

Why Don't People Participate?

Physical activity can help improve health and create opportunities to build social connections. People do not participate in physical activity, even though they know it is good for them, for a number of reasons.

Some Physical Activity Statistics

The following statistics show a relationship between physical activity rates and life situation.

- Physical activity rates are lower among women, older persons, aboriginal peoples, and persons who are members of ethnic groups.¹
- According to the 1998/99 National Population Health Survey, about 62% of persons with a household income of \$20,000 or less were considered inactive. The same survey also showed that about 62% of persons without a high school education were considered inactive.¹
- Lower income Canadians are more likely to report that barriers such as access to safe places to walk, cycle and be active prevent them from taking part in regular physical activity. They are also more likely to report excessively busy streets prevent them from taking part in physical activity.²

BARRIERS TO RECREATION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The following sections on key and general barriers to participation are adapted from “Fact Sheet 4: Barriers to recreation” of the Everybody gets to play™ toolkit, an initiative of Canadian Parks and Recreation Association. www.everybodygetstoplay.ca³

Key barriers

Low-income families and their children face significant barriers to recreation. Many of the key barriers have existed for decades. A 1994 Canadian study found that recreation services have a variety of systemic barriers:

- **socio-economic barriers** – the cost of recreation is prohibitive
- **organizational barriers** – a lack of supportive policies, facilities and financial resources
- **communications barriers** – information about recreation resources and services doesn't reach low-income families
- **cultural barriers** – visible minorities feel uncomfortable and unwelcome
- **gender barriers** – there is a bias in favour of men, especially in sports



A joint initiative of
BC Recreation and Parks
Association and the Heart
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General Barriers

Local government recreation departments

Local government recreation departments are generally the main providers of physical activity opportunities in communities, however, they often:

- assist only those who ask for help – many people affected by poverty are too proud to ask
- ask people to prove that they need help – a humiliating experience
- do not work with other service providers that are trusted by low-income individuals and families
- respond to budget cuts by cutting subsidy programs or promotions that may increase demand
- lack creative ways to involve individuals and families on low incomes in creating and implementing physical activity opportunities

Processes and structures

- Staff can be insensitive and unwelcoming.
- Low income community members are not involved in decision-making or planning.
- Information on fee assistance opportunities is often difficult to find, as there is fear that subsidies will be abused.
- Opportunities are not tailored to low-income adults (initiatives are often aimed at increasing physical activity among children, youth and older adults).
- Sexual stereotyping and biases against gay, lesbian and transgendered people may discourage participation.

Programming and infrastructure

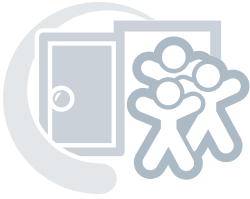
- Traditional programming may not be flexible enough to meet needs of people affected by poverty.
- Some adults prefer drop-in or loosely organized activities, particularly for shift workers or those who work on-call.
- Information about programs does not reach low-income individuals and families.
- People affected by poverty may not feel comfortable participating with wealthier participants.
- Playing fields and other recreation facilities are not available or are too far away.

Economics

- Program fees are too high.
- Equipment and clothing, especially for sports and physical activities, is too costly.
- People affected by poverty may have to work more than one job

Transportation

- Low-income individuals and families may not own vehicles.
- Parents may not let children participate in activities that require transportation if they cannot share in driving or pay for gas.
- Bus systems are often inadequate and many low-income neighbourhoods do not have bus routes, or routes with appropriate schedules.
- Low-income individuals or families may not have money for bus transportation.
- Walking and biking trails may not connect to form a viable transportation option to and from activities.



Social and physical skills

- People affected by poverty may have fewer opportunities to build the skills they need to participate.
- If they didn't participate when they were children, people may lack the social and team skills, and physical ability to participate at the same level as others.

Societal attitudes

- Poverty can be ignored and well hidden within communities.
- "Consumerism" is a significant barrier. Individuals on low incomes may feel inadequate and avoid activities that require expensive clothing, uniforms or equipment.
- Blame and judgment are common public attitudes.
- Some people feel "If I have to pay so should they."
- Some people feel "It is their choice not to participate because they are adults."

Individual and family perceptions, attitudes and knowledge

Individuals and families affected by poverty may:

- not know how to access physical activity or feel unwelcome
- not be familiar with recreation settings
- have low self-esteem or lack social support to get involved
- lack childcare
- feel isolated and not wanted by the community
- fear being judged and stigmatized
- lack time due to work (particularly shift work) and family commitments
- experience existing chronic disease, mental illness (depression), physical pains and related health concerns

Barriers for cultural and visible minorities

Aboriginal people, recent immigrants and visible minorities are more likely to live in poverty than other Canadians. They also face additional barriers to accessing physical activity and recreation.

- New immigrants may not know how Canadian recreation facilities work, or what goes on in recreation settings.
- They may feel intimidated and excluded as a result.
- Cultures view physical activity in different ways and beliefs vary – some cultural beliefs prevent women from wearing bathing suits or swimming in public, but pools may not accommodate alternatives.
- Recreation facilities may not have staff trained to make people from all cultures feel welcome.
- Recreation departments may not have staff who speak languages other than English or French.
- They may not be able to translate information on programs, or develop materials in other languages.
- Recreation programs are rarely based on community needs assessments, and may be irrelevant to some of the cultures in a community.

Barriers in small, rural and remote communities

People in small, rural and remote communities face more barriers to physical activity than those in urban settings.

- Participation in indoor and/or organized activities can involve a lot of travel.
- Many communities have no public transportation.
- Transportation and outdoor participation can be particularly challenging in colder weather.
- Infrastructure may not support safe walking, roller blading or cycling.
- There may be a lack of public amenities, such as community centres, public fitness facilities and swimming pools. Private facilities, such as fitness clubs and arenas, may not offer programming, outreach or support to people affected by poverty.
- Wildlife, such as bears or cougars, may deter regular outdoor activity and transportation.
- In small and rural communities, volunteers are spread thin. It is harder to find support for programs aimed at individuals and families on low incomes.

Barriers for women

Women face barriers to participation in sports and other physical activities, including:

- stereotypes about female participation
- choosing sedentary activities
- lack of female role models
- family responsibilities such as caring for children
- dislike of competitive programs
- limited choices and awareness of opportunities
- lack of basic skills in sport or team play
- safety concerns
- little family support
- cultural restrictions
- lack of money to pay fees or purchase equipment
- getting teased about inappropriate clothing, equipment or skills

What do low-income women say?

The following quotes are from research projects conducted by the University of British Columbia, which involved women on low income and community practitioners collaborating to plan effective physical activity opportunities.

Affordability

"If you don't have any money, you can't get there and you can't do anything if you don't have any money. You have to have money. You need money to buy tickets. You need money to have proper apparel." (Shelly)⁴



Depression & Social Isolation

“If you’re really isolated and you’re depressed ‘cause you’re isolated and don’t have any friends and then your health deteriorates.” (Kelly)⁴

“I was in an abusive relationship and for a long time I was afraid to go out the front door. Once the kids and I were on our own, we had to move to a rough part of town where there are few sport facilities or programs. It is impossible to lug three kids and a stroller onto a bus to get across town where the good programs are and I would never go out at night.” (Project participant)⁵

Fee Assistance Process

“I was trying to get some kind of swimming entry for myself and my daughter... They were really putting me through the wringer and giving me the run-around for everything... I didn’t understand why they were even offering this [fee assistance] if they weren’t going to help. In some ways I felt stereotyped there, like I was begging...” (Deena)⁴

In a 2008 Canadian study, the following were identified as factors that influenced physical activity participation among low socio-economic status women.⁶

External Factors

- Built environment
- Costs
- Climate
- Subsidy process
- Marketing
- Transportation

Personal Influencing Factors

- Life transitions
- Family influence
- Spousal support
- Health issues

Community Influencing Factors

- Lack of childcare
- Isolation

Internal Factors

- Fatigue
- Guilt
- Culture
- Racism/ Discrimination
- Body weight/image
- Skill Level
- Priority

Organizational Supporting Factors

- Family
- Partnerships
- Professional Support

Interpersonal Supporting Factors

- Champions
- Friends
- Spousal Support

These are just some of the barriers and support factors that influence participation in physical activity. To determine what factors are at play in your community it is important to ensure those who are not participating have an ongoing voice.

WHY INVEST IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY?

Health Benefits of Physical Activity

Regular physical activity has recognized health benefits.

- Significantly reduces the risk of coronary heart disease and stroke
- Reduces diabetes
- Prevents site specific cancers (such as colon, breast and lung cancer)
- Combats osteoporosis⁷
- Protects against obesity and assists in weight control
- Fosters development of healthy muscles, bones and joints
- Increases strength and endurance
- Contributes to mental health by protecting against stress and anxiety and reducing depression⁸

Social Benefits of Physical Activity

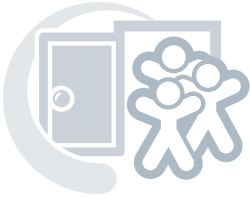
Physical activity opportunities can promote social inclusion in communities.

- Social inclusion is the when resources and opportunities are equitably distributed to enable people to live comfortably, to take part in society and to feel that they are valued and respected members of the community.⁹
- Physical activity can provide opportunities for people to develop social networks and reduce social isolation, loneliness and alienation.
- Physical activity can be a vehicle for community engagement and building relationships with community members.¹⁰
- Physical activity can build self-esteem and positive self-image, which are foundations to personal quality of life.⁷

Cost Savings of Physical Activity

Health Canada estimates that for every \$1 invested in physical activity alone, there is a long-term savings of \$11 in health care.¹¹

- Physical inactivity costs Canadians an estimated \$5.3 billion annually in health care costs.¹²
- In BC, physical inactivity costs us an estimated \$211 million annually in direct health care costs, including hospital, physician, drug, institutional and other costs.⁸
- If physical activity rates in BC increase by just 10%, the province could save \$18.3 million in direct health care costs.⁸
- Sedentary Canadians are 60% more likely to suffer from depression than physically active Canadians. If 5% of mental illness cases in BC can be avoided through regular physical activity, it is estimated that an additional \$81.2 million (in both direct and indirect costs) could be saved.⁸



Moving Beyond Blame³

A common but often unacknowledged sentiment in mainstream culture categorizes “the poor” as:

- **Deserving** - people like the disabled who are poor through no fault of their own
- **Undeserving** - people like single moms or people with addictions who did something “wrong” and who we blame for their poverty

By categorizing people in this way, factors such as domestic violence, cultural history and child abuse, which can contribute to poverty, are ignored. Shifting attitudes from blame to acceptance is the first step toward inclusion.

References

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