

Section 5

Building Stronger and More Inclusive Communities

While we experience sport's benefits most immediately as individuals, sport also plays a major role in strengthening communities by bringing people together, building social capital and fostering greater inclusion of equity-deserving groups.



Sport can help **strengthen communities** by **building social capital** and **fostering greater inclusion** of equity-deserving groups.



There are many individual and community benefits to social participation within a community, including improved mental and physical health, higher academic achievement, and better employment prospects.²¹¹ However, as of 2015, 38% of Canadians reported feeling like they didn't have a stake in their local community.²¹² Sport and recreation groups are the most popular type of community group, with almost one third of Canadians being involved in a local sport and recreation group.²¹³ Canadians know that community sport is one way to strengthen feelings of belonging: 85% of Canadians agree that sport participation builds stronger communities.²¹⁴

Participation in sporting events can act as a driver for social inclusion and integration, providing social opportunities for community members to develop friendships and networks.²¹⁵ Community sport offers valuable opportunities for developing new friendships, with 36.8% of women and 33.3% of men ranking 'making new friends and acquaintances' as a very important benefit gained from sport participation.²¹⁶ Nearly 1 in 4 Canadians feel a sense of community as fans of a sports team; this is higher than for those identifying with either a school or religious community.²¹⁷ For example, more than 90% of Canadians said that cheering on our athletes at the Vancouver Olympics in 2010 boosted their sense of national pride.²¹⁸ Sport participation can build community spirit, promote intercultural learning, and strengthen shared beliefs and values.²¹⁹

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Building Social Capital

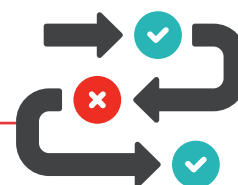
Community sport has the potential to help bring individuals and communities together, create a sense of community, encourage active citizenship, and foster trust, reciprocity, and a sense of security among community members. Together, these elements are the social capital of every community.

Involvement with community organizations, particularly volunteer experiences, are one of the key components to increasing social capital in a community. Participating in volunteer organizations provides human connections and enhances feelings of belonging and shared values. Among life-long volunteers, 65% report that their first experience volunteering was through sport and recreation.²²⁰ In fact, as of 2012, volunteerism in sport and recreation accounted for 19% of total volunteer hours.²²¹

Volunteer-run sport organizations provide a number of opportunities for social capital to develop, including:²²²

- Building new relationships;
- Having more contact with peers;
- Integrating immigrants;
- Fostering civic engagement; and
- Building trust.

Sport is being used successfully to **link newcomers** to key community services and supports.



Sport involvement has been found to be a particularly strong predictor of social connectedness, even more so than involvement in other community organizations.²²³ Adolescent involvement in non-school team sport has been shown to increase civic engagement, including political voting and signing petitions.²²⁴ Relationships and trust developed through participation in sport works to both strengthen existing social networks and develop new community connections.²²⁵ Sport clubs in particular contribute to both the development and maintenance of relationships within groups of people with similar status (known as “bonding social capital”), and the creation of relationships between individuals of different social groups (e.g., different ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds; known as “bridging social capital”).²²⁶

Social capital is also related to the level of trust, shared values, and cooperative norms present in a community. For example, local children and adolescents who participate in sport clubs are more willing to help out friends, neighbours and other community members, including newcomers to the country.²²⁷ By increasing social capital, local sport clubs have the ability to foster fair and inclusive cooperation through the development of norms like tolerance and non-discrimination. In this way, promoting

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community sport can lead to the development of more inclusive communities.

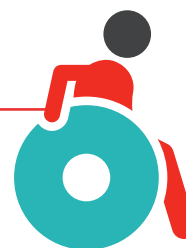
Helping Newcomers Integrate More Quickly into Canadian Society

In 2019, permanent and non-permanent immigration was responsible for over 80% of Canada’s population growth.²²⁸ Sport can be an important tool in integrating newcomers into their local communities by facilitating community building, socialization, English language acquisition, and fun!²²⁹ However, there are important considerations around how to promote sport and recreation participation among immigrant and refugee community members.

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Evidence shows that participation in physical activity can reduce depression, stress and anxiety for immigrants.²³⁰ Newcomers to Canada have reported having more meaningful social interactions while playing and watching sports than they have in other settings, like in the workplace.²³¹ Of new Canadians, 87% agree that watching their children play sports makes them feel more connected to the community.²³² In addition to facilitating participation within typically Canadian social circles, providing sport and recreation opportunities for refugees and immigrants to participate with members of their homeland communities enables individuals to connect, acting as sources of guidance, comfort and empathy to newcomers.²³³

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However, immigrants and refugees face additional barriers to participation, including language barriers, lack of familiarity with the activities, lack of information on how to register, discrimination and alienation.^{234, 235} Designing programs to be affordable, locally accessible, and with cultural customs in mind (e.g., offering girls- and women-only options, programming with flexible clothing options) would help promote community sport participation among Canadian newcomers.^{236, 237}

Participation in community sport among youth and adolescents provides ample opportunity to engage with local youth. Participation in youth sport among new immigrants is positively associated with personal contact with local peers, leading to reports of more intercultural relationships between youths and stronger feelings of cultural integration.²³⁸ Immigrant children who participate in sport clubs are more likely to report social acceptance and respect from their peers.²³⁹

Fostering Greater Inclusion of People with Disabilities

People with disabilities also face many forms of social, economic and political exclusion. These may be intentional or unintentional. Even in the absence of negative stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes, people without disabilities may underestimate the capacities of people with disabilities and feel unsure about how to accommodate and include them in day-to-day activities.

Sport provides opportunities for people with disabilities to build their self-confidence and self-esteem, enhance their social skills and networks, and become more motivated and independent.

The 2017 Canadians with Disabilities survey reported that an estimated 1 in 5 Canadians over the age of 15 has a disability, including 13% of youths (ages 15–24).²⁴⁰ Over 40% of Canadians with a disability reported having a “more severe” or “severe” disability, which tends to be correlated with lower rates of employment and enrolment in school, and higher rates of poverty.²⁴¹ About 1 in 3 individuals aged 3–21 with severe developmental disabilities play team sports; however, while there has been progress made in offering sport and physical activity programs to small children with developmental disabilities, far fewer programs exist for adolescents and adults.²⁴² Adult women with a disability reported less participation in sport than their able-bodied peers (13% vs 20%).²⁴³

Individuals with disabilities have reported that their involvement in sport played a role in their development of self-confidence, self-worth and identity. Sport programming can also provide opportunities for developing social connections with peers both with and without disabilities.^{244, 245} These opportunities for forming social networks benefit both individuals with disabilities as well as their caregivers: participation in sport has been shown to decrease feelings of isolation for both parties.²⁴⁶ While information on program availability can be hard to find, participation in sport leagues both provides individuals with disabilities with role models and offers the opportunity to serve as role models themselves.²⁴⁷

Children with disabilities tend to be more sedentary than their typically-abled peers, including spending more time engaging in screen-based activities.²⁴⁸ However, research about sport and physical activity in children living with chronic mental health conditions and disabilities shows largely positive outcomes, including increased acceptance, social functioning,

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and quality of life, and decreased symptoms (e.g., lower vocal tic severity for physically active children with Tourette syndrome, and less arterial stiffness in active children with congenital heart disease).²⁴⁹ Regular physical activity in children with brain-based (neurodevelopmental) disabilities have been associated with increased self-concept and self-worth, just as we see in neurotypical children and youth.²⁵⁰ In fact, children and youth with brain-based disabilities seem to show even greater benefits in executive function as a result of physical activity than their active neurotypical peers.²⁵¹

Parents of kids with disabilities are often unsure of what sport programming is available to their children, or whether or not there are inclusive options. This can serve as a barrier for sport participation in this community. Ensuring that children are involved in sport and physical activity is vital for developing a lifelong positive association with sport. Health care professionals should become familiar with community-based inclusive programming, including disability-specific sport organizations, so they can better advise parents.²⁵² Sport and recreation providers should also work with health care providers, parents, and advocates to provide specialized staff training, and ensure their programming is accessible and supportive to kids with all levels of abilities.²⁵³ In order to do this, government officials must be willing to provide funding to support these community initiatives, as well as subsidies for families with children and youth with disabilities, to help decrease barriers to participation.²⁵⁴

LGBTQ+ Inclusion and Representation

Despite recent efforts to increase participation by sexual minorities in sport, 81% of Canadians have witnessed or experienced homophobia in sport. Among a large international sample of sport participants, 82% witnessed homophobic or transphobic language in sport in the last six months, and 90% considered homophobia and transphobia to be a current problem in sport.²⁵⁵ Similar findings have been demonstrated consistently across the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and the European Union over the past five years.²⁵⁶ The experiences of gay Canadians reflect these findings: 1 in 4 gay men did not play youth team sports themselves, with nearly half of these men reporting that negative experiences in school turned them off team sport participation.²⁵⁷

While sexual minority youths would benefit from the physical, psychological and social benefits of sport participation, implicit and explicit acts of homophobia are common across sport organizations and stand in the way of LGBTQ+ youth participation.²⁵⁸ Of Canadians, 70% believe youth team sports are not welcoming or safe for gay, lesbian and bisexual people.²⁵⁹ These beliefs are reflected in the participation rates: gay, lesbian and bisexual Canadian youth are still participating in sport at a lower rate than their heterosexual peers.²⁶⁰ Gay, lesbian and bisexual youth are less likely to participate in both formal sport (with a coach) and informal sport (without a coach) than their heterosexual peers.²⁶¹ In addition to serving as a barrier to participation for LGBTQ+-identifying youths, heterosexist language and other heteronormative assumptions serve to exclude families with LGBTQ+-identifying parents.²⁶² This isolates both the parents and their children from participating fully in the community.

These social and safety barriers to participation are having a significant negative impact on the LGBTQ+ community. Members of this community suffer from a variety of mental health concerns at a higher rate than other Canadians, but supportive friends, family and community can work to combat these issues.²⁶³ Working to create awareness and promote inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals within community sport by educating teachers and coaches, providing

funding for program development, and providing a voice for community advocacy will make significant improvements in the lives of all Canadians.

Renewing Indigenous Culture

In Canada, significant disparities exist between the social, economic and cultural opportunities available to Indigenous peoples and to Canadians on the whole. These disparities are reflected in data such as increased levels of obesity-related chronic disease, substance abuse and mental health concerns, unemployment, and urban poverty in Indigenous populations relative to non-Indigenous people across Canada.^{264, 265} Sport offers particular benefits to Indigenous communities in terms of physical and mental health benefits, building cultural pride, social cohesion, self-esteem, and transferable skills among participants and volunteers.

Sport plays an important role in the cultural identity of Indigenous communities and has been intricately woven into the colonial history of Canadian-Indigenous relations.²⁶⁶ In spite of the cultural significance of community sport, Indigenous populations show a slightly lower sport participation rate than the Canadian average, with 26.1% of Indigenous respondents indicating that they play sport (the Canadian national average is 26.7%).²⁶⁷ When broken down further, we find that Indigenous women play sport at a slightly higher rate than non-Indigenous women (23.6% vs. 21.6%), while Indigenous men participate at a significantly lower rate than non-Indigenous men (28.4% vs. 35.7%). This may be in part due to the difference in the Euro-centric definition of sport that Canadians tend to use, which does not always include things like cultural activities (Indigenous dance and hunting) or traditional Indigenous games.²⁶⁸ Many of these traditional activities were replaced with Euro-centric sports and games that were deemed “appropriate” during the long history of Canadian residential schools, a recent trauma which continues to impact Indigenous sport participation and identity to this day.²⁶⁹

Among Canadian youth, girls who self-identified as Indigenous reported the lowest participation in sport

(24%) relative to their Asian, White, South Asian and Black peers (32%–45%).²⁷⁰ This data is particularly concerning when we remember that nearly half of the Indigenous population in Canada is composed of people aged 24 and younger.²⁷¹ Systemic barriers including disempowerment, lack of resources, geographic remoteness and safety concerns all contribute to the significantly lower rates of sport participation among Indigenous youth.²⁷² However, the data shows that sport provides Indigenous youth with positive development opportunities, including strengthening resiliency, incorporation of Indigenous values and traditions, cultural pride, promotion of culture and education, and improvements in physical and mental health.^{273, 274}

Support for both reducing barriers to mainstream sport participation for Indigenous people, as well as financial and governmental support for Indigenous-specific sport opportunities like the Arctic Winter Games and the North American Indigenous Games, will contribute to increasing participation rates for Indigenous people. Steps towards meaningful inclusion include incorporating Indigenous values and traditions in the creation of culturally-specific programs.²⁷⁵ As McHugh and colleagues found in their research into urban Canadian Indigenous youth and adults, “in order for sport programs to be successful, they need to be community-driven and community-based.”²⁷⁶ Crucially, this must involve inclusion of Indigenous voices in the development of community sport programming.

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Experiences of Racialized Peoples

Racialization, or the ascription of “race” and “racial categories” to non-white bodies and the subsequent oppression as a result of those labels, has been a deep part of Canadian history that continues to impact our identity today.²⁷⁷ While the specifics of which groups are considered racialized are ever-changing, there has been a consistent and systematic exclusion of Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian bodies from mainstream Canadian rhetoric. This includes both an implicit and explicit dismissal of the needs and experiences of individuals with racialized identities from within the sport community.²⁷⁸

Self-identified “visible minorities” in Canada reported participating in sport at a slightly lower rate than the rest of the Canadian population (25.2% vs 26.7%).²⁷⁹ In particular, women who identified as visible minorities had a significantly lower participation rate than the rate for the total female population of Canada (12.7% vs 19.7%); this is likely a reflection of the intersectional oppression faced by members of this community.²⁸⁰

Recent interventions have begun to push back against the white colonial rhetoric that erases racialized groups from Canadian sport. Hijabi Ballers in Toronto provides an opportunity for Muslim women to play basketball in an inclusive and welcoming environment and explore their passion for sport.²⁸¹ Since its inception nearly 10 years ago, the program has grown and now offers bursaries for Muslim women to become certified coaches or referees,

providing opportunities for sport sector employment and a means to give back to their community.²⁸²

The APNA Hockey program was founded in 2017, directed at developing hockey talent in the South Asian community.²⁸³ Other ethnically specific competitions have existed in Canada for some time (e.g., the Asian Hockey Championship and the Maccabi National Jewish Hockey Tournament). But the APNA Hockey program seeks to provide something different to the members of its community by fostering new skills, providing South Asian mentorship, and connecting its members with national and international scouts and sport management personnel, with long-term goals to expand to other sports.²⁸⁴ Providing community support for organizations like APNA Hockey and Black Girl Hockey Club,²⁸⁵ as well as including the voices of organizers and members of these and similar groups in conversations on how to increase engagement by members of racialized communities in community sport, will be vital starting points from which to expand sport participation in these communities.

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Intersectionality

While each of these identities pose significant potential barriers to participation on their own, many individuals will find their identities crossing between more than one of these groups. The intersection of multiple marginalized identities can result in an amplification of barriers faced by any one identity on its own. This concept has been termed intersectionality and is defined by the Ontario Human Rights Commission as “intersectional

Prioritizing research into intersectional identities and barriers to inclusion **should be a national priority.**

oppression [that] arises out of the combination of various oppressions which, together, produce something unique and distinct from any one form of discrimination standing alone ... [taking] into account the historical, social and political context and [recognizing] the unique experience of the individual based on the intersection of all relevant grounds.”²⁸⁶

Bisexual and trans people are overrepresented among low-income Canadians.²⁸⁷ We know that members of both the LGBTQ+ community and low-income Canadians face barriers to participation in community sport; by considering the fact that some members of the LGBTQ+ community are also more likely to be part of a lower income bracket, we see the potential for an additive relationship between barriers faced by members of both communities.

Similarly, gender and disability are both identities that impact the experiences of sport participants. Girls and women who identify as disabled are more likely to report lack of confidence, injury and body image as barriers to sport participation relative to girls and women without a disability.²⁸⁸ We know that body image and confidence are already potential barriers for women’s participation in sport, even before considering disability status.²⁸⁹ Considering the duality of identity for women and girls with disabilities shows us the deeper barriers to participation by those who share membership in both communities.

While we know that those with intersectional identities face additional barriers to inclusion in community sport, there is still a dearth of data available to fully understand the experiences of these individuals. Prioritizing research into these questions should be a national priority.

Specific research questions could include:

- What are the positive and negative experiences of racialized women and girls in different sporting roles (e.g., athletes, parents, coaches, referees, administrators, spectators and/or sport journalists) and in different levels/forms of sport participation (e.g., recreation, exercise, dance, competition, high-performance, community-based) in Canada?²⁹⁰
- Understanding participation rates in disability sport by gender across levels of involvement (e.g., organizational, coaching, athletic) and across context (e.g., high-performance, recreational, school), from a Canadian perspective.²⁹¹
- What are the experiences of girls, women, two-spirited and trans athletes/participants with anti-Indigenous racism and misogyny? What can be done to address anti-Indigenous racism and patriarchy in sport for Indigenous girls, women, two-spirited and trans individuals?²⁹²

These examples illustrate the many layers of complexity involved in an intersectional approach, and demonstrate the importance of considering how experiences with sport and sport participation are impacted by the many intersecting factors involved in an individual’s identity. It is crucial to consider these factors when designing interventions to increase the accessibility of community sport to members of these groups. For example, knowing that many people with disabilities also face financial barriers, it would be important to include financial subsidies and accessible public transit options when designing sport programming for Canadians with disabilities. Similarly, when designing facilities and programming with racialized groups in mind, including childcare options will ensure that caregivers in these communities will be able to take full advantage of the available programming. Failing to consider these intersecting factors will impede success of targeted program interventions for the most marginalized among us.