questions of up to three sports that they have participated in over the previous seven days. As in previous years, most of those participating in sport participated in one activity, although 15% participated in multiple activities (11% participating in two, and 4% participating in three or more). As with overall sports participation, the proportion participating in multiple activities is slightly lower than in 2013 when 19% participated in multiple activities. This may also be an outcome of more restricted free time due to increasing economic activity.

Figure 3.2 below shows the thirteen most popular forms of sporting activity in 2015. As in previous survey waves, personal exercise has the highest levels of regular participation, with 13.7% participating in this form of activity during the previous seven days. Personal exercise is a collection of different activities, most prominent of these are gym-based activities and classes. The increase since the previous survey wave is further to an increase between 2011 and 2013 and means that personal exercise is now further established as the most popular form of sporting activity.

**Figure 3.2 Most popular forms of sporting activity (%)**



Running is now the second most popular form of sporting activity, although similar numbers participate in swimming. Between 2011 and 2013 the numbers participating in running increased considerably, and this has been maintained since then. An expansion in the numbers of running events and initiatives such as parkrun support what is primarily an individual-based activity. Further discussion on this is provided later.

The decline in the proportion participating in swimming since the 2013 survey is notable, and as discussed later is focussed on specific demographic sub-groups (in particular those aged 25 to 34) that may be changing the type of activity participated in. However, other factors such as the cooler summer weather may have impacted on the numbers going swimming in open water. Further analysis of swimming indicates that the relative decline in outdoor swimming is higher than that for indoor swimming.

The proportion participating in soccer has also declined, and is symptomatic of the overall decline in younger males participating in sport – a group that perhaps are benefitting most from the economic recovery<sup>4</sup> and are more time-pressured due to increased work and family commitments. Similarly, it is reflective of a previously noted trend away from team-based activities perhaps due to the more flexible nature of individual activities.

<sup>4</sup> Between Q2 2014 and Q2 2016, the proportion of men in the labour force that were in employment increased by 6.3%, compared with a 3.7% increase in overall employment (CSO QNHS Q2 2016)

The proportion participating in golf declined between the 2011 and 2013 surveys, and has yet to recover since then. Much of the decline may be due to players ceasing golf club membership due to financial pressures, and this has yet to recover. Increased time pressures due to improving economic conditions may also be a factor restraining any increases in golf participation.

Dancing is a further activity seeing declines in participation. As outlined later, this comes from declines in activity among older individuals.

A further change is the increased popularity of Pilates. As discussed later, this is an activity primarily participated in by females, and increases in participation in Pilates are likely due to similar reasons as their general increases in activity.

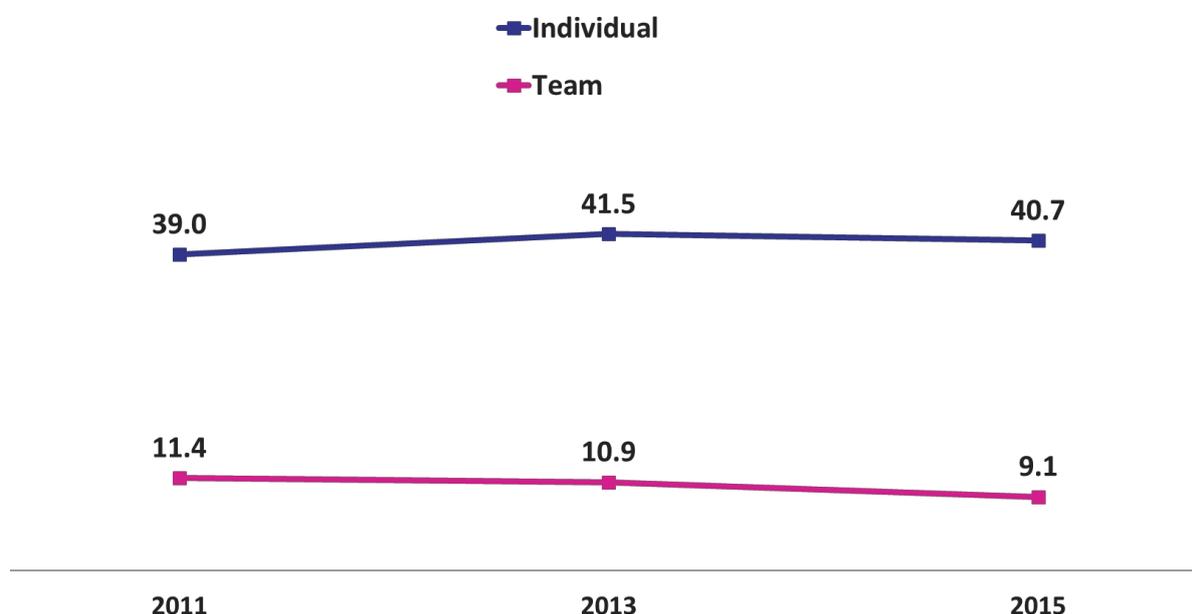
### 3.4 Individual and team sports

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Changes in the types of activities participated in are reflective of a longer term trend towards individualisation of sport that has been noted in previous reports of the ISM. It is noteworthy that only two of the ten most popular sports (soccer and Gaelic football) are those participated in a team context, whereas the others can be participated in alone, although may be participated in with others.

In total, 40.7% participated in a sport that is played on an individual basis with 9.1% participating in sport played on a team basis. A comparison to the 2013 survey shows that while the proportion participating in individual activities has remained broadly unchanged, the decline in overall activity levels is coming through team-based activities. The proportion participating in these types of activities has declined from 11.4% since 2011.

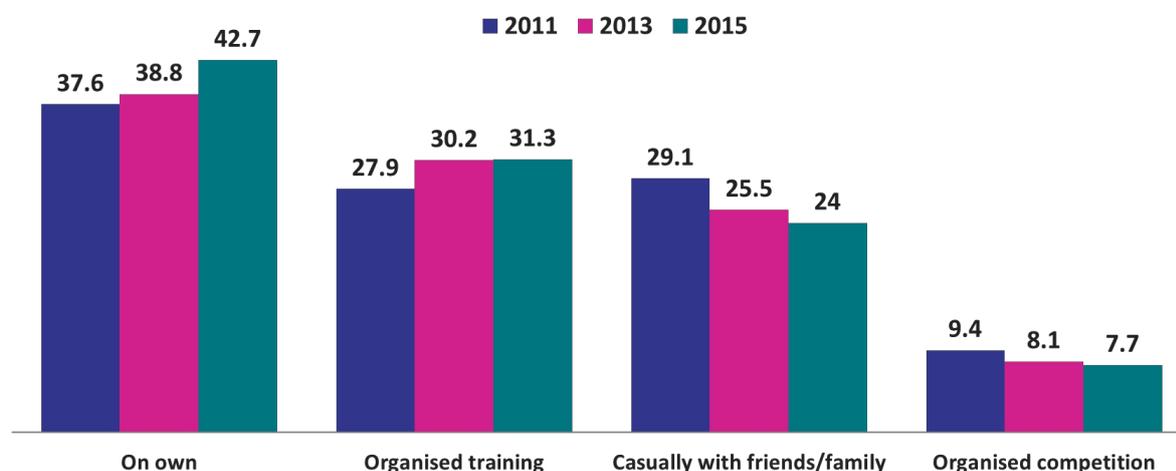
Figure 3.3 Participation in sport – Type of sport (%)



Detailed discussion on the factors behind this decline is provided in previous reports. These factors relate to the easier access to sports participated in an individual basis both for those taking up activity later in life, and also those migrating towards these types of sports from team-based activities. Further discussion on these dynamics is provided later in this report in the sections relating to Transitions into Sport and Transitions out of Sport.

In addition to identifying the activity participated in, the ISM also identifies the context in which it was participated. Previous waves of the ISM have shown a trend towards sport being played alone as particular types of activities, such as personal exercise, running and cycling, have become more popular. This trend continues in the 2015 monitor with over 4 in 10 (42.7%) of those participating in sport doing so alone. Similarly, there has been a decline in sports being participated through organised competition, as the sports growing in popularity are less likely to be done in a competitive context.

Figure 3.4 Context in which sport participated (%)



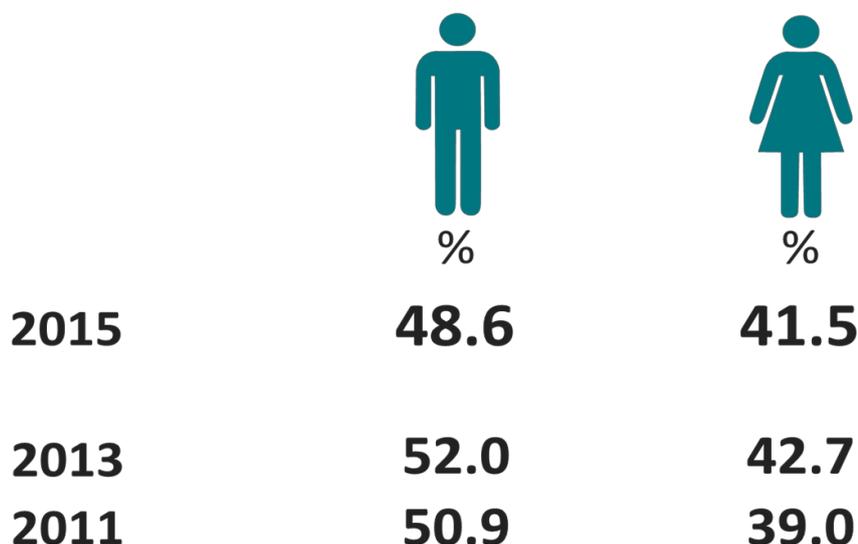
### 3.5 Age and gender differences in sports participation

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There are considerable differences in participation across different population groups, and this is the case both in terms of overall participation and the types of sports participated in.

Firstly, analysis by gender shows that, as has been the case throughout the research series, males are more likely to participate in sport than females. However, while the proportion of each gender participating in sport has declined since 2013, a more substantial decline among males leads to a narrowing of the gender gap in sports participation. Over the longer time period, since 2011, participation in sport among males has declined by 2.3%, but has increased by 2.5% among females. As a result, the gender gap has narrowed somewhat over the past five years, which is to be welcomed, although that it occurs in the context of declining male participation in sport is less positive.

**Figure 3.5 Participation in sport by gender (%)**



The types of activities that each gender participates in can differ strongly. While exercise, running and swimming are the three most popular activities among both genders, some activities that are popular among one gender are not among the other. For example, while yoga and Pilates are the fifth and sixth most popular activities among females, they are the fifteenth and sixteenth most popular among males. In contrast, team based sports such as soccer, Gaelic football, rugby and hurling are much more popular among males than females.

Some of the changes in participation at an overall level are determined by changes among one of the genders. Two of the most notable changes in participation – declines in soccer and dancing – have come predominantly from one gender. The proportion of men participating in soccer has declined from 10.6% to 8.8%, and the proportion of women participating in dancing has declined from 6.3% to 4.6% (although the proportion of men participating in dancing has also declined – from 2.2% to 1.3%). The changes in participation levels for exercise and swimming exist within both genders.

**Figure 3.6 Type of activity by gender (%)**

	All		Males		Females	
	2013	2015	2013	2015	2013	2015
Exercise	12.2	13.7	11.4	13.4	12.9	13.9
Running	8.6	8.2	9.7	8.9	7.4	7.5
Swimming	9.4	8.0	8.8	7.6	10.0	8.5
Cycling	5.9	5.5	8.3	7.3	3.5	3.8
Soccer	5.9	4.8	10.6	8.8	1.3	1.0
Golf	3.3	2.7	5.4	4.3	1.3	1.2
Dancing	4.3	3	2.2	1.3	6.3	4.6
Weights	2.9	2.3	4.1	2.7	1.8	1.9
Gaelic Football	2.6	2.0	3.9	3.4	1.3	0.7
Yoga	1.2	1.5	0.4	0.6	2.1	2.4

Other activities that show no notable change in participation at an overall level have changed for one of the genders. For example, while the proportion of females participating in running is unchanged, the proportion of men who participate has declined from 9.7% to 8.9%.

As with gender, sports participation differs considerably by age. At an overall level, participation is highest among those aged 16 to 19 (80.3%), declining to 25.7% among those aged 65 and older. Similarly, the nature of the participation changes considerably with a drift away from team-based activities as individuals get older. While the proportion participating in activities typically participated in on an individual basis also declines, the extent of this decline is not as severe as with team-based ones.

Figure 3.7 Participation in sport by age (%)

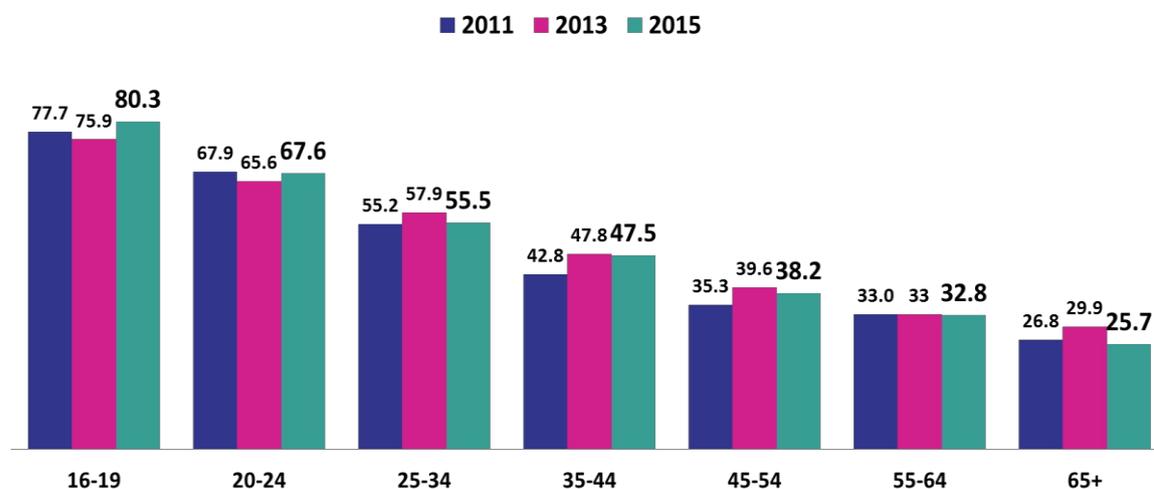
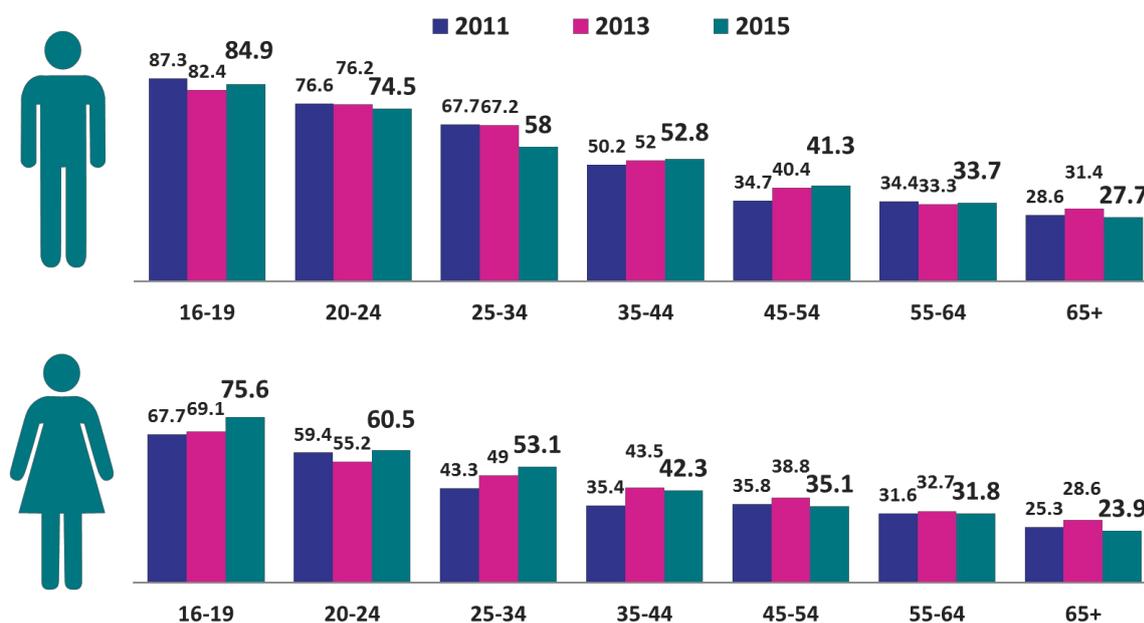


Figure 3.8 Participation in sport by gender/age (%)



Analysis of sports participation by age within gender identifies notable changes in participation. While at an overall level, sports participation among those aged under 25 has increased slightly, this increase is coming mainly from females. Furthermore, while there has been an increase in participation among females aged 25 to 34, males of the same age are less likely to participate in sport than in 2013.

Additionally, the nature of participation among young males and young females has also changed. Participation levels in swimming among females aged 25 to 34 have declined, with participation levels among males also declining within running, soccer and weights. In contrast female participation in weights and Pilates has increased. In terms of the latter, the increase is primarily among females aged 25 to 34, with participation levels among those younger than this unchanged.

Among younger individuals (aged under 25), participation levels in personal exercise have increased for both genders. This has the effect of offsetting the decline in participation in team based activities among younger males, while increasing the overall participation levels for younger females.

What this potentially suggests is that there may be a shift towards primarily indoor, gym/class based activities among younger people, and among young females in particular. This may be reflective of increasing availability and easier access to these classes, and similarly poor weather conditions may have been more conducive to encouraging indoor activity over outdoor ones.

At the older end of the age spectrum, participation among those aged 65 and older is slightly lower than in 2013 (a decline from 29.9% to 25.7%). Participation levels for both genders are lower than in 2013 (although the extent of the change at individual gender level is not statistically significant). Declines in participation in golf (males) and dancing (both genders) are key within the declines in overall participation. While poor weather conditions may have influenced a decline in participation in golf, the factors behind the decline in dancing are less clear.

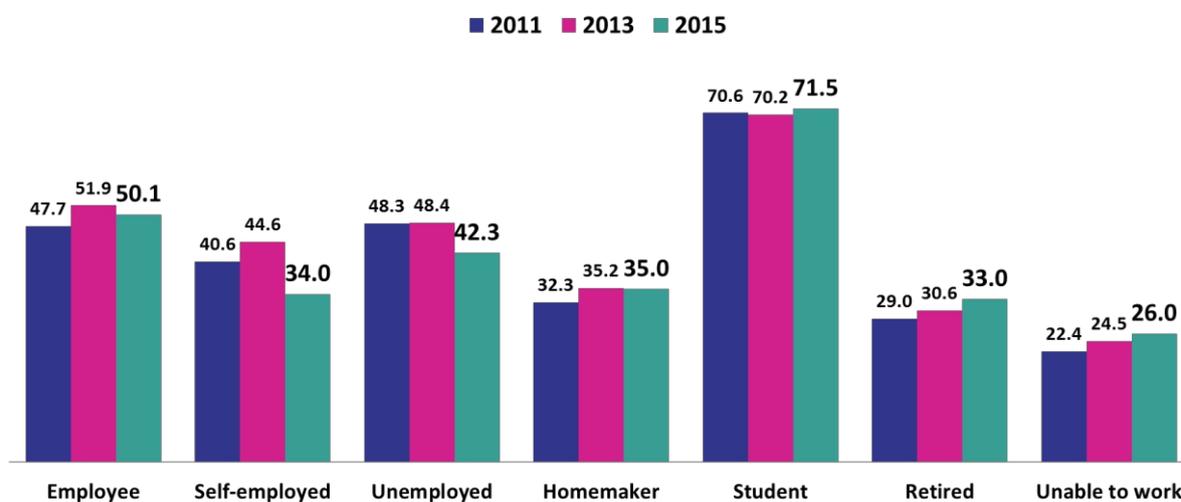
### 3.6 Social differences in sports participation

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Previous ISMs have outlined the considerable differences across a variety of social dimensions in terms of both the level and nature of sports participation. While these differences remain, it is the extent of change across various factors that is of most interest in explaining changes in participation.

One of the potential explanations for the decline in sports participation is the improved economic context since the previous wave of the ISM, and an analysis of sports participation by an individual's working status should be indicative of any trends in this regard. As shown in figure 3.9 the proportion participating in sport has declined among those in paid employment, and this decline is particularly noticeable among those who are self-employed. The nature of this category means that this group are more vulnerable to economic changes, including time pressures that may limit participation in sport.

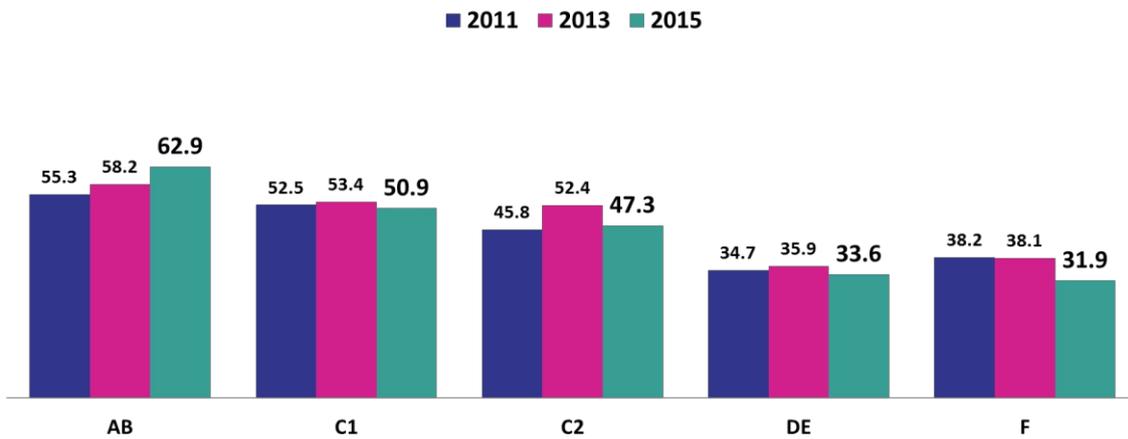
**Figure 3.9 Participation in sport by working status (%)**



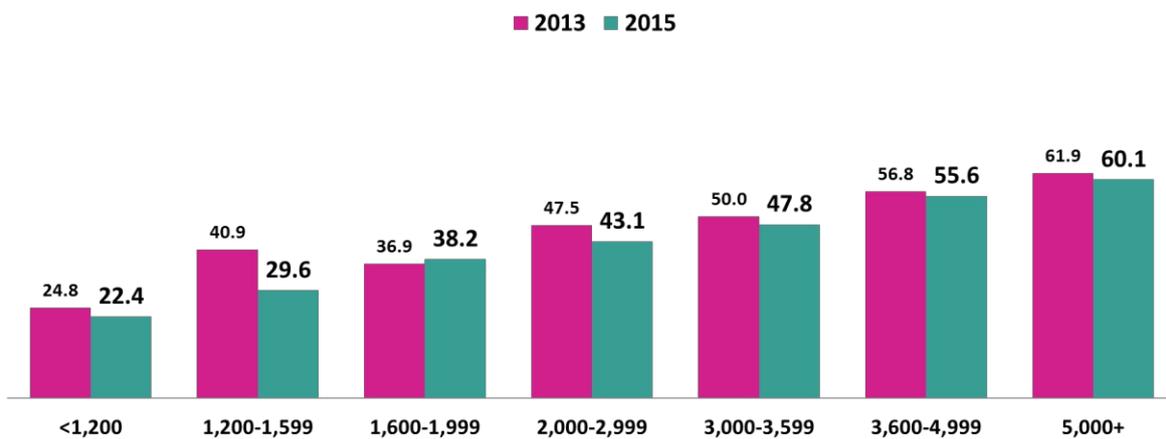
Similarly, there has been a decline in participation among those who are unemployed. With declines in the overall level of unemployment (from 13.5% to 8.9% between the midpoints of the 2013 and 2015 studies), the nature of this category can also change so the ability to draw direct comparisons may be limited.

Social class and income have both been shown in previous waves of the ISM to correlate strongly with sports participation. Those in higher social class groups and with higher income levels (although both are correlated with one another) are typically more likely to participate in sport. While this remains the case in 2015, some of the changes in participation indicate a widening of a social gradient in this respect. As shown in figures 3.10 and 3.11, those in lower income groups and lower social class groups are less likely to participate in sport than in 2013, with those in the highest AB social class more likely to do so. As a key priority is to narrow this social gradient, this apparent widening is of particular concern.

**Figure 3.10 Participation in sport by social class (%)**



**Figure 3.11 Participation in sport by income (%)**



Analysis of specific activities undertaken by those in different income and social class groups shows increases in personal exercise among those in the highest income and social class groups. No specific activities are particularly notable in terms of the decline among those in the lower income and social class groups.

A final social dimension that typically shows a variance in sporting participation is educational attainment. This remains the case in 2015 – those with higher levels of educational attainment are more likely to participate in sport.

**Figure 3.12 Participation in sport by education<sup>5</sup> (%)**



As with other physical and social dimensions, sports participation differs in terms of whether or not an individual has a disability. The ISM measures disability in two ways – firstly through a respondent indicating that they have “a long-term illness, health problem or disability that limits daily activities or work”, and secondly that this illness, health problem or disability prevents them from taking part in sport and exercise.

<sup>5</sup> Due to differences in question wording, data for educational attainment in the 2011 survey are not comparable with 2013 and 2016

Figure 3.13 below shows that those with a long-term illness, health problem or disability (20% of the survey sample) are less likely to participate in sport than those who do not have a long-term illness, health problem or disability. Just under a third (31.6%) of those with a long-term illness, health problem or disability participate regularly in sport, and just over a quarter (26.7%) of those who indicate that this condition prevents them from participating in sport actually do participate.

**Figure 3.13 Participation in sport by disability (%)**

% Participating in Sport	Total	Long term illness / Disability	Long term illness / disability preventing sports participation
<b>% participating in sports - Total</b>	<b>45.0</b>	<b>31.6</b>	<b>26.7</b>
Exercise	13.7	9.4	7.8
Running	8.2	2.0	1.2
Swimming	8.0	8.4	8.4
Cycling	5.5	3.7	3.4
Soccer	4.8	3.6	2.1
Dancing	3.0	3.5	2.2
Golf	2.7	1.7	0.9
Weights	2.3	2.4	2.2
Gaelic Football	2.0	0.7	0.1
Yoga	1.5	1.7	1.6
Pilates	1.4	1.3	1.3
Hurling / Camogie	1.2	0.2	0.2
Rugby	1.1	0.4	0.2

The types of sports participated in by those with a long-term illness, health problem or disability are also different. Those with a long-term illness, health problem or disability are less likely to participate in most types of sport, however there are a few exceptions where participation levels are the same as the rest of the population – swimming (8.4% of those with a long-term illness, health problem or disability), dancing (3.5%), weights (2.4%), yoga (1.7%) and Pilates (1.3%).



## 4. BROADER PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

- While the proportion that are highly active is slightly lower than in 2013, the change is not statistically significant. Encouragingly there is no increase in the numbers that are sedentary meaning that levels of activity are being maintained.
- The numbers engaged in walking for transport have increased slightly while recreational walking, and cycling for transport are both broadly unchanged since 2013.
- Walking remains the most popular physical activity among all aged over 35 years old, with more people participating in it than in all forms of sport combined. Increases in participation among those aged under 25 indicates further popularity of this activity among younger individuals.
- Similar to the narrowing gender divide in sports participation, there is also a narrowing in the gender divide that exists in cycling for transport.
- Increased walking for transport among those aged 25-44, those working and those living in Dublin is perhaps a reflection of increased levels of employment and economic activity.

### 4.1 Introduction

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While the core objective of the ISM is to provide a reliable and robust measurement of sports participation in Ireland it also measures activity in other contexts – recreational walking, walking for transport and cycling for transport. In doing so it is able to provide a wide perspective on physical activity, as well as estimates on the levels of physical activity undertaken outside of sport.

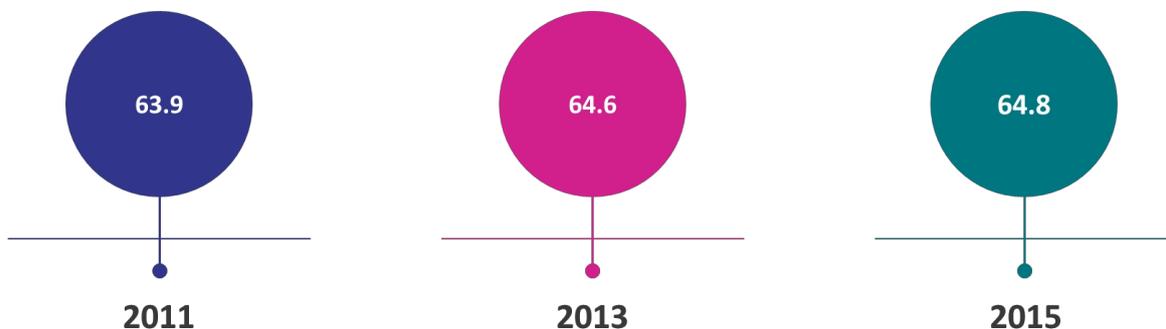
Previous waves of the ISM have demonstrated the high levels of recreational walking in particular, and the importance of this form of activity in maintaining overall levels of physical activity.

### 4.2 Recreational walking

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Recreational walking provides an accessible, low impact form of exercise which requires no facilities and is suitable to all ages regardless of fitness levels. While in itself it provides significant health benefits, it has also been shown as acting as a gateway to higher intensity sporting activities and increasing levels of physical activity generally.

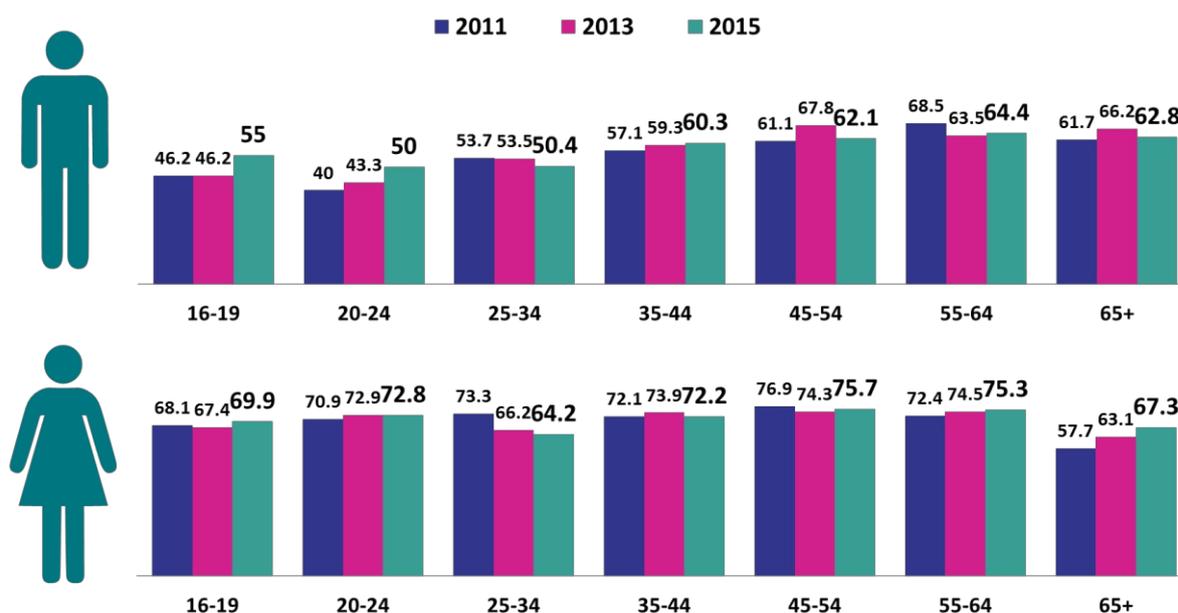
**Figure 4.1 Participation in recreational walking (%)**



The proportion who walked for recreational purposes is unchanged since the previous wave, with 64.8% doing so in 2015. This form of activity is by far the most popular form of physical activity, and attracts almost five times as many participants as the most popular sporting activity (personal exercise).

While levels of participation in walking differ across the population, it remains the most popular type of activity across all gender and age groups. Furthermore, among all age groups over 35 years old more people participate in walking than all forms of sport combined. This highlights the importance of this activity in maintaining activity levels generally, particularly among older age groups.

**Figure 4.2 Participation in recreational walking by age/gender (%)**

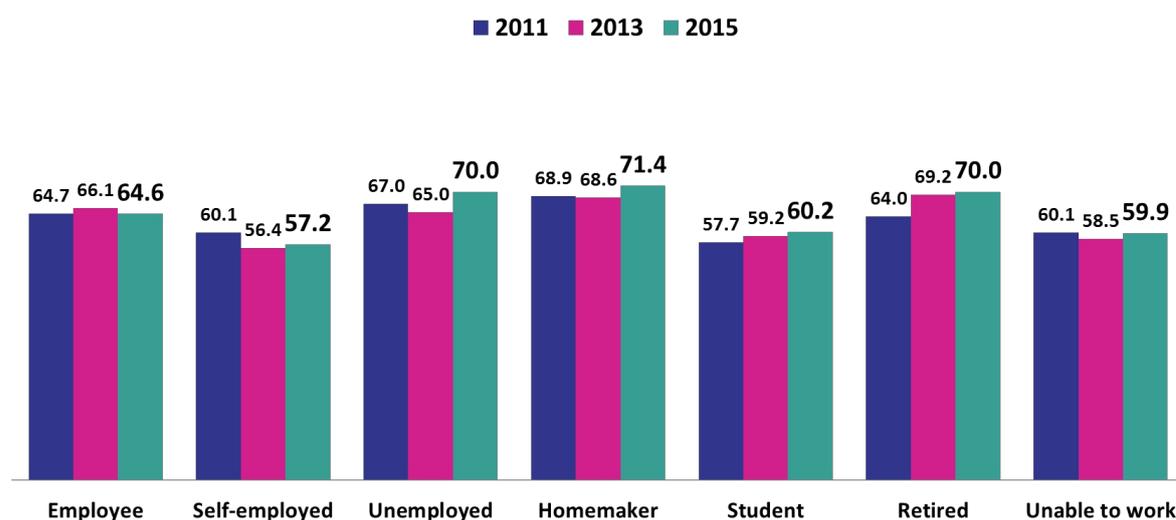


While the proportion engaged in walking is unchanged at an overall level, this disguises underlying changes within specific groups. There has been a notable increase in the proportion of males aged under 25 that participate in walking, and while they remain less likely to participate in this activity than females of the same age, the gap between the genders has narrowed considerably. However, at the other end of the age spectrum older men are slightly less likely to participate in walking than in 2013. Among females walking is broadly unchanged across all age groups since 2013.

The increase in walking among younger men is welcomed given the decline in sports participation among this group. It suggests that while their participation in sport may be lower, it is being somewhat compensated for by increases in other forms of activity – albeit potentially at a lower intensity.

Analysis of walking by employment status also indicates some underlying changes, with a slight decline in the proportion that are working who engage in this activity, with increases in the proportion of unemployed and homemakers who do so. While the changes are marginal when margin of error is considered, it is notable in comparison to the trend in participation in sport which has decreased among the unemployed group. It is unclear whether this is reflective of the changing nature of the unemployed group over time (as many return to work), or indicative of changing patterns in participation.

**Figure 4.3 Participation in recreational walking by working status (%)**



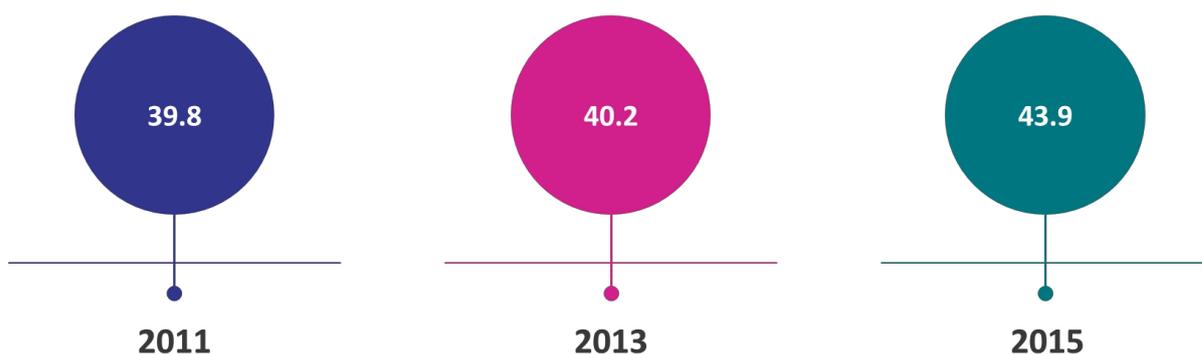
### 4.3 Walking for transport

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Data collected on walking for transport is more limited than what is collected for participation in sport and recreational walking, and simply asks about “regular walks of over 15 minutes for transport”, rather than specifically about the past seven days. In conjunction with the similar measurement on cycling for transport, it provides an indicator of active forms of travel.

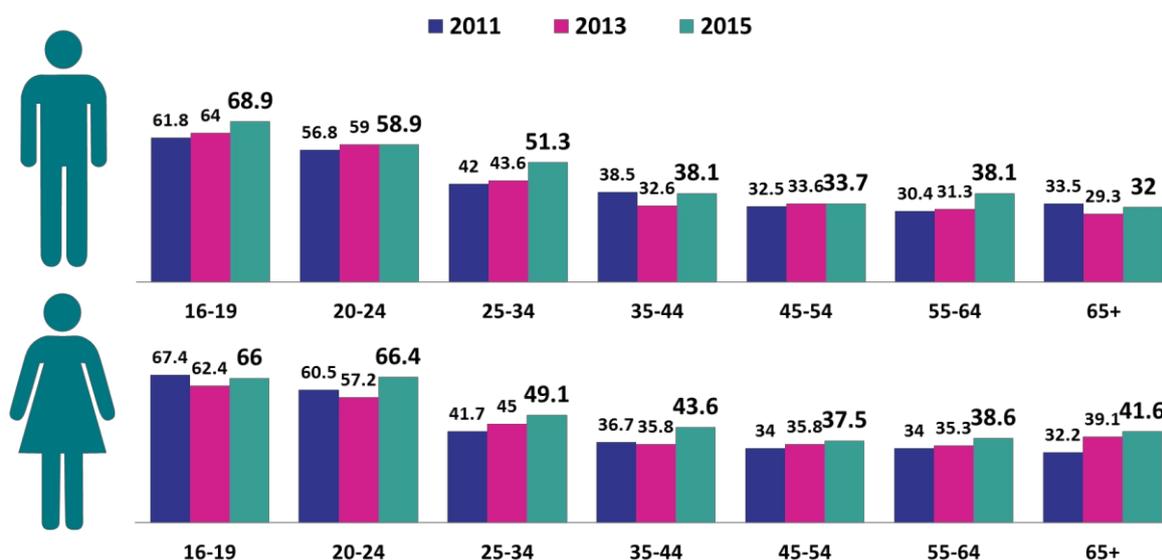
In the 2015 survey, 43.9% indicated that they regularly walk for transport. This suggests an increase since the 2013 survey when 40.2% walked for transport. As the numbers travelling to work have increased since the 2013 survey, it naturally follows that more may also walk for transport. Analysis of the data indicates that much of the increase in walking for transport is coming from economically active groups – most notably those in employment, those aged 25 to 44 and those living in Dublin.

**Figure 4.4 Participation in walking for transport (%)**



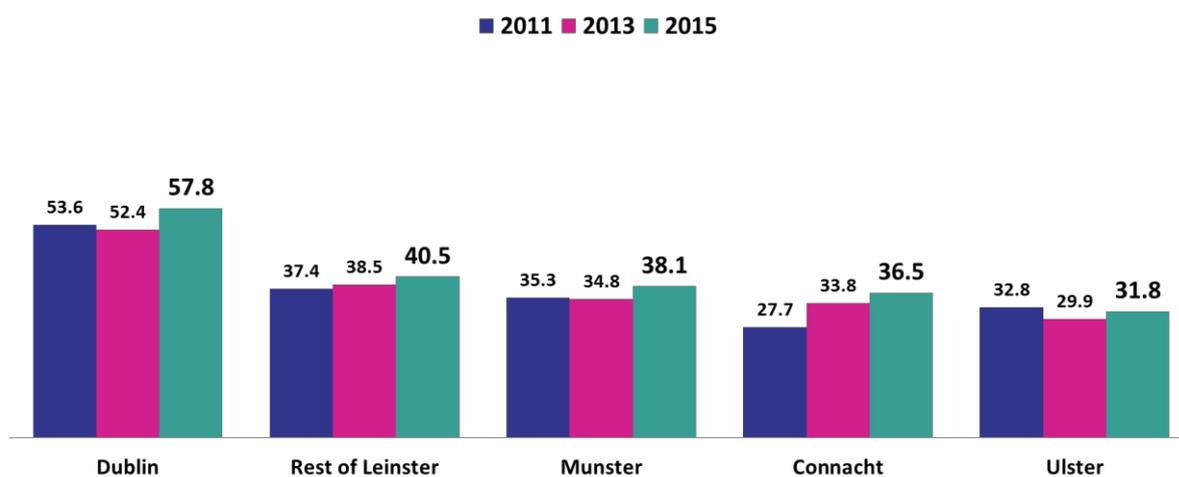
Analysis of walking for transport patterns across age and gender groups shows that younger individuals are more likely to walk for transport. However, it is slightly older individuals (those aged 25 to 44) where the most noticeable increases in walking for transport occur (although increases can be observed across most age groups). At an overall level, 45.3% of those aged 25 to 44 regularly walk for transport – an increase from 39.5% in 2013. The numbers walking for transport remains lower across the oldest age groups (although they have increased slightly), indicating the potential to use this form of activity to increase activity levels generally among older individuals.

**Figure 4.5 Participation in walking for transport by age and gender (%)**

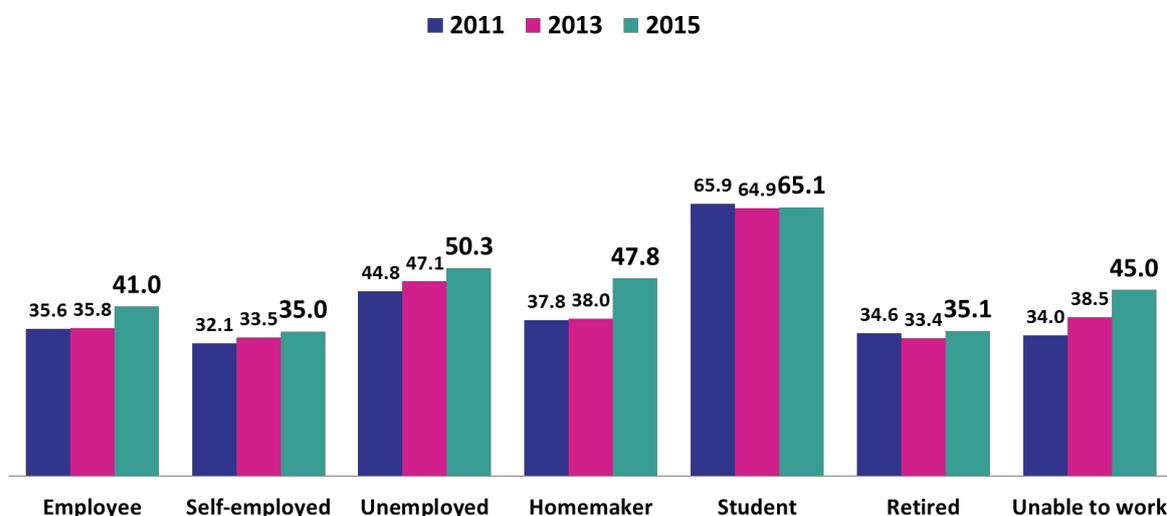


Those living in Dublin remain most likely to walk for transport, and stronger increases in Dublin widen the gap between Dublin and the remainder of the country. Analysis by working status shows that while increases are evident across all working categories, they are stronger among those in employment and homemakers. In both cases this may be due to increased economic activity and the need to travel more frequently.

**Figure 4.6 Participation in walking for transport by region (%)**



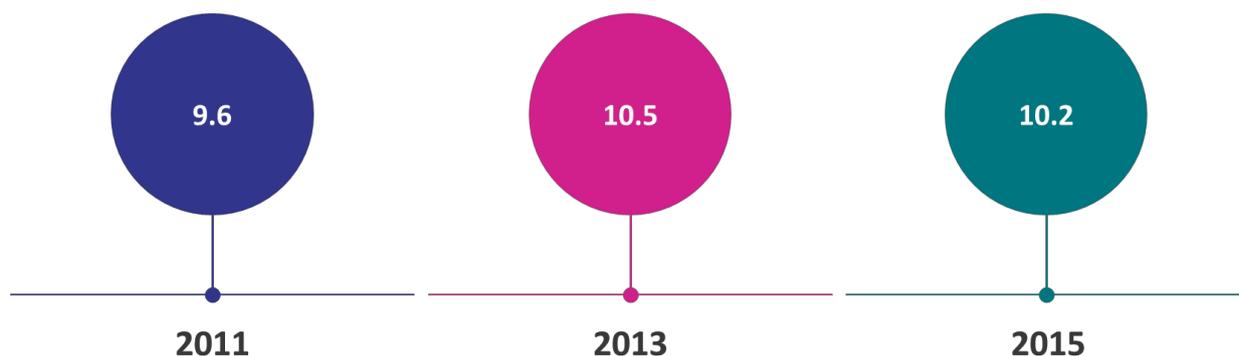
**Figure 4.7 Participation in walking for transport by working status (%)**



#### 4.4 Cycling for transport

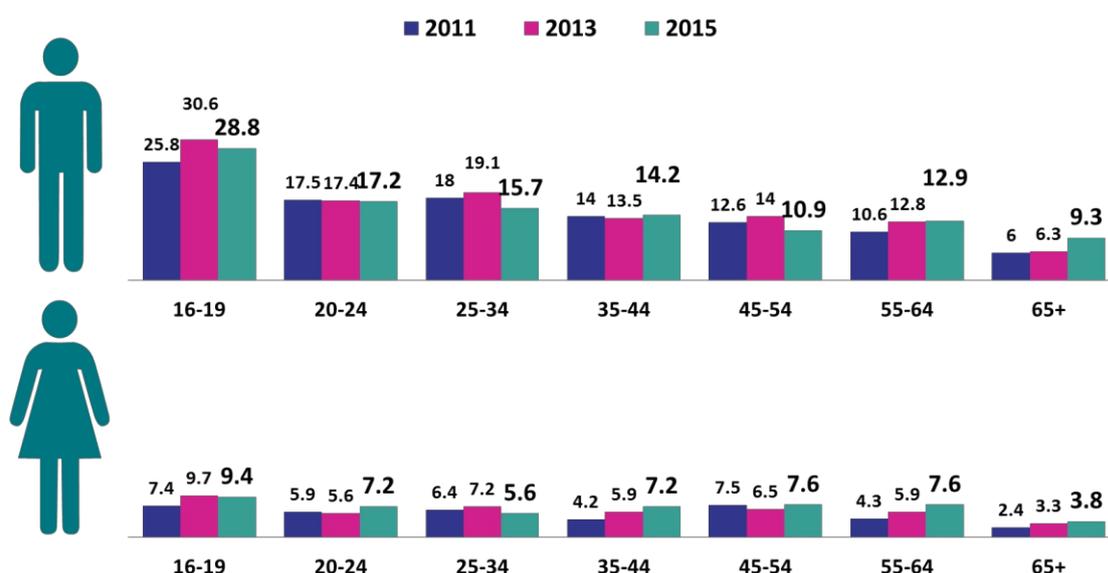
One in ten (10.2%) cycle regularly for transport, with the proportion remaining relatively constant over the past three waves of this study. The challenges in promoting this form of activity have been discussed in detail in previous reports, and many of these challenges remain in 2015/2016.

**Figure 4.8 Participation in cycling for transport (%)**



A strong gender gap remains, with females much less likely to cycle for transport than males. This wave finds that while 14.0% of males cycle regularly for transport, only 6.5% of females do so. This 7.5 percentage point difference between the two genders is slightly lower than the 9 percentage point difference in 2013, however there remains significant differences between the genders. Further developments in cycling infrastructure in Ireland will need to ensure careful consideration of this gender differential. Other studies have shown that females are more likely than males to identify a variety of environmental barriers to cycling (for example, inhaling car fumes, inability to bring bicycle on public transport, decreased daylight in winter).<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 4.9 Participation in cycling for transport by gender/age (%)**



Analysis by age indicates no significant changes in this respect with cycling for transport predominantly undertaken by men, and younger men in particular. In total, men aged under 45 account for 42% of all who cycle regularly for transport.

<sup>6</sup> Heesch et al. (2012) Gender differences in recreational and transport cycling: a cross-sectional mixed-methods comparison of cycling patterns, motivators, and constraints. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* 2012, 9:106

## 4.5 Meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines

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By combining activity levels through participation in sport, recreational walking, walking for transport and cycling for transport it is possible to provide estimates on the proportion of the population that are meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines.<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this study, the levels of activity are defined as below, with the proportion that is highly active considered to be meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines.

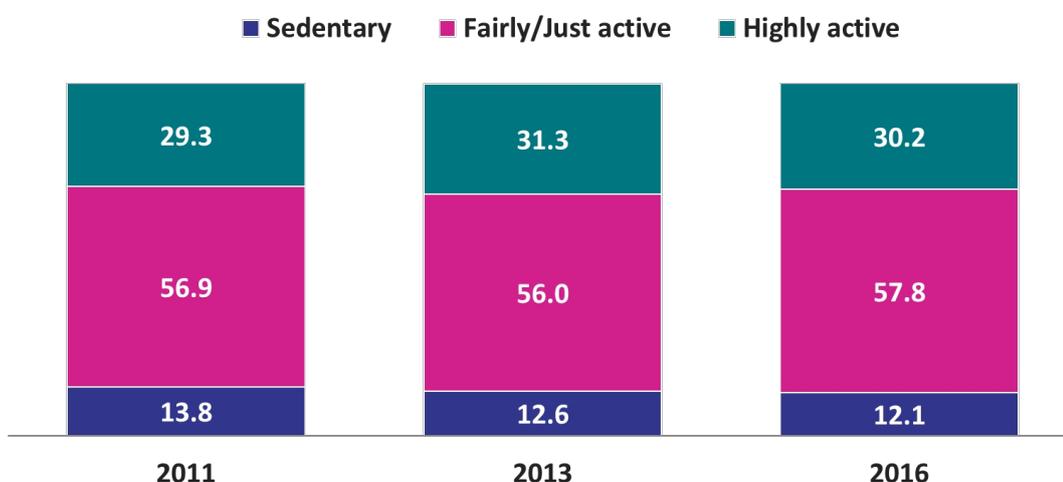
<b>Highly active</b>	Participate in 30 minutes moderate <sup>1</sup> physical activity at least five times during the previous seven days (i.e. meet the National Physical Activity Guidelines)
<b>Fairly Active</b>	Participated in 30 minutes physical activity at least twice during the previous seven days
<b>Just active</b>	Participated in a sporting activity or recreational walking for 20 minutes at least once during the previous seven days, or regularly walks or cycles for transport (at least once a week)
<b>Sedentary</b>	Did not participate (20 minutes) in sporting activity or recreational walking during the previous seven days and does not cycle or walk regularly for transport.

The past few waves of this study have shown a steady rise in the proportion that is highly active, while the proportion that is sedentary declining. In 2015, just over 3 in 10 (30.2%) are highly active, while 12.1% are categorised as sedentary. These are slight, but statistically insignificant, declines in both cases.

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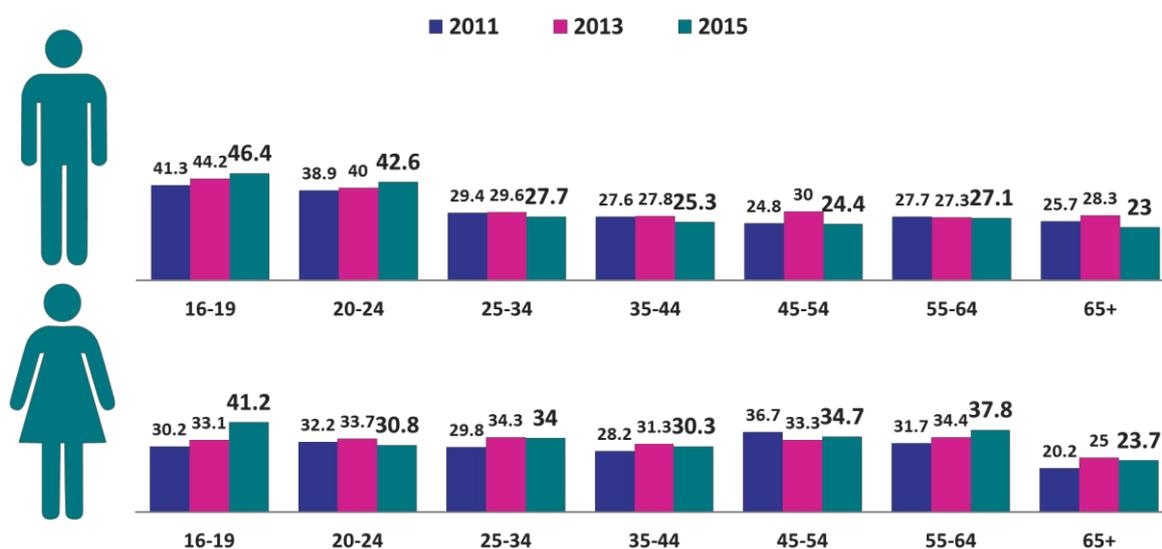
<sup>7</sup> Within this analysis only participation in sport and recreational walking are used to categorise and individual as highly active. As such the proportion classified as highly active may not include those who undertake their activity through active travel/commuting.

Figure 4.10 Hierarchy of activity by year (%)



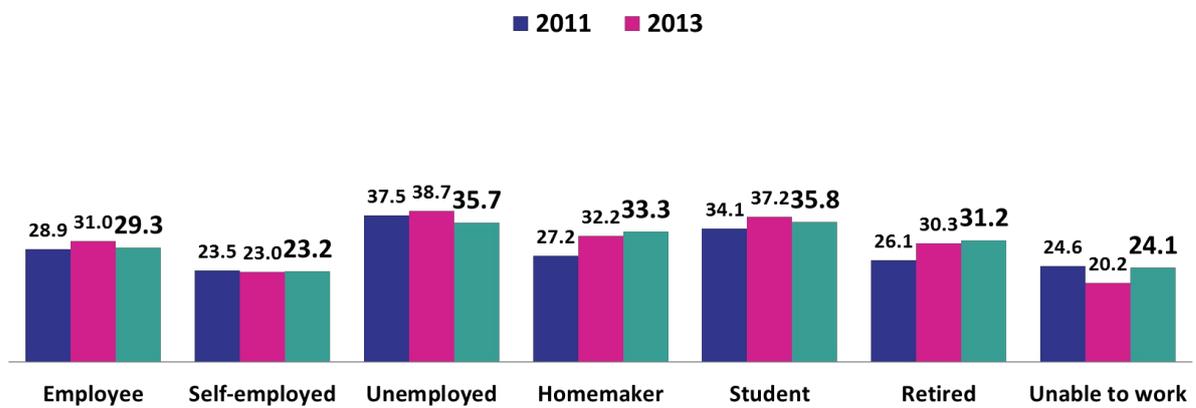
Despite there being limited change at an overall level, some changes among key demographic groups are observed. The proportion of males that are highly active has declined since 2013, with older males in particular being less active than previously. Over a quarter of males (28.1%) are highly active – a decline from 30.7% in 2013. Fewer older males (aged 65 and older) are highly active (23.0%) than in 2013 (28.3%), while in contrast the proportion of younger males that are highly active has increased, albeit only slightly. Coupled with the decline in recreational walking, this gives rise to concerns about the activity levels of older men, however it is worth noting that there is no increase in the proportion of men in this age group that are sedentary. This may be due to increases in the proportion of this group that are walking for transport.

Figure 4.11 Proportion that are highly active by gender/age (%)



As noted earlier in this report, there has been a decline in the levels of sporting activity among those in employment. However, the proportion of those in employment that are highly active (27.8%), and the proportion that are sedentary (12.2%) are broadly unchanged since 2013. This suggests that while their sporting activity has declined, those in employment have maintained a sufficient level of activity to meet the definitions used within this analysis.

**Figure 4.12 Proportion that are highly active by working status (%)**



## 5. SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN SPORT

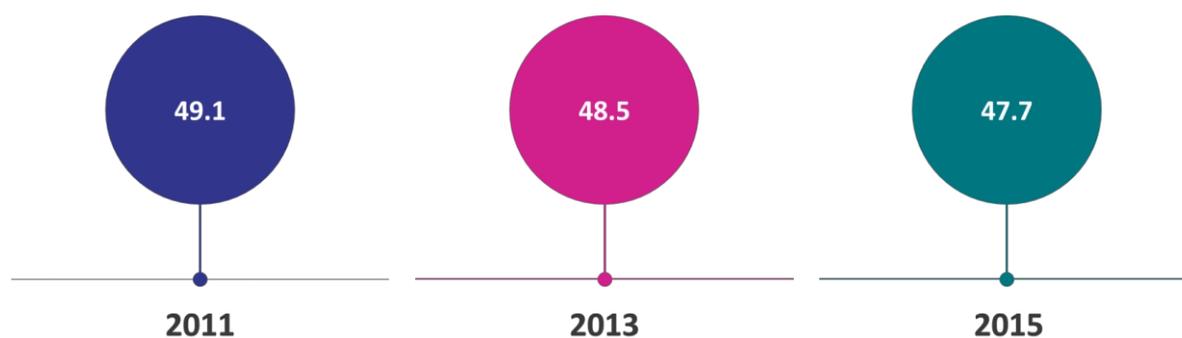
- The numbers involved in a social form of sports participation are broadly unchanged since 2013. Approximately 1.6 million engage in a regular form of social participation, mainly through club membership.
- Lower levels of social engagement among males aged 20 to 44 and those who are working – again possibly due to increased time pressures due to higher levels of economic activity.
- Increased membership of gyms and other forms of exercise clubs.
- There has been a slight narrowing of the gender gap in terms of volunteering for sport, however notable differences remain in terms of the types of roles played.
- Females aged 35 to 44 are now more likely to volunteer for sport than males of the same age, however the only role where they are more likely than males to be involved in is in providing transport.

### 5.1 Introduction

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The ISM measures social participation in three contexts – volunteering, club membership and attendance at events. Social participation in sport plays a crucial role, both in terms of the maintenance and development of sporting structures, as well as more widely in Irish society and community life. Put simply, social participation in sport provides the foundations upon which the many benefits provided by sport can be delivered.

**Figure 5.1 Social participation in sport (%)**



The 2015 survey shows that just under half (47.7%) of the Irish population have a regular social participation in sport. This is in line with the level measured in 2013 (48.5%). Similarly, each of the three forms of social participation are broadly unchanged over the past three ISMs, with 36.0% currently members of a sports club, 20.7% attending a sports event and 12.9% volunteering for sport.

Figure 5.2 Types of social participation in sport (%)

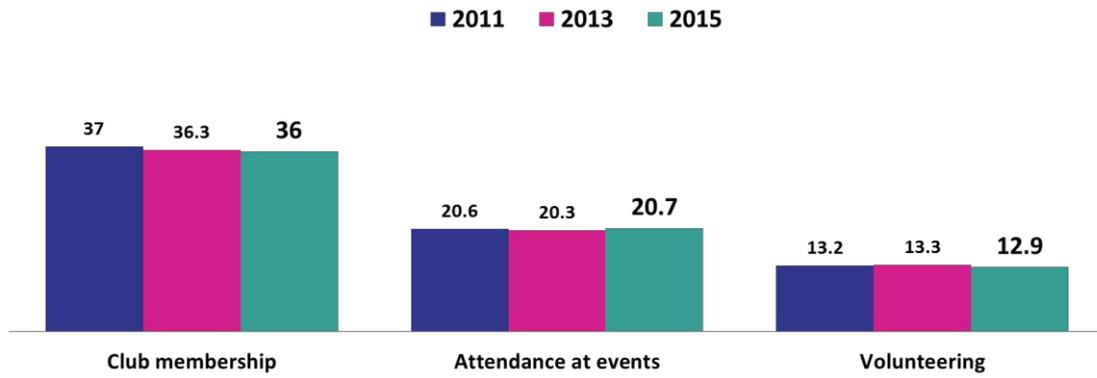
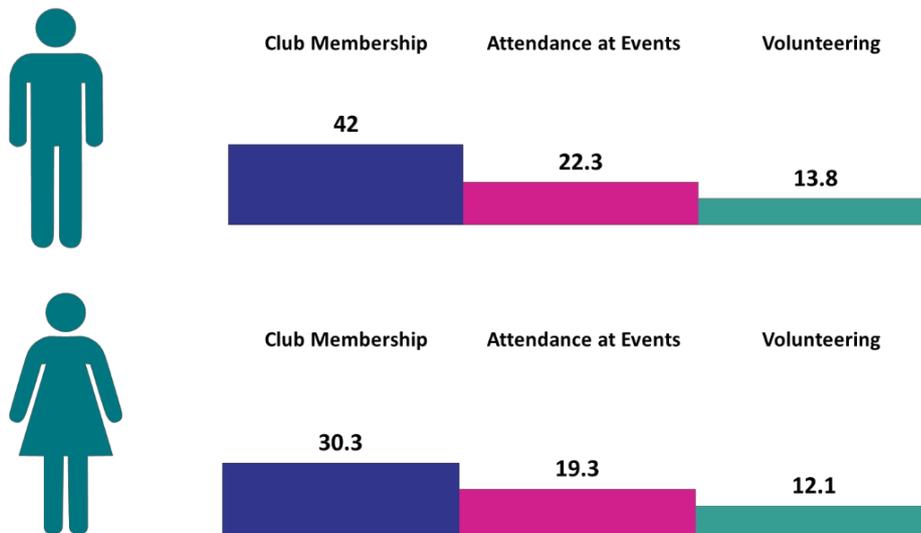


Figure 5.3 Types of social participation in sport by gender (%)

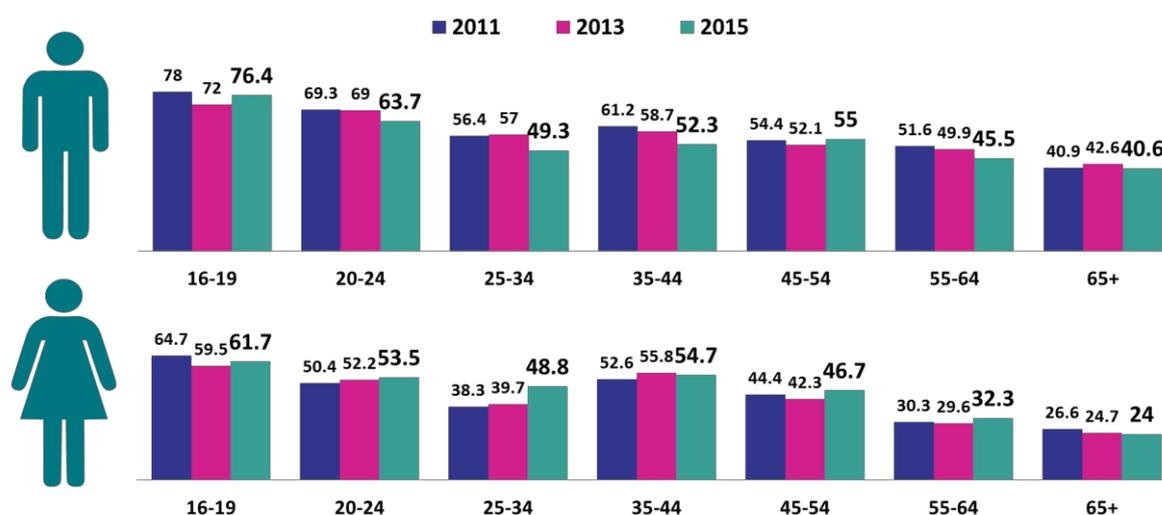


## 5.2 Overall social participation in sport

While social participation is a combination of a variety of activities, exploring it at combined level provides a good understanding of the overall nature of this participation and of those who play a key role in the ongoing development and organisation of sport in Ireland.

In general, many of the patterns in social participation are the same as those for active participation. Males are more likely than females to be involved in sport in this way, and those who are younger are more likely to be involved than those who are older. The decline across age groups is less severe than is the case for active participation, however as outlined later in this section the nature of this participation may change across age groups.

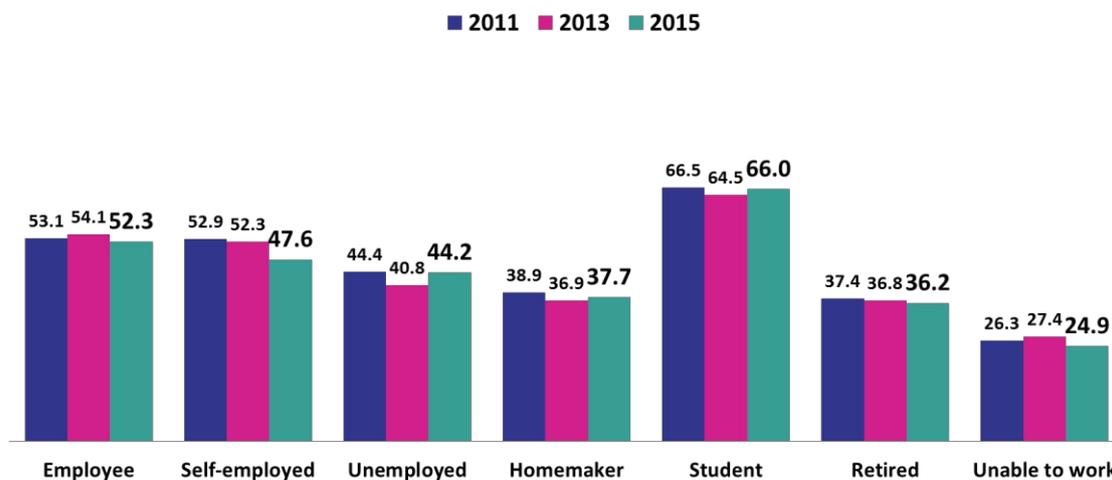
**Figure 5.4 Social participation in sport by gender/age (%)**



While social participation remains broadly unchanged since the previous ISM in 2013, some changes are observed across individual groups. The proportion of males involved in social forms of participation has declined from 55.6% to 51.7%, while the proportion of females has increased from 41.7% to 44.0%. This reflects the changes in participation in active sport.

Examining social participation across age groups shows declines in involvement among males aged 20 to 44, while participation among females of the same age has increased. Currently, 53.1% of males in this age group are involved in a social form of participation (a decline from 59.7% in 2013), while 52.1% of females of the same age are involved (an increase from 48.1%). As with active participation, the improving economic conditions may have had a more significant impact on male participation than female participation.

Figure 5.5 Social participation in sport by working status (%)



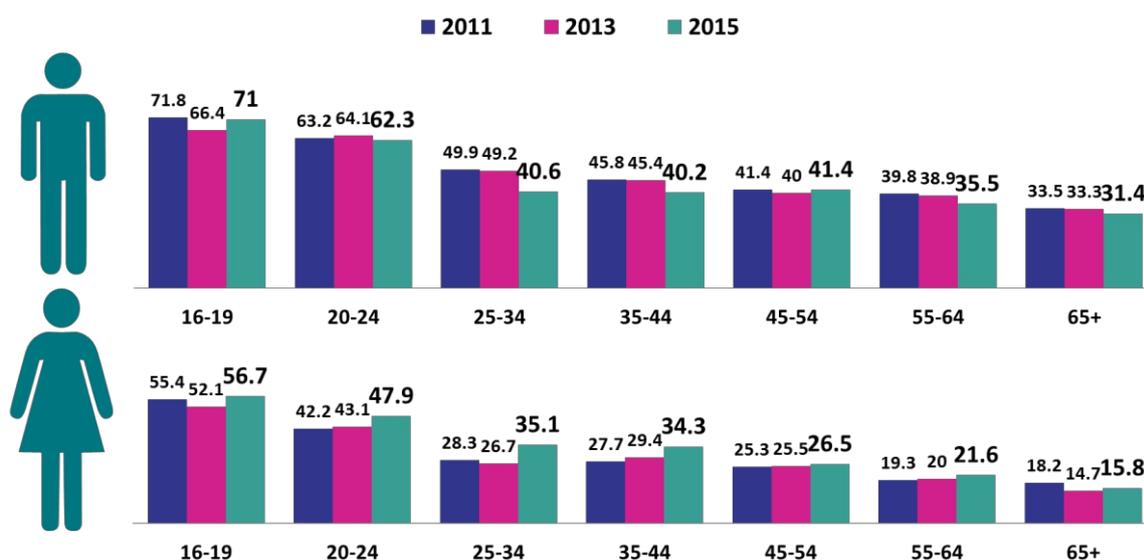
Further evidence of the impact of improving economic conditions can be seen through working status, with declines in participation among those in employment (from 53.7% to 51.2%). Despite this decline those in paid employment remain more likely to participate socially than those in any other employment category, with the exception of those in full-time education.

The nature of these changes in participation are discussed in more detail below, however the change at an overall level is notable for a number of reasons. Firstly, that certain types of individuals, particularly young men, are less involved socially in sport (as well as less involved actively) may further weaken their connections to sport and make it more difficult for them to re-connect again at a later stage. Additionally, it presents a challenge to sporting structures as the nature of membership, volunteering and attendance at sporting events changes and these structures need to react accordingly.

### 5.3 Club membership

Previous waves of this study have demonstrated the significant differences in club membership that exist across gender and age groups. These differences remain in the 2015 study.

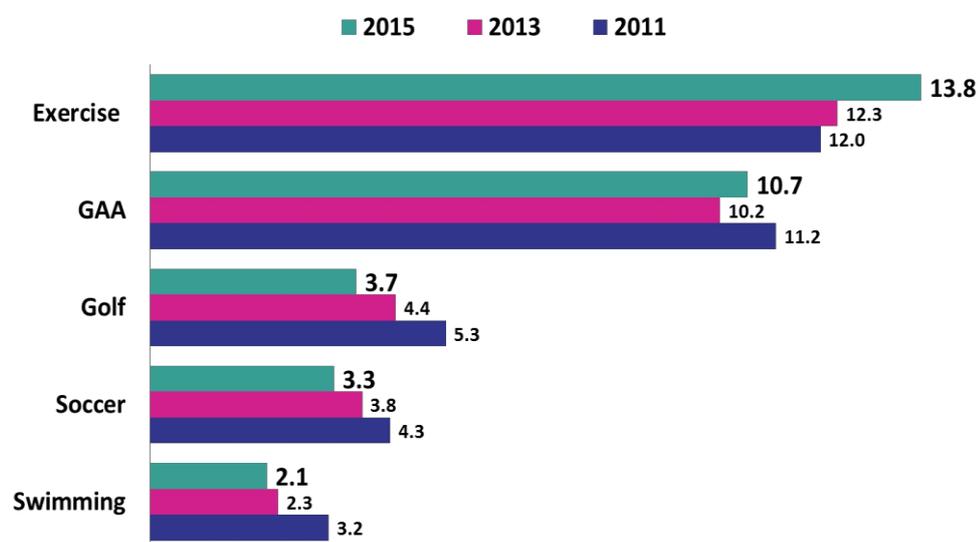
**Figure 5.6 Club membership by gender/age (%)**



Males are much more likely than females to be members of a club. However, a decline in membership among males and an increase among females means that this gap has narrowed from 18.5% to 11.7%. As with participation in sport, the largest increases in club membership come from females aged 25 to 34, 35.1% of whom are club members (an increase from 26.7% in 2013). In contrast, there has been a decline in club membership among males of the same age with 40.6% being members of a club, down from 49.2% in 2013. As outlined later, the changes in membership come from similar sports as the changes in active participation.

The factors influencing these changes in membership are likely to be the same as those outlined earlier (primarily related to increased economic activity). Indeed, it is likely that they will correlate with one another – when someone ceases participation in sport they may also terminate their membership of the club associated with it.

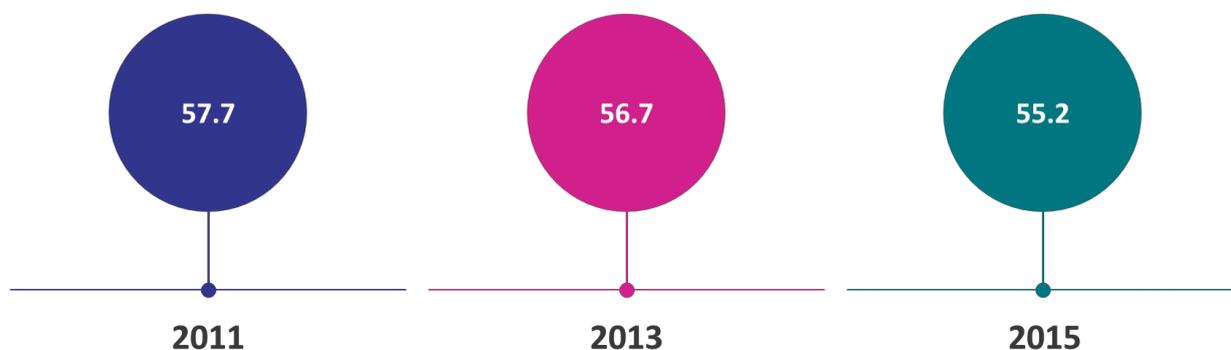
**Figure 5.7 Type of club membership (%)**



As in 2013, the type of club with the highest level of membership is that associated with exercise activity – primarily gyms. In total 13.8% are members of an exercise club, an increase from 12.3% in 2013. Across all other clubs, membership levels are broadly unchanged at an overall level although some differences emerge among individual demographic groups.

Analysis of membership of exercise clubs shows that increases are coming from males aged under 20 and females aged under 45, and in turn drives up overall membership levels among both groups. This is similar to overall changes in active participation in exercise-based activities. Additionally, there has also been declines in membership of GAA and soccer clubs among men aged 25 to 34, although these are offset somewhat by increases in membership within other age groups. This also corresponds with the decline in active participation in soccer.

**Figure 5.8 Participants in sport that are also members of a club (%)**

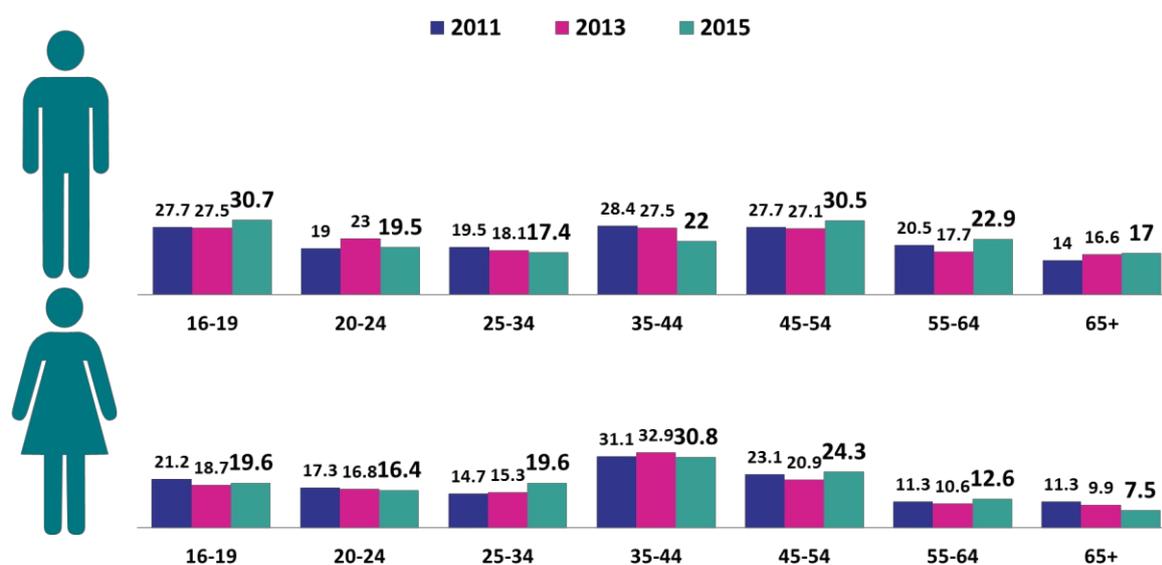


In addition to the changes among specific groups in the population there has also been a change in terms of the extent of club membership among active participants in sport. In 2015, 55.2% of those who participate in sport are also members of a club. This represents a decline from 56.7% in 2013 and from 57.7% in 2011. This is due to two factors – firstly, those sports with the largest increases in participation (e.g. running and personal exercise) are typically those that are less likely to require club membership in order to participate. Additionally, more flexible forms of accessing club facilities (e.g. pay-as-you-go approaches) provide an alternative to club membership for many.

## 5.4 Attending a sports event

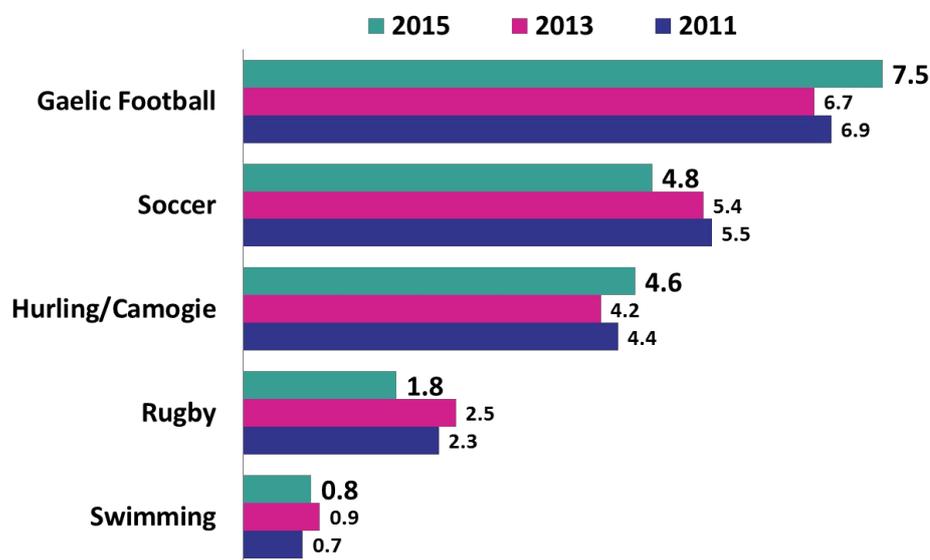
Just over a fifth (20.7%) of the population attended a sporting event in the previous seven days. The definition used for sporting events in the survey is deliberately wide, and the events include will range from international professional sport to local children’s sports.

**Figure 5.9 Attendance at event by gender/age (%)**



Males are slightly more likely to attend a sporting event than females, however unlike other forms of participation there is no notable decline by age, with the exception of the oldest age groups. Comparisons to the 2013 wave of the survey indicate that fewer men aged between 20 and 44 attended a sports event, and the reasons for this are likely to be the same as outlined elsewhere for other forms of participation.

Figure 5.10 Type of event attended (%)



Gaelic football remains the most popular form of sporting event, and while a higher proportion of males (8.6%) than females (6.5%) have recently attended a Gaelic Football match it is the most popular event for both genders. The five most popular sporting events are the same as in 2013, with similar levels of attendance in all cases.

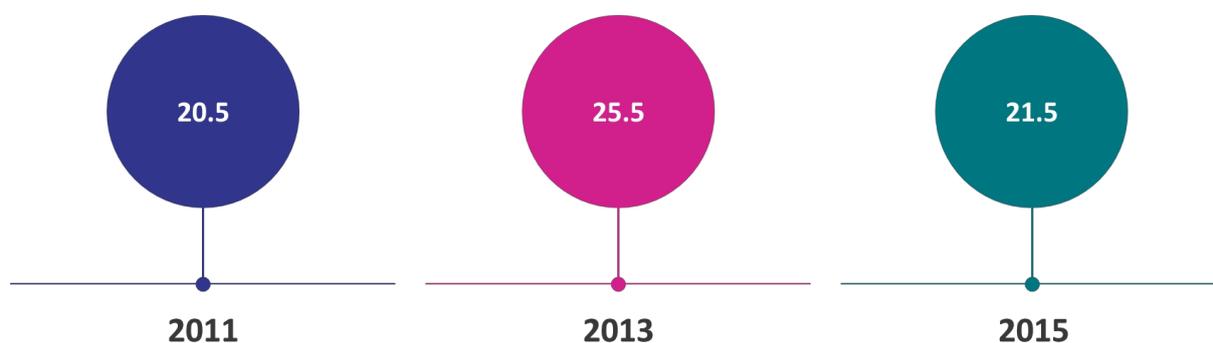
## 5.5 Volunteering for sport

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Volunteering plays a central role in the proper functioning of sport. Without volunteers many of the sporting infrastructures in Ireland could not function, and the provision of sport for children in particular would be almost impossible.

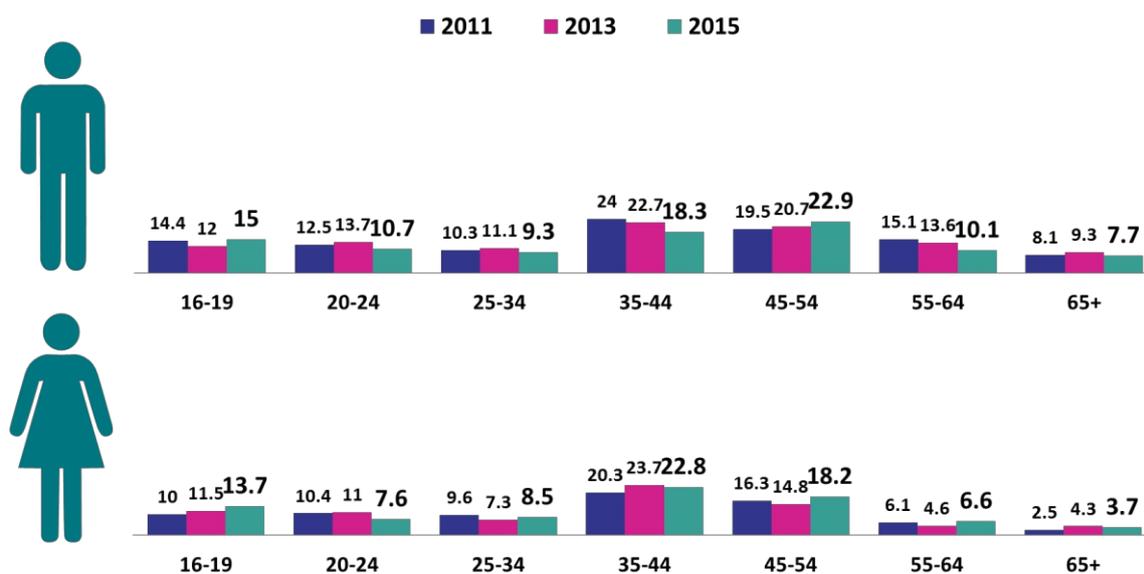
The proportion involved in volunteering is unchanged over the three most recent waves of the ISM with 12.9% regularly volunteering for sport. The previous report noted an increase in the proportion volunteering for multiple sports, and while this has decreased slightly since the previous wave, over a fifth (21.5%) of volunteers play this type of role across multiple sports.

**Figure 5.11 Volunteering for multiple sports (%)**



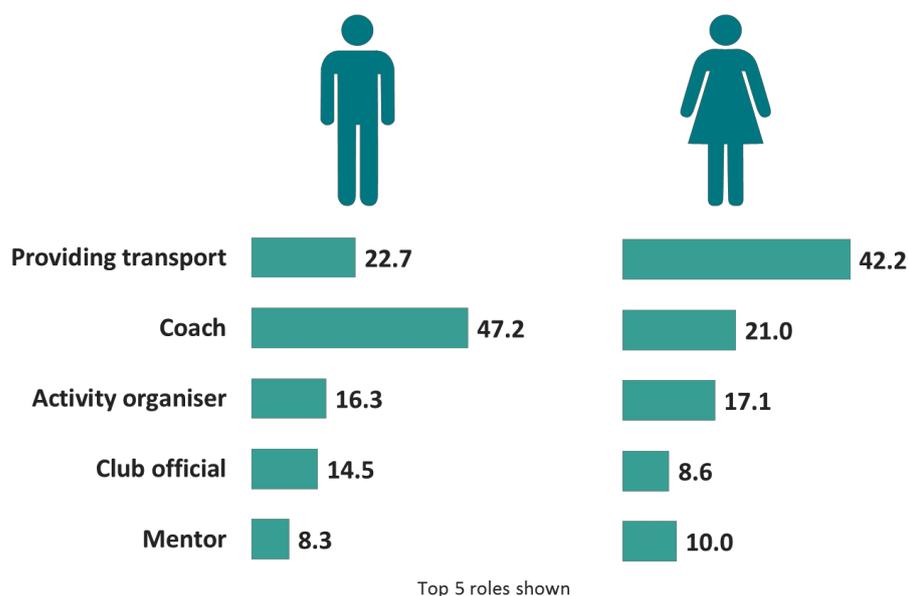
Males (13.8%) are more likely to volunteer than females (12.1%), and as is the case across other forms of participation a decline in volunteering activity among males, and an increase among females leads to a narrowing of the gender gap from 4.0% to 1.7%.

**Figure 5.12 Volunteering by age/gender (%)**



Again much of the decline in volunteering among males comes from those aged 20 to 44. However, it is the decline among 35 to 44-year-old males that is most notable, as this is the age group most likely to volunteer for sport (due to them being more likely to be parents of children). Females aged 35 to 44 (22.8%) are now more likely to volunteer for sport than males of the same age (18.3%), however the only role where they are more likely than males to be involved in is in providing transport.

Figure 5.13 Type of role by gender<sup>8</sup> (%)

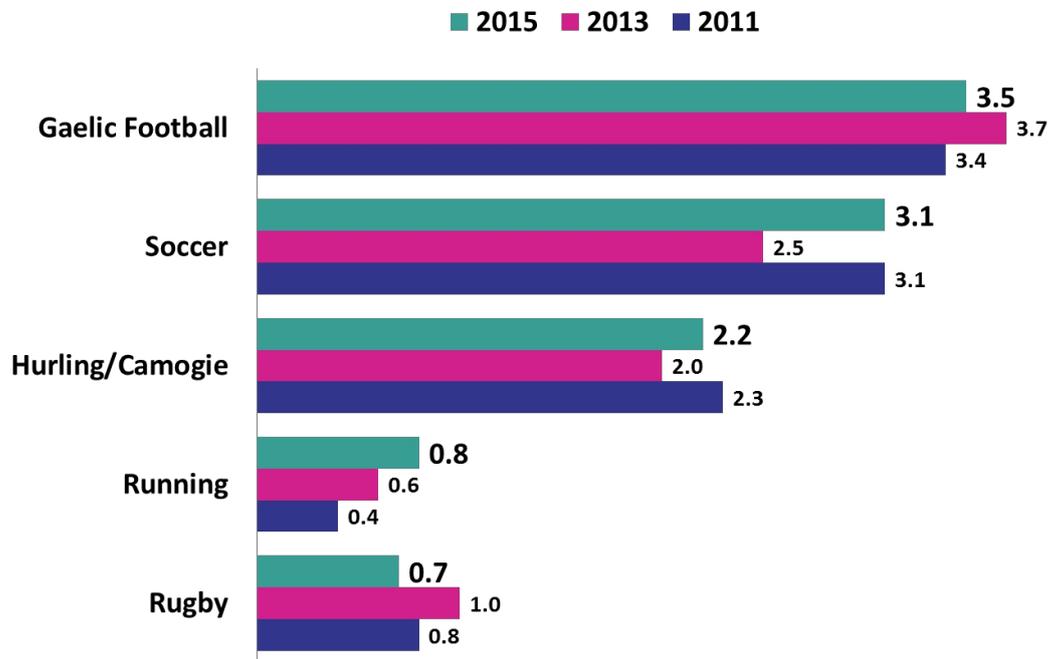


The changes in participation among genders are particularly noteworthy as previous studies have shown differences between the genders in terms of the roles played. Specifically, males are more likely to play a coaching or administration role, while females are more likely to provide transport or organise/supervise activities. The current study shows that the differences between the genders in this respect is consistent with previous studies, and as such notable changes among any particular group could present challenges in terms of sustaining the multitude of volunteer roles required to maintain sports generally.

Further discussion on gender differences in terms of children’s sports is provided in a later section exploring the relationships between parents and children in their involvement in sport.

<sup>8</sup> Figures here are expressed as a percentage of all who volunteer for sport. As individuals can play multiple roles, percentages may sum to greater than 100%

Figure 5.14 Type of sport volunteered for (%)



Analysis of the nature of volunteering by type of sport demonstrates no changes in this respect, with team sports such as Gaelic football, soccer and hurling/camogie having the largest numbers of volunteers.



## 6. TRANSITIONS INTO SPORT

- Taking up and transitioning between sports is a process that occurs throughout the life course.
- Almost half (47%) of those taking up a sport as an adult are not already active in sport when taking up that activity.
- Individual activities such as exercise, running and cycling are all more likely to have been taken up in adulthood, while team-based activities are more likely to have been played since childhood.
- Just under a third taking up a sport did so through a local sports facility, with approximately a quarter taking up the sport through a sports club or organisation. Sports clubs are central to facilitating participation in both team-based and individual sports.
- Friends and family play the largest role in encouraging individuals to take up a sport. Among males the father plays a larger role, however among females both fathers and mothers play equal roles.

### 6.1 Introduction

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Understanding the various ways in which people take up sports is central to developing strategies to encourage greater involvement in sport and to ensure the provision of suitable facilities to maintain this involvement. The ISM demonstrates that many come to sport and change sports at different stages in their lives, so strategies to increase participation levels need to have a broad appeal.

One of the modules included in this wave of the ISM asked a series of questions to understand when and how people took up sports that they were currently active in. Respondents who were active in sport were asked:

- Age at which they took up the activity
- Whether they were also active in other sports at that time
- Where they first participated in that sport
- Who first introduced them to the sport and did they participate in it together
- Where sport was first participated in and ease of finding facilities

In total, 1,270 respondents participated in this module in relation to the first sport they identified earlier in the survey (which is likely to be their “main” sport). This provides a robust understanding of taking up sports and transitioning between sports.

## 6.2 Taking up sport across life-stages

The ISM clearly demonstrates that the nature of sports participation differs considerably across ages, both in terms of the extent and types of sports participated in. Exploring the age at which sports are taken up and the influences on that process provides an alternative perspective on this, demonstrating the ever-changing nature of sports participation as individuals select different sports that are compatible with changing interests, motivations and availability of time and resources.

*Table 6.1 Age of taking up sport by current age (%)*

	Current age						
	16-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<16	82	52	42	34	27	28	31
16-19	18	31	11	8	6	10	7
20-24	-	17	21	6	8	5	3
25-34	-	-	27	23	17	8	6
35-44	-	-	-	29	19	9	18
45-54	-	-	-	-	22	20	14
55-64	-	-	-	-	-	20	11
65+	-	-	-	-	-	-	11

Results from this module clearly show that taking up sports and transitioning between sports happens throughout the life course. The majority (59%) of people aged 16 and older who are active in sport took up that sport since turning 16, with 41% still involved in the sport that they took up younger than this.

Exploring this across different age groups is particularly revealing as it demonstrates that the changing nature of participation continues across all age groups.

The table above shows the age at which those in different age cohorts took up the sport in which they are currently active. For example, 52% of those aged 20 to 24 who are active in sport started playing that sport while aged under 16. Seventeen percent of this age group took up that sport between the ages of 20 and 24.

A few things are particularly noteworthy from this. Firstly, it is clear from this that many, across all age groups, are active in sports that they took up quite recently. Over a quarter (27%) of those aged between 25 and 34 took up that particular activity while they were aged between 25 and 34, and similarly 29% of those aged 35 to 44 took up that activity while they were aged between 35 and 44.

Secondly, a sizeable group in all age cohorts remain active in a sport that they took up in childhood. Of particular note is the 29% of those aged 55 and older who are active took up that sport in their childhood – indicating that that these activities can be tailored to meet specific needs and abilities across different life-stages.

Differences exist across genders in this respect, with males more likely to maintain a childhood activity than females. Almost half (48%) of males who are active in sport are playing a sport that they took up while aged under 16, however a lower proportion (33%) of females are similarly active in a childhood activity. On this basis, females who are active are more likely to be playing a sport that they took up more recently. Almost half (48%) of females aged 25 to 44 who are active took up that activity after turning 25, compared to less than a third (31%) of males in this age group.

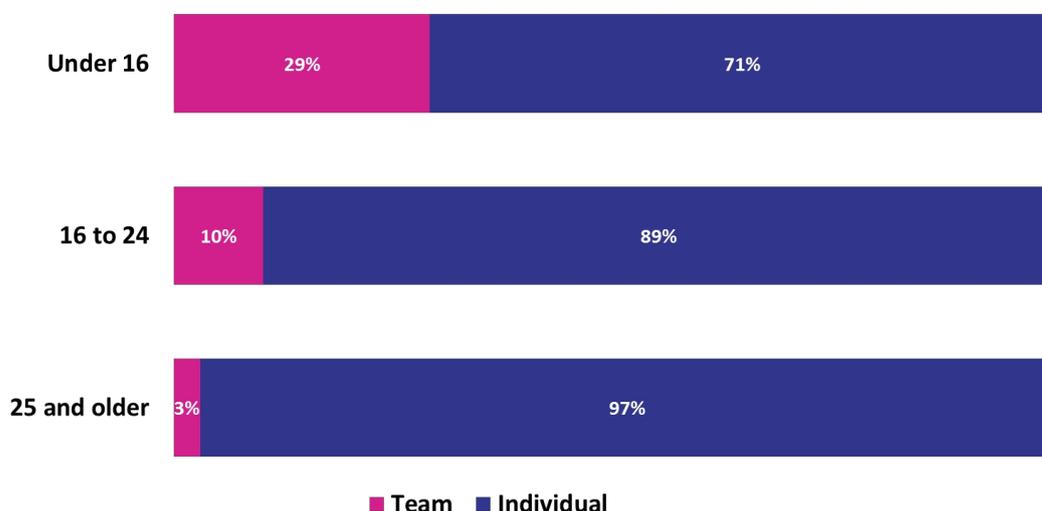
Additionally, the majority (61%) were not active in any other sport when taking up the sport in which they are currently active, however differences exist in terms of when they take up this activity. For those who took up their activity before turning 18, almost 70% were participants at the time while for those who took up a sport after age 18, only 53% were then current participants. This indicates that almost half of those taking up sport in adulthood are coming from a position of relative inactivity, highlighting again the importance of ensuring an approach which goes well beyond children and youth in any policy approaches to increasing participation.

### 6.3 Types of sports taken up

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One factor that is clearly illustrated over each of the waves of the ISM is the widening gap between participation in individual and team sports throughout the life course, with much lower participation in team sports among older age groups than younger age groups. Results from this module provide further insight into this, demonstrating key differences between both types of sports in terms of when they were taken up and factors determining the take-up.

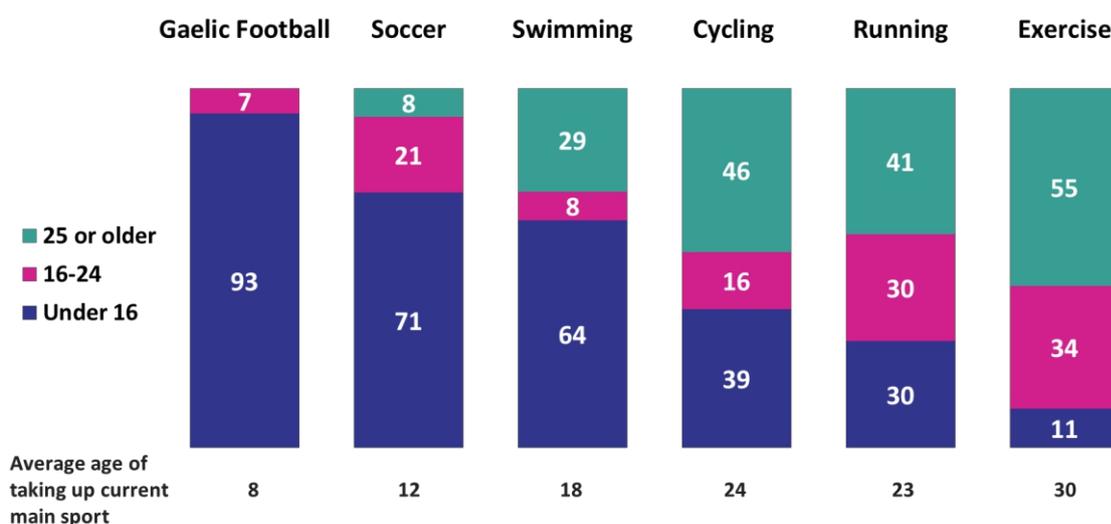
**Figure 6.2 Type of sport taken up by age of starting current main sport (%)**



Team sports are more likely to be taken up in childhood, with 29% of those who took up their current main sport aged under 16 choosing a team sport, compared with 10% of those aged 16 to 24 and 3% of those aged older than this. Similarly, the average age of those taking up an individual sport (25 years old) is much older than those taking up a team sport (12 years old).

Exploring those taking up sports at a later stage provides further illustration of the differences in choices of sport, with 97% of those taking up a sport after their twenty-fifth birthday opting for a sport participated in on an individual basis.

**Figure 6.3 Age of taking up specific sports (main sport participated in) (%)**



Many of these differences are explained by the types of sport participated in. Those playing popular team-based sports such as Gaelic football soccer (most of whom are male) are more likely to have taken up this sport as a child. Over 9 in 10 (93%) of those playing Gaelic football, and almost three-quarters (71%) of those playing soccer, commenced playing that sport before turning 16.

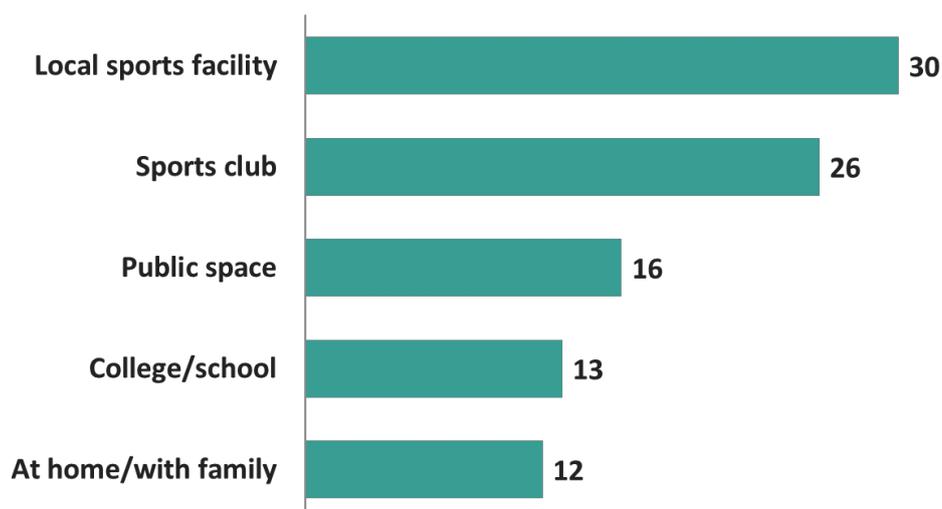
Popular sports that are typically played on an individual basis, such as personal exercise, are much more likely to be taken up later in life with the majority (55%) taking it up aged 25 or older. Similarly, 46% of those participating in cycling, 41% of those participating in running and 29% of those participating in swimming took up that sport after turning 25.

## 6.4 Facilities used when taking up sports

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Just under a third (30%) taking up a sport did so through a local sports facility, with approximately a quarter (26%) taking up the sport through a sports club or organisation. Naturally the type of sport being played is a key influencer of where the sport is taken up with team based activities most likely to be taken up at a club (39%) or college/school (27%), while individual sports are most likely to be taken up at a local sports facility (31%) or at a club (24%). This demonstrates the importance of sports clubs in facilitating access not just to the team-based sports with which they are most frequently associated but also to sports of an individual nature.

**Figure 6.4 Facilities used when taking up sports (%)**



Notably, two of the sporting activities that have become increasingly popular in recent years – running and cycling – are more likely than other sports to have been taken up in a public place (e.g. parks, streets etc.) rather than within a specific facility. Of those taking up running, 40% took it up in a public place, with 43% of those taking up cycling also doing so in a public place. As these activities become more prevalent in terms of overall sporting participation it provides evidence of the extent of activity being undertaken away from more formal structures and facilities, and also indicates that many can commence and maintain activity without requiring these facilities. Recent successes of initiatives such as parkrun demonstrate how public facilities can be utilised to provide a more structured, club-like approach to these activities.

Furthermore, almost three-quarters (72%) indicate that they did not have to search for local facilities in order to participate in the activity that they were starting, with the vast majority claiming not to have had any difficulties identifying somewhere to participate and being satisfied with the facilities used to participate. Both running and cycling participants were more likely to note some difficulties finding somewhere to participate, however the vast majority (over 85%) still identified that they experienced no difficulties.

**Figure 6.5 Ease of identifying location to participate (%)**



## 6.5 Influence of other people when taking up sport

Almost two-thirds (65%) feel that their initial involvement in the sport was either entirely or mostly due to their own motivation, with 35% indicating that it was entirely down to self-motivation. Males are more likely to indicate that it was down to self-motivation, with 67% of males indicating this compared to 62% of females. Notable differences exist across both sports and age at which the sports were taken up in terms of the role of self-motivation. For example, younger age groups (those under 20 years), are more likely to take up sport due to encouragement by others.

**Figure 6.6 Source of encouragement to take up sport (%)**

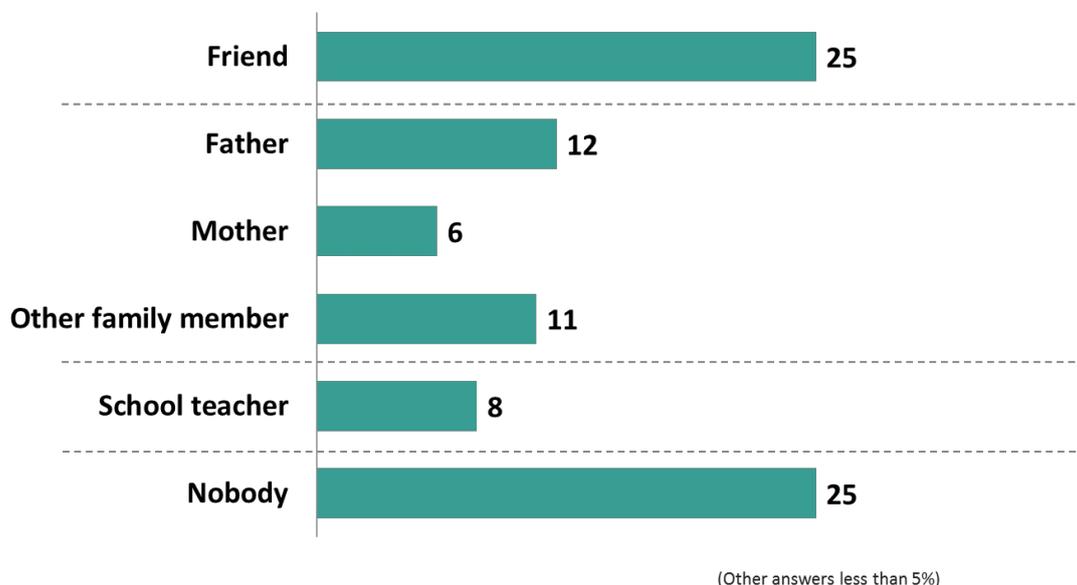


Those taking up exercise and running are more likely than those taking up other sports to say that it is due to self-motivation. Over three-quarters (76%) of those taking up exercise say it was at least mostly due to their own self-motivation with 70% of those taking up running indicating that self-motivation was the driving force behind taking up the sport. In contrast, over half of those taking up cycling or swimming (56% and 51% respectively) indicate that self-motivation was their main source of encouragement, with 22% and 27% respectively indicating that it was mostly or entirely due to encouragement by others.

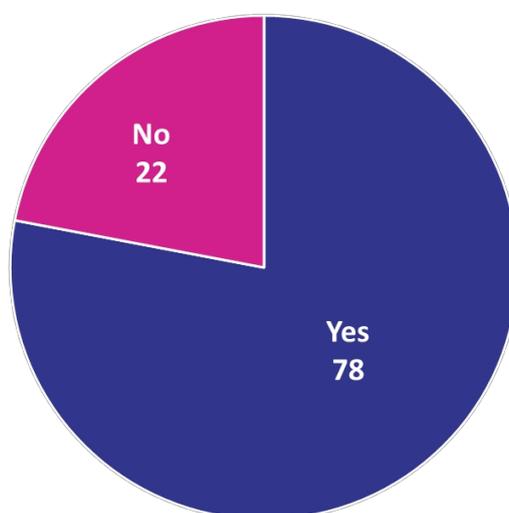
Despite these differences in motivation, most identify someone as being responsible for introducing them to the sport, with friends (25%) and family members (father: 12%, mother: 6%, other family member: 11%) prominent in this respect. It is notable that twice as many identify their father rather than their mother as being responsible for introducing them to the sport. In this respect males are more likely than females to identify their father as introducing them to the sport (14% and 9% respectively), while mothers play a much smaller role for males than they do for females (3% and 9% respectively). The roles of parents in their children’s sporting behaviours are discussed in further detail in a later section in this report.

It is clear from this that the existence of role models who are real in people’s lives stands in contrast to the fact that only 3% of were influenced by advertising, posters or TV. A quarter (25%) were influenced by nobody when taking up the sport they are currently involved in.

**Figure 6.7 First introduction to sport (%)**



**Figure 6.8 Whether participated in the sport with person who first introduced them to it (%)**



Over three-quarters (78%) of those introduced to a sport by someone else indicate that this person played that sport with them. Those introduced to running are more likely to indicate that the other person participated in it with them, with 88% indicating that this was the case. Those introduced to the activity by a friend are also more likely to indicate that they participated in it together (91%). Notable differences also exist between fathers and mothers, with 69% of those introduced to the sport by their father participating in it with them compared to 55% of those introduced to it by their mother. This theme is explored further in the later section relating to parents and children’s sporting behaviours.

## 7. TRANSITIONS OUT OF SPORT

- Over three-quarters (78%) were regular participants in sport at some stage, with almost a quarter (22%) of adults never having been involved in sport.
- A higher proportion of those who are inactive have previously played sport than never played. Increases in sports participation can come through encouraging individuals to recommence activity rather than start it for the first time.
- Extent of dropping out from team sports is much higher than for sports participated in on an individual basis.
- A variety of factors influence the decision to cease playing sport. Lifestyle factors are key within this, notably developing other interests and increased work or family pressures.

### 7.1 Introduction

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The ISM demonstrates that sports participation changes considerably throughout life, both in terms of the proportion participating across age groups as well as the nature of this participation. Team-based activities that are more common among younger individuals, especially in childhood, become less common as individuals become older. Some may drop out of sport entirely, while others may migrate towards activities that may be more suited to changing life circumstances and permit more flexible involvement within a busy work and family life.

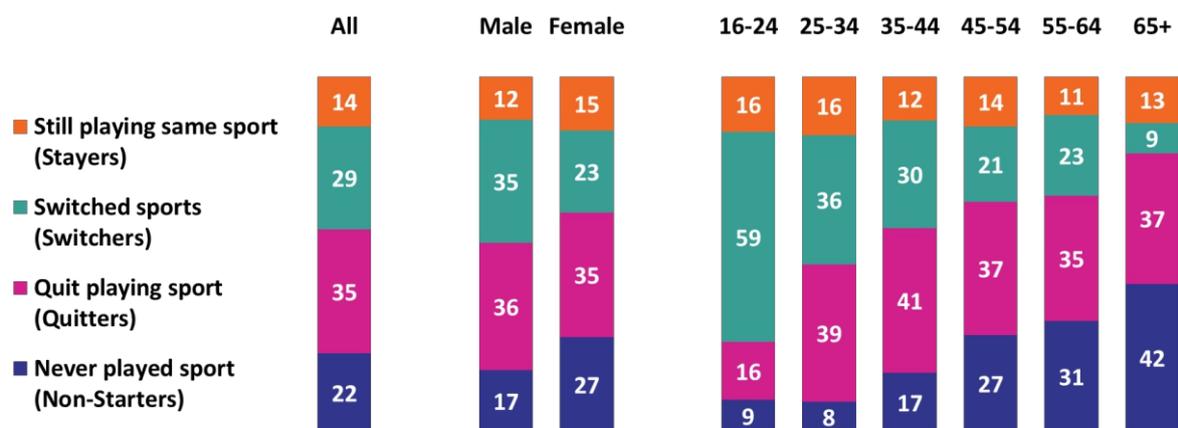
This module of the ISM seeks to understand the extent and nature of prior involvement in sport – both among those who are still active as well as those who have dropped out of sport entirely. It provides an understanding of the nature of the transition between sports and the factors that cause it.

### 7.2 Prior sporting activity

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Almost two-thirds (64%) have been previously active in a sport that they no longer participate in. This includes 68% of those who are currently active in sport and 62% of those not active in sport. Males are more likely than females to have been previously active in a sport that they no longer participate in (70% and 58% respectively), and those who are younger are more likely to have a previous activity than those who are older.

**Figure 7.1 Involvement in sport by gender and age (%)**



By combining current and previous activity it is possible to understand the extent to which individuals have ever been active in sport. Four distinct categories can be explored in this respect – those who are still playing the same sport they have always played (“stayers”), those who have switched sports at some stage (“switchers”), those who have quit playing sports (“quitters”) and those who have never played sport (“non-starters”).

This shows that 78% are either currently involved in sport or have previously been involved, with 22% never having been actively involved in sport. Exploring this by gender shows that while females are more likely to be “non-starters”, broadly equal proportions of both genders are categorised as “quitters” (males: 36%, females: 35%).

Another notable factor is the extent of change in sports participation, with there being twice as many “switchers” and “stayers”. The high proportion of 16 to 24 year olds (59%) who have switched sports is particularly noteworthy and indicative of the changing nature of sports participation among this age group. In contrast those who are older are less likely to have ever played sport. The reasons for this are unclear although may be reflective of increased levels of sports participation among younger generations.

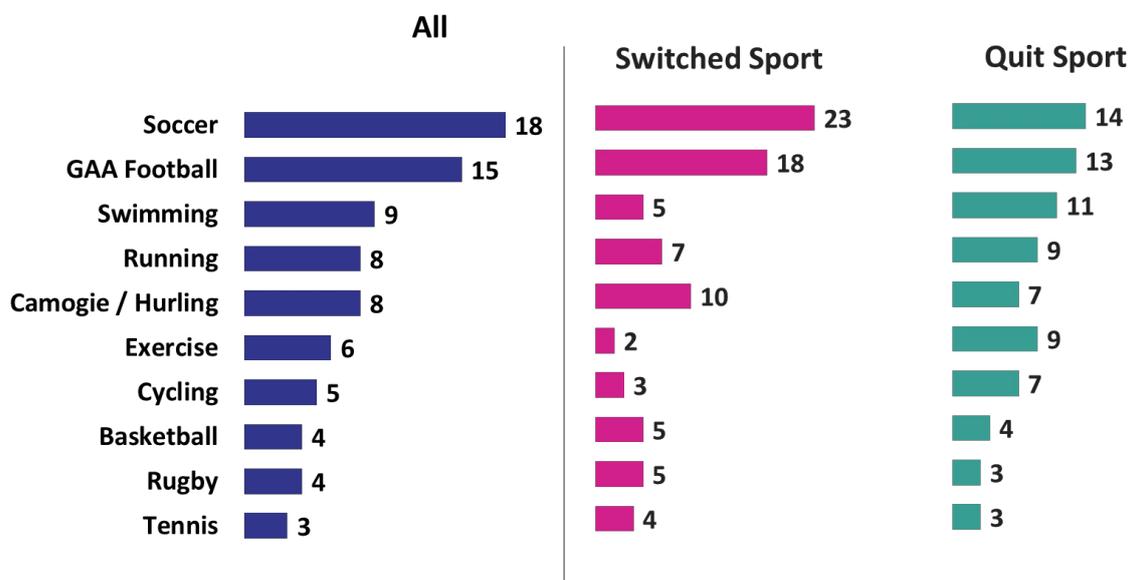
An encouraging finding is that for all age groups (except those aged 65 and older), the proportion who have quit sport (“quitters”) is larger than the proportion who have never played sport (“non-starters”). This suggests that strategies to increase sports participation among those aged 25 to 64 can be fruitful by encouraging groups to recommence activity rather than start it for the first time.

### 7.3 Types of activities previously involved in

Exploring the types of activities that individuals previously participated in shows that broadly equal proportions were involved in individual and team sports (53% and 52% respectively). However notable differences exist between “switchers” and “quitters”. Just over 6 in 10 (61%) “quitters” were previously involved in an individual sport (compared with 43% involved in a team sport), while a similar proportion (62%) of “switchers” were involved in a team sport. This is reflective of team sports being more prevalent among younger age groups and within childhood in particular, while individual activities are more likely to be taken up (and ceased) in adulthood.

As shown in figure 7.2 below, those who have switched sports are more likely to have switched from soccer or Gaelic football, and while these sports are the most common among those who have ceased sport entirely a range of other individual sports are also common.

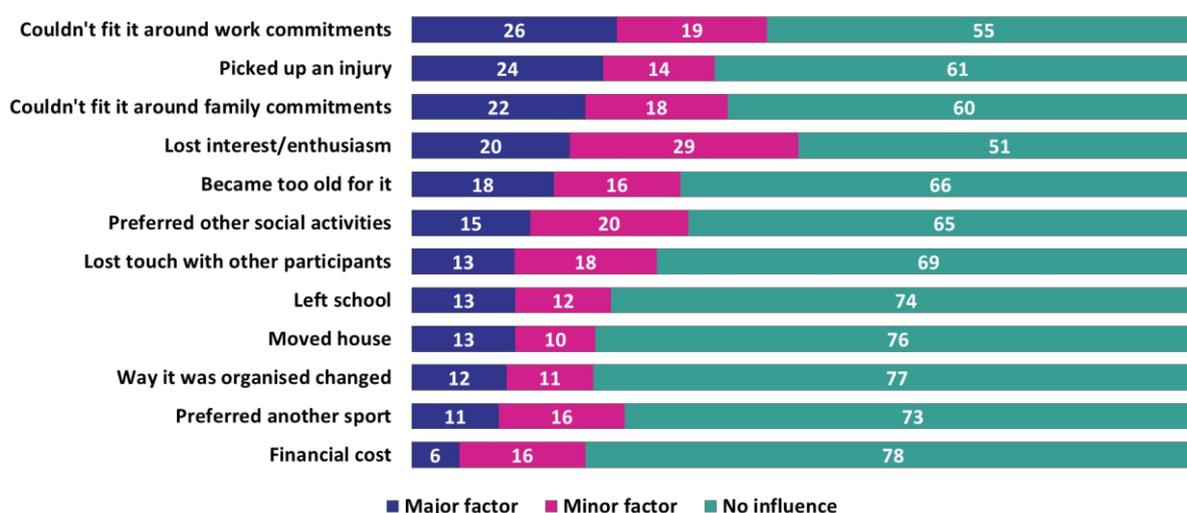
**Figure 7.2 Types of activities previously involved in (%)**



## 7.4 Factors behind ceasing sport

A variety of factors cause people to stop playing sport. Time pressures are particularly prevalent, with 26% and 22% respectively noting work and family commitments as a major factor. Picking up an injury (24%) and losing interest or enthusiasm (20%) are also common factors.

### 7.3 Factors influencing decision to cease sport (%)



Notable differences exist between genders in terms of reasons for dropping out of sport. While the five most common reasons are broadly similar in many cases, some interesting differences exist. Family commitments are a more significant reasons for females stopping participating in a particular sport, while work commitments are more prominent for males. Similarly, picking up an injury and becoming too old are more common among males, perhaps indicative of ceasing a team-based sport that they participated in from childhood.

#### 7.4 Most common factors for ceasing participation in sport (%)

	MALE		FEMALE	
	Reason	%	Reason	%
1	Work commitments	31	Family commitments	26
2	Picked up injury	26	Picked up injury	22
3	Became too old	23	Lost interest/enthusiasm	21
4	Lost interest/enthusiasm	19	Work commitments	21
5	Family commitments	19	Preferred other forms of social activities	15

What this indicates is that lifestyle factors are key to people dropping out of sport – either changing interests (preferring other activities and losing motivation) or changing priorities in life (family or work commitments). Strategies to maintain involvement in sport need to recognise these factors and ensure that the types of activities accessible to people can evolve with these lifestyle changes. Furthermore, specific sports can consider whether they are able to evolve their formats and methods of participation to ensure that participants can maintain involvement into adulthood and continue participating alongside increased work, family or other commitments.



## 8. PARENTS AND SPORT

- Approximately three-quarters (74%) of parents participate in sport with their children on a weekly basis – the majority of which is on a casual basis outside of a club structure.
- Soccer, Gaelic football and swimming are the most common sports played with children. There is a notable difference between the genders in terms of sports such as swimming, with mothers much more likely to participate with their children.
- Those with sons are more likely to play sport with their children, and similarly those with sons are more likely than those with daughters to rate their child's sporting ability as being above average when compared with peers
- Those with sons are more likely to say that having children has a positive effect on their participation in sport. Mothers are more likely to say that they participate in more sport since having children.

### 8.1 Introduction

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Encouraging and maintaining high levels of sport among children is a key policy area within the National Physical Activity Plan published in 2016. The Plan presents a specific action area relating to children noting the importance of experiencing opportunities to be physically active as part of normal living. The Plan recognises that there are a variety of contexts in which physical activity of children needs to be encouraged, and central within this is family life and the importance of growing up in active families.

The role of parents in encouraging children's physical activity is outlined in other sections of this report and the section relating to transitions into sport highlights the role of parents introducing people to a sport that they still participate in as an adult.

This section places a specific focus on the interaction between parents and children in sporting behaviour. It explores the ways in which parents and children participate in sport together – both in the active and social contexts, as well as in both the organised and informal contexts. It also explores the impact that having children has on the parent's own sporting behaviour.

## 8.2 Active participation in sport with children

High numbers of parents participate in sport with their children on a frequent basis. In total, 74% do so at least once a week, with a further 13% participating at least once a month. 8% indicate that they never participate in sport with their children.

Most of the participation with children happens on an informal basis away from organised settings - for example playing football in a garden, going swimming, cycling etc. Seventy percent indicate that they participate in sport with their children in this way at least once a week, compared with 23% who participate in organised sport with their children. Similarly, while 53% never participate in organised sport with their children, only 9% never participate with their children on an informal basis.

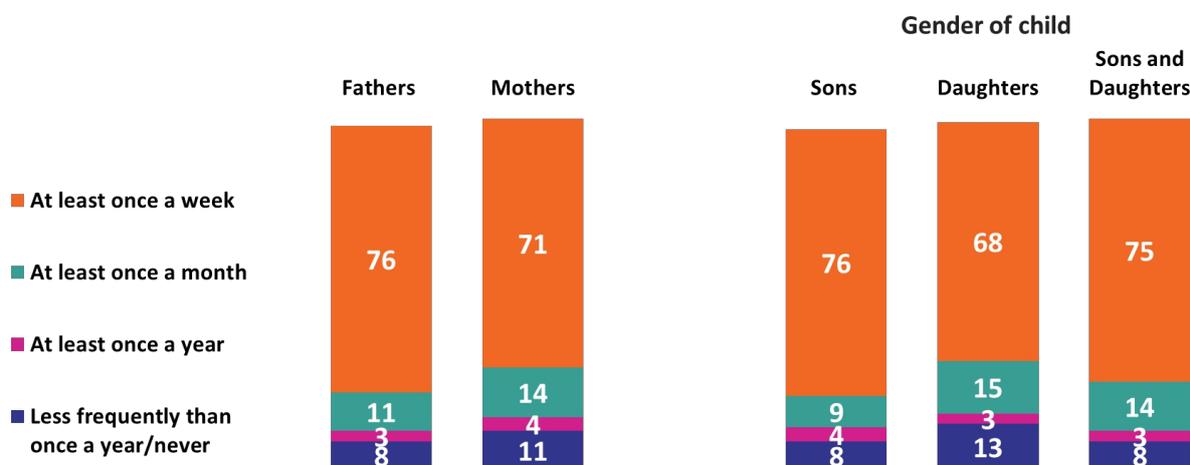
**Figure 8.1 Participation in sport with children (by type) (%)**



This suggests that the nature of participation between parents and children may reflect that of adult sport generally, in that the majority of sport is occurring away from organised sporting structures – in community settings such as gardens, parks, on the street and in other public places. Ensuring easy access to such places is crucial in encouraging and developing children’s involvement in sport.

Gender plays a significant role in terms of the extent of sports participation between parents and children. Those who only have sons are more likely to participate in sport with their sons than those who only have daughters. 76% of those with only sons participate in sport with their children at least once a week, compared with 68% of those with only daughters. Similarly, 13% of those with only daughters (i.e. no sons) never participate in sport with their children compared to 8% of those with only sons.

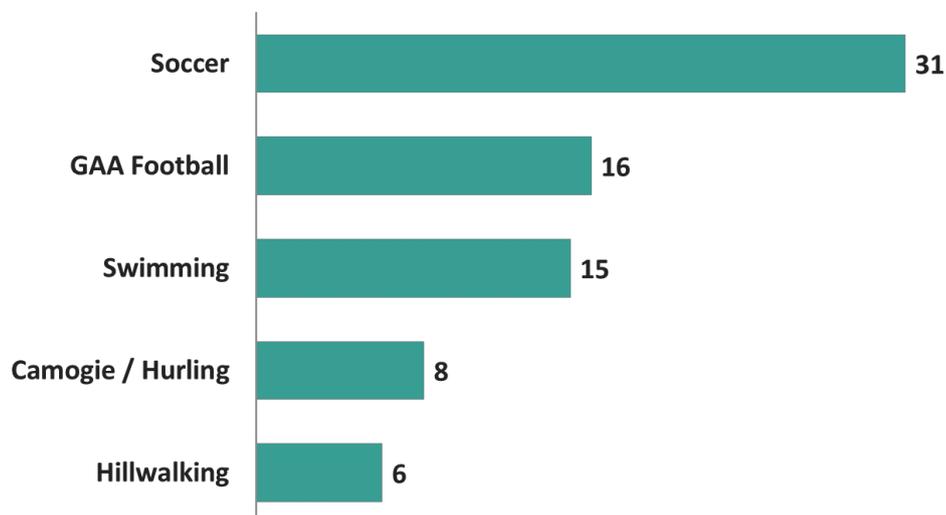
**Figure 8.2 Participation in sport with children (%)**



This difference between the genders presents a number of challenges that are important to consider. It highlights that a stark difference in gender perceptions around sport can occur from a young age. While this is not the sole determinant of the gender divide that exists in terms of sports participation among adults, it may play a key role in terms of forming attitudes towards sports from a young age.

Exploring the types of sports played by parents and children shows that soccer is the most common sport played (31%), followed by Gaelic football (16%) and swimming (15%). As with overall levels of participation, there are notable gender differences with regards to the types of sport played. Fathers who participate in sport with their children are more likely to play Gaelic football and soccer, whereas mothers are more likely to go swimming or cycling. Similar differences exist across the gender of children, with those who only have sons more likely to play soccer or Gaelic football and those with daughters more likely to go swimming.

**Figure 8.3 Types of sports participated in (top 5) (%)**



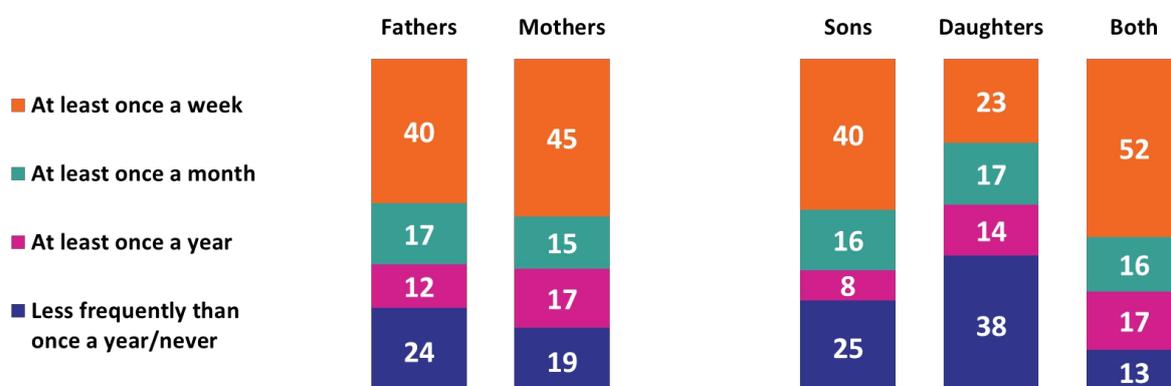
### 8.3 Social participation in sport with children

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In addition to measuring active participation with children, this module also explored social participation. This was done across four contexts – attending an event in which their child was participating, attending an event with their child, volunteering at an event in which their child was participating and being members of the same club with their child.

Just over 4 in 10 (42%) attend a sporting event at least once a week in which their child is participating, with a further 16% attending an event at least once a month. Almost 1 in 5 (19%) have never attended an event in which their child is participating, however over half (54%) of these indicate that they have children aged under five.

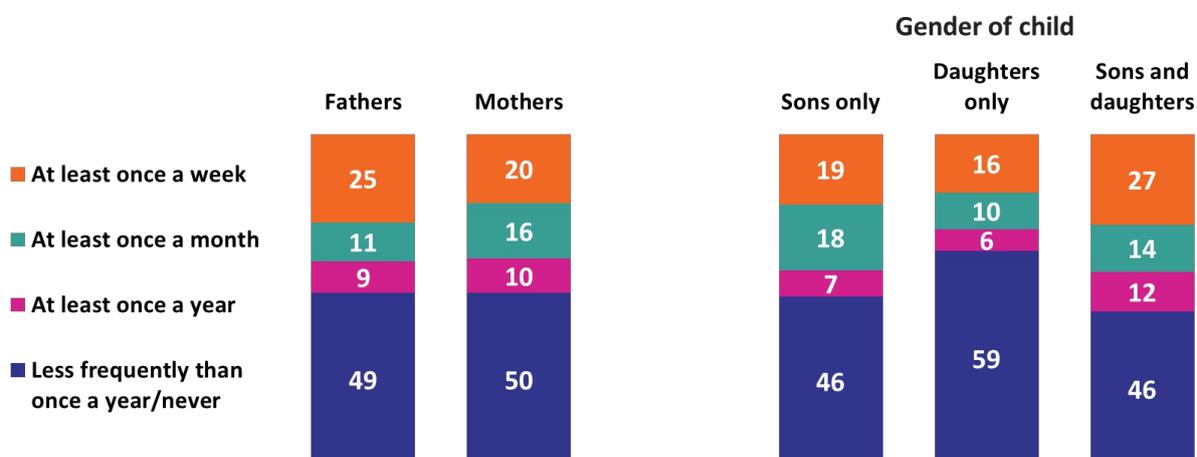
**Figure 8.4 Social participation in sport with children (attending a sports event that the child is involved in) (%)**



A slightly higher proportion of mothers than fathers (45% and 40% respectively) attend an event weekly in which their child is participating while attendance is particularly strong among parents of children aged between 5 and 12 with 54% doing so at least once a week.

There are lower levels of attendance at sporting events with a child in which their child is not participating, with just over 1 in 10 (11%) doing so weekly, 35% doing so at least once a month and 57% at least once a year. Just over a third (34%) of parents never attend this type of sporting event with their child. Fathers are much more likely than mothers to attend an event with their child with 41% doing so at least once a month, compared to 30% of mothers.

**Figure 8.5 Social participation in sport with children (volunteering in a sport that the child is involved in) (%)**



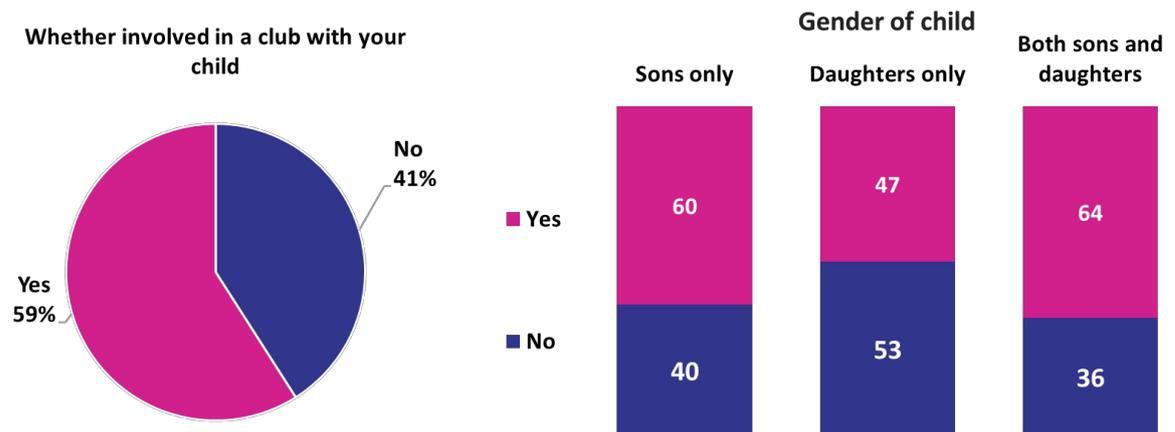
Volunteering is arguably a more important aspect for the functioning of children's sports than for adult sports, and parents have a key role to play in this regard. Results from this module show that just over a third (36%) volunteer at least once a month at a sporting event or club that their child is involved in. Just under half (46%) of parents claim never to have volunteered at a sporting event that their child is involved in – however this varies by age of child with over half (54%) of those with children aged under five claiming never to have volunteered compared with 37% of those with children aged five to twelve.

Throughout the series of ISM studies a difference in nature of volunteering between males and females has been suggested and may be due to females playing a more significant role in certain elements of children's sports (e.g. providing transport). However, results from this module may appear to initially contradict this with no noticeable difference between mothers and fathers in terms of their involvement in volunteering for sport in which their child participates. Broadly equal proportions of mothers (36%) and fathers (37%) indicate that they have volunteered for children's sports at least once a month.

This may appear to contradict earlier findings in relation to gender roles, however this may be explained by the nature of the question asked for this module which asks respondents about volunteering at a sporting event or club, rather than the broader definition used in the main survey which includes other roles such as providing transport, kit maintenance etc.

The final aspect of social participation measured in this module relates to club membership. Over half of parents (59%) who are members of a club indicate that their child or children are also members of this club.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 8.6 Social participation in sport with children (club membership) (%)**

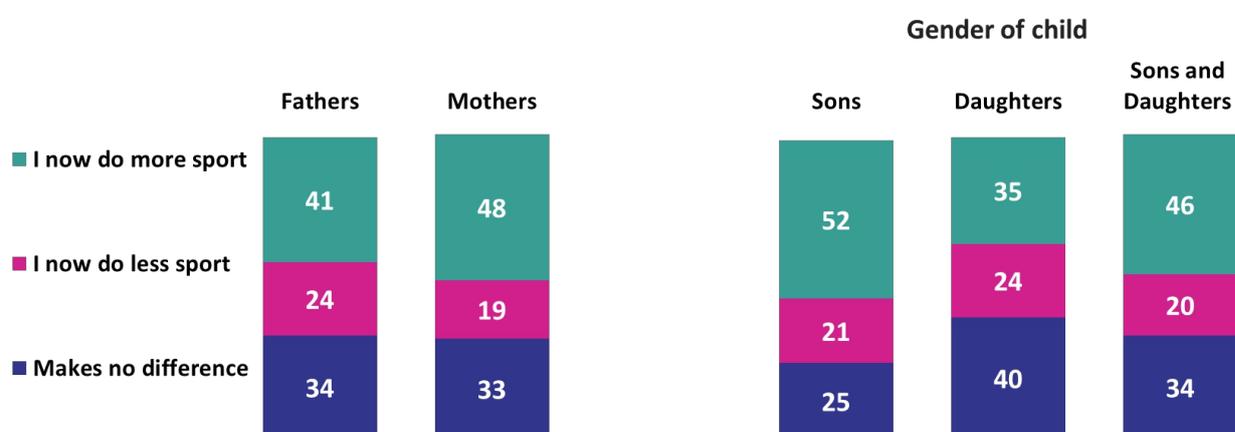


<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, the respondent was asked about the first club identified earlier in the survey

## 8.4 Impact of having children on own sports participation

In addition to measuring sports participated in with their children, this module also explored the impact that having children had on the parent's own participation in sport. In total, 45% identified that having children meant that they did more sport than they did before they had children with 21% indicating that it meant they did less and 33% suggesting that it made no difference to the amount of sport they did.

**Figure 8.7 Impact of having children on parents sporting habits (fathers and mothers with sons, daughters or sons and daughters) (%)**



The gender of the child perhaps has the most significant impact on likelihood to do more or less sport. Just over half (52%) of those who only have sons perceive that they do more sport than before they had children, compared with just over a third (35%) of those with only daughters. Those with only daughters are more likely to indicate that having children has no impact on their sports participation with 40% indicating that this is the case.

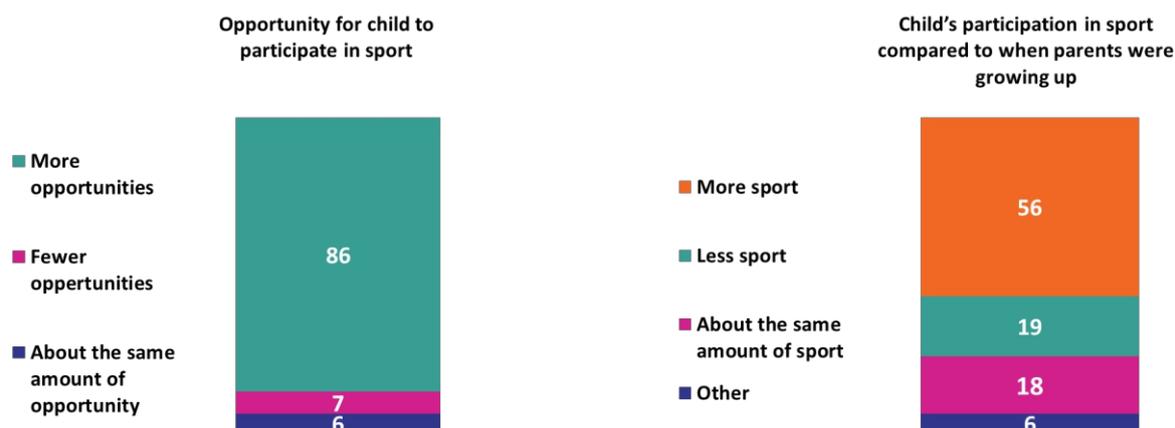
Mothers are more likely to identify that they currently do more sport than before they had children with 48% indicating that this is the case compared to 41% of fathers.

Those with children aged under five were more likely to suggest that having children had a negative impact on their own sports participation. Twenty-eight percent of this group indicated that they did less sport than before they had children, compared with 20% of those with children aged 5 to 12 and 16% of those with children older than this. However, even among parents of those aged under five, a higher proportion (44%) indicated that they are doing more sport than before they had children.

## 8.5 Opportunities for children to participate in sport

When asked about the opportunities available to children today to participate in sport compared to when the parents themselves were children, the vast majority (86%) indicate that they feel there are more opportunities available to children today, with less than 1 in 10 (7%) indicating that they feel there are fewer opportunities available.

**Figure 8.8 Opportunities for children to participate in sport compared to when parents were growing up (%)**



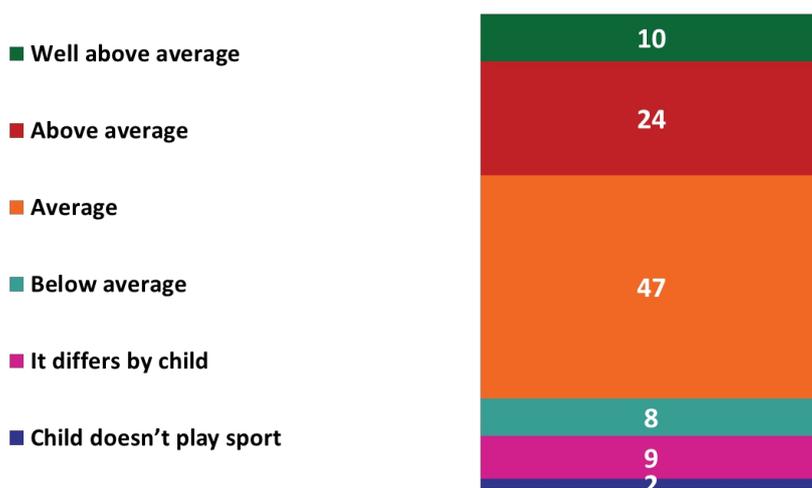
Related to this the majority (56%) of parents feel that their children participate in more sport than they themselves did when they were children. Almost one in five (18%) feel their children do about the same amount of sport as they themselves did, with 19% perceiving that they did less. Among parents of children aged 5 years or older, the proportion indicating that their children do more sport is slightly higher (61%).

The majority of all groups indicate that there is more opportunity for their child to participate in sport compared to when they were growing up, however some differences do exist. Over 9 in 10 (91%) of those with a high income (net monthly household income of €3,600 or higher) indicate that there is more opportunity for their child, compared with over 8 in 10 (81%) of those with a net monthly household income of less than €2,000. However, this difference does not persist for the actual level of sport participated in compared to their own childhood.

These two results in combination firmly indicate that the perceptions of most parents is that there is considerable opportunity for children to get involved in sport, and that this younger generation may be availing of this. While the extent of general inactivity among children is well documented elsewhere and is a key concern, the opportunities exist and are being taken within the sporting context.

Additionally, parents were asked to rate their children’s sporting abilities, with almost half (47%) indicating that their children had a sporting ability that was average when compared with other children of the same age. Roughly a third (34%) indicated that it was above average and 8% feeling that it was below average. Notably a slight difference exists among those with sons and those with daughters. Those with sons are more positive about their children’s sporting abilities with 38% rating their ability as being above average, compared with 24% of those with daughters.

**Figure 8.9 Child’s sporting ability compared to children of the same age (%)**



## 9. POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

### The challenges of maintaining sport within a busy life

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The ISM series suggests an association between economic activity and levels of sports participation. As the general economic situation worsened the levels of sports participation increased, and results from the latest survey show sports participation has declined in an improving economic environment.

The most likely reason for this is increased time pressures due to increased levels of employment and perhaps working longer hours. The survey module exploring transitions out of sport further highlights that being too busy (either due to work or other reasons) is the most common reason for ceasing playing sport. More time spent working means less time available for leisure activities such as playing sport.

This dynamic needs to be at the heart of policies to increase sports participation. Involvement in sport may have appeal or be feasible for many if they can fit it alongside the many other pressing commitments in their lives. It is arguably for this reason that sports such as running and cycling have become increasingly popular in recent years as these activities offer flexibility and are easier to accommodate within busy lifestyles. Although out of the scope of sports participation in this survey, active commuting offers potential for many in employment to incorporate activity into their daily routine.

However, policies may need to go further than this in order to encourage active workplaces and community initiatives to ensure that sport remains accessible and is an easy choice in a busy life.

### The continuous evolution of sport throughout life

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The module included in this year's survey on transitions into sport provides a clear illustration of the evolving nature of sport throughout life. A typical pattern is one of participating in team-based sports such as Gaelic football and soccer during childhood years and subsequently transitioning into individual sports such as exercise, cycling and running when aged in their twenties and thirties.

However, the evolution does not cease at that point and people embark on multiple sporting careers over the course of their life depending on specific interests, abilities and requirements. This continues into older age with a third of those aged 65 and older who are active in sport having commenced playing that sport since turning 55 years old.

This continuous evolution needs to be recognised in the context of encouraging more people to be active in sport. The proportion who have quit sport is higher than the proportion who

have never played it, and efforts to increase participation in sport need to include a focus on encouraging people to recommence activity, rather than starting activity for the first time. While the specific sport previously played may no longer be suited to an individual's circumstances or abilities, the results from this wave demonstrate that sport can adapt and evolve across the life course.

In order to facilitate this continuously evolving sporting life, participants and would-be participants should seek contact with a multitude of sports and be encouraged to participate and try new sports regardless of age or ability.

A further consideration within this is ensuring ease of access to appropriate sports for those with a long-term illness, health problem or disability. Despite these groups having lower levels of sports participation at an overall level there are a number of activities (such as swimming, dancing, weights, yoga and Pilates) which have similar levels of participation regardless of any illness, health problem and disability. These provide opportunities to maintain and enhance sports participation regardless of physical abilities.

### The role of sports clubs in ensuring access to sport

One of the key issues that is observed in each wave of the ISM is the continued trend towards sports participation on an individual basis, which in turn suggests a more limited role for the club within overall sporting context. However, this is far from the case and the role of the club remains central to sports participation – in both the active and social contexts.

Among those taking up sports, clubs along with sports facilities are the most common location for getting involved. This is not just the case for team-based sports, where the club by definition plays a key role, but also for those taking up individual sports. It is straightforward to take up an individual sport away from the club environment, however almost a quarter of people taking up an individual sport do so within a club environment. While the reasons for them doing so is not clear through this wave of the research, it is likely that the many advantages offered by a club (facilities, expertise and social outlet) are key factors.

Sports clubs remain key in maintaining the social structure of sport, facilitating vital roles to the maintenance and development of sport – volunteering, children's sport and many other elements of the development of sport.

## Role of social circles in encouraging greater sports participation

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In addition to the role played by sports clubs in fostering and developing sports participation, results from this wave of the ISM clearly highlight the role of social circles and peers in encouraging people to get active.

Friends and family play a key role – both in childhood and adulthood – and the importance of social circles in this respect is more significant than other influencers such as advertising or television. In turn, social circles drive community initiatives, and many of these successes such as parkrun, walking groups and meet and train groups play an important role in encouraging activity and increasing participation in sport.

Strategies to encourage greater uptake of sports need to recognise the role of communities, social circles and peers in forging a path to encouraging increased activity.

## Gender roles defined from an early age

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A concerning result from this wave of the survey is the apparent gender differences that exist in terms of children's sports. Those with daughters are less likely to participate in sport with their children than those with sons. Similarly, parents of daughters have a less favourable opinion of their child's sporting ability than parents of sons. It is clear that a gender differential in terms of sport is being introduced from an early age.

The extent to which this influences the gender differential in adult participation in sport is unclear. It can only be assumed that if gender stereotypes are being instilled in childhood, lower levels of exposure to sport may negatively affect later sports participation.

Females are less likely to participate in sport than males. Despite a narrowing of this gender divide, it continues to present a range of challenges both in terms of sport and wider health implications. Females are also less likely to have a social involvement in sport, and less likely than males to have a coaching or administrative role in sport. These differences in key influencing roles in sport potentially perpetuate gender differences that exist.

While this module only provides a very limited perspective on gender roles in childhood, it highlights a significant concern for the longer term development of sport.







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