

A Look at Leisure

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No. 25

CURRENT RECREATION PARTICIPATION

This bulletin looks at the participation of Albertans in a broad range of leisure activities. The findings are based on the 1988 *General Recreation Survey*, conducted by Alberta Recreation and Parks. Comparisons with findings of previous surveys show how preferences for recreation activities are changing in Alberta.



Alberta

RECREATION AND PARKS
Recreation Development Division

INTRODUCTION

Awareness of participation rates and trends is a basic aspect of recreation research. It is also essential to the recreation practitioner concerned with meeting consumer needs, keeping programs current, and anticipating future demand.

The participation data obtained from the *1988 General Recreation Survey* provide an up-to-date indication of the current recreation preferences of Albertans. The 1988 findings are discussed in the first part of the bulletin. The second part looks at how these preferences are changing by comparing the 1988 survey findings with participation data from the 1984 and 1981 *Public Opinion Surveys on Recreation*.

A great deal of recreation research is concerned with trying to explain recreation activity preferences and participation patterns. The bulletin describes how participation varies for different sub-groups of the Alberta population. For example, participation patterns differ according to the size of the community, household income, and age.

HIGHLIGHTS

These are a few of the main findings from the 1988 survey:

- Activities with the highest household participation rates are walking for pleasure, driving, gardening, doing a craft or hobby, and visiting a museum, live theatre, art gallery, etc.
- Physical activities with the highest household participation rates are walking, bicycling, swimming, dancing, ice skating, and golf. These activities also ranked highly in 1984 and 1981, although some of the activities have shown a decline in participation during the 1980s.
- The top-ranked activities were very consistent for the Alberta population regardless of community size, household income, or type of household.
- Household participation in many activities appears to have declined during the 1980s. Activities with the greatest drop in participation are jogging, rollerskating, dancing, the arts (music, drama, writing), camping, football, and ice skating.



HOUSEHOLD PARTICIPATION

The survey looked at household participation in 65 activities. These included creative, cultural, and general recreation activities, as well as many outdoor and sports pursuits. For each activity, it was possible to identify "participating households". These were households having at least one member who participated in the activity during the previous year. **These participation rates therefore reflect the involvement of both adults and children.**

The 20 activities with the highest levels of household participation are shown in Figure I. Although these are the "Top 20" activities in the province, it is evident that the percentages of participating households differ considerably (from 89% of households for walking for pleasure to 34% of households for softball/baseball).

Walking for pleasure, bicycling, swimming, dancing, ice skating, golf, aerobics/fitness/jazzercise, and downhill skiing are the most physically active pursuits in this top 20 grouping. Softball/baseball is the highest ranked of the team sports.

Activities in which fewer than ten percent of households participated are mountain climbing, motorized trail biking, backpacking, squash, archery, orienteering, windsurfing, judo, rugby, ringette, sailing, and rafting.

HOW DOES PARTICIPATION VARY?

How do patterns of participation compare for different sub-groups of the population? We looked at participation in activities according to different socio-demographic variables. These included:

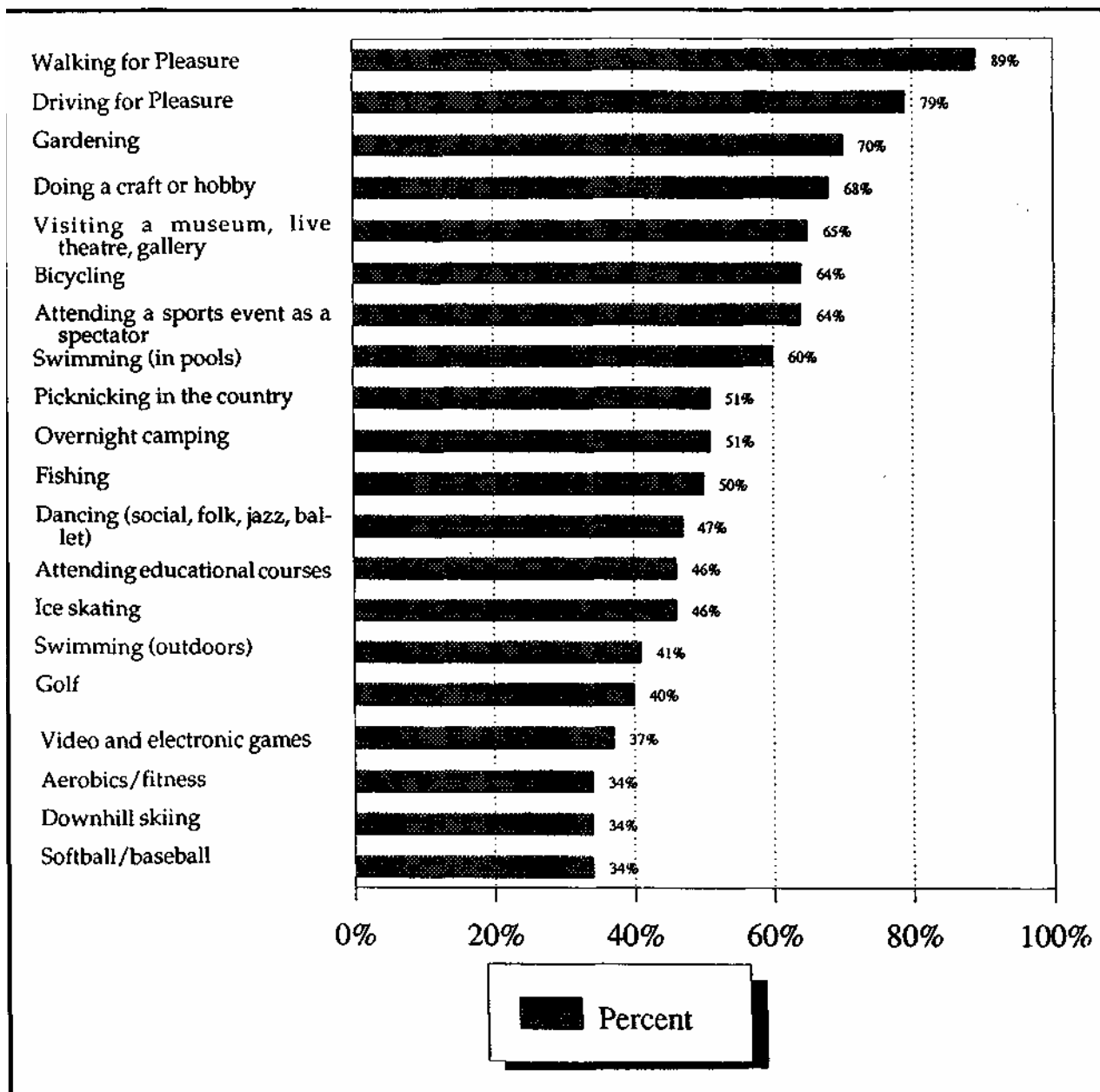
- Size of community;
- Household income; and,
- Type of household (such as families, single persons).

We found that the top-ranked activities were very consistent across sub-groups of the population. The most popular activities were basically the same for residents of small and large communities, lower and higher income families, and various types of households.

For many activities, however, the actual rates of participation did vary across socio-demographic groups. Some of the patterns associated with community size and household income are summarized below.



Figure 1: Top 20 Activities of Alberta Households - 1988



Community Size

There were many activities which varied in participation across communities of various sizes. The most striking differences in activity patterns appear to occur between communities under 10,000 people and those with populations over 10,000. It is also interesting to note that, for many activities, participation rates for rural residents are higher than for urban residents.



Figure 2 identifies community types which have participation rates above the provincial average. Curling, Softball, fishing, hunting, and snowmobiling are examples of activities which are more likely to be enjoyed by residents of smaller communities and farms than by those from larger urban centres.

A previous *Look at Leisure* bulletin (No. 19 "Community Type Variations in Recreation Patterns") identified similar patterns in 1984. It also discussed some of the factors contributing to variations in recreation behaviors for different sizes of communities.

Figure 2: Community Size and Participation

Activity	Rural	Under 2,000	2,000 4,999	5,000 9,999	10,000 24,999	25,000 99,999	100,000 or more
Curling		★	★	★	★		
Fishing	★	★	★	★			
Hunting	★	★	★	★			
Snowmobiling	★	★	★				
Softball/ baseball	★	★		★			
Track and field	★	★					
Volleyball	★		★				
Motorboating	★	★			★		
All-terrain vehicles	★	★★					
Golfing							
Bowling						★	
Visiting museums and theatre							★

★ Participation Higher than Provincial Average

Household Income

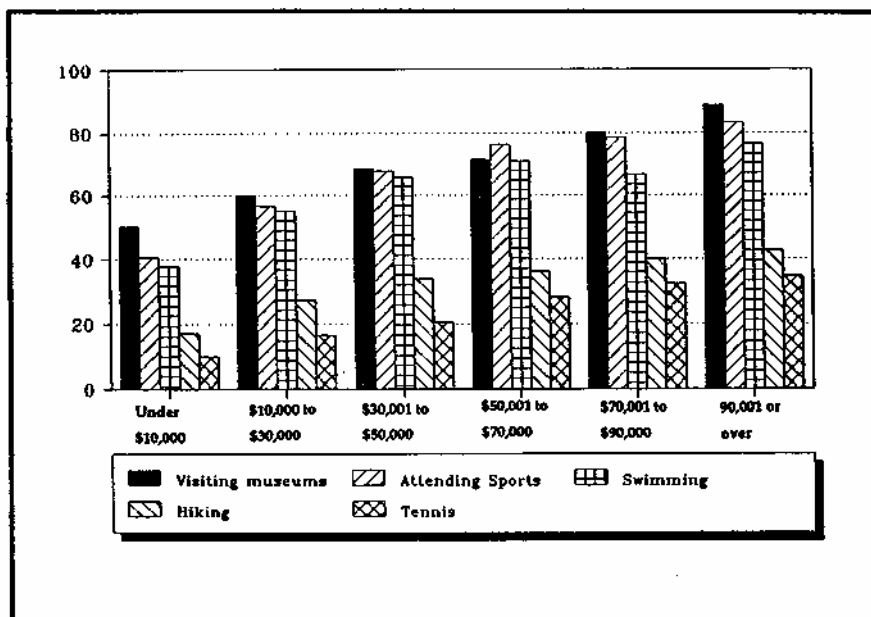
Variation in participation was also associated with household income. For almost every activity, households with incomes under \$30,0007 year reported lower levels of participation than did households in the middle and upper income levels.

Many activities showed higher rates of participation as household income level increased. Examples of this pattern are provided in Figure 3. Other activities which show a similar trend include: jogging, squash, curling, football, downhill skiing, horseback riding, and gardening.

Information was also obtained about respondent participation in 65 activities. This provides a measure of adult participation.



Figure 3: Participation and Household Income



For the most part, adult (respondent) participation patterns were very similar to household participation patterns. The top 16 activities were identical for respondents and households, although there were some differences in ranking. The additional activities which appeared in the top 20 ranking for respondents (but not for households) are:

- Picnicking within a city (30% of respondents);
- Weight lifting/body building (27%);
- Motor boating (27%); and,
- Day hiking (27%).

Respondent participation data is used to look at individual characteristics such as age, education, and gender to further describe how participation in activities varies for different sub-groups of the population.

For most activities, rates of participation decline with age. Activities which appear to have relatively stable participation across age groups include curling, cross-country skiing, doing crafts or hobbies, visiting museums, theatres, or galleries, walking, and driving for pleasure.



UNDERSTANDING RECREATION PREFERENCES

Recreation preferences vary with the socio-demographic characteristics of participants. In addition to providing this type of descriptive information/ recreation researchers are concerned with trying to explain how recreation preferences develop and change throughout life.

Some of the factors which are studied include motivations and needs, the influence of friends, stages of the lifecycle, the desire for new activities versus the desire for familiar activities, and the availability of recreation opportunities (e.g., McClaskie *et al*, 1986; Horna, 1987; Crandall, 1980).

Recreation researchers are now stressing the importance of early learning experiences on the leisure activity patterns of adults (e.g., Kamphorst, 1987). Using outdoor recreation activities as an example, McGuire *et al* (1987) identified two types of recreation participants. The largest percentage started most of their activities prior to the age of 21, and showed very few changes as adults. A smaller group showed a growth in their range of leisure activities throughout their lives, and particularly after the age of 50.

Horna (1987a) found that people become "locked into" preferences for physical or cultural activities early in life. As adults, their activity choices are influenced by peers, friends, and spouse, but they rarely change categories or add activities from the other category.

If people do make changes in their leisure patterns, they are most likely to do so at certain stages in their life (e.g Horna, 1987a, 1987b; Warnick, 1987). For example, parenthood is a major turning point. In the early stages of parenthood, there are changes in the amount of time available for leisure activities. Parents search for activities in which they can participate with children, and much of leisure activity is home-based. As children become school-age, parents are then able to resume some of their earlier leisure activities (Horna, 1987a).

PARTICIPATION TRENDS

How do the 1988 findings compare with participation data from the 1984 and 1981 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation*? It was possible to compare most activities across the three surveys. Some activities such as reading, television viewing, and listening to the radio ranked highly in previous surveys but were not included in the 1988 study.

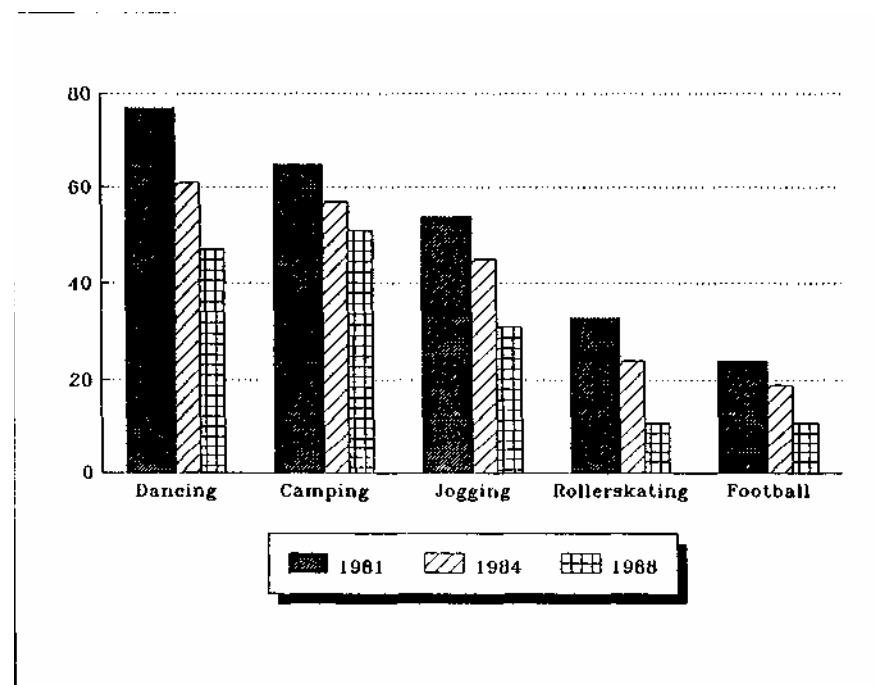


In all three years, creative, cultural, and passive activities ranked highly in terms of household participation. The most popular active pursuits were similar in all three surveys. Bicycling and fishing appear to have increased in popularity since 1981.

Further comparisons suggest, however, that participation in many activities may be declining in Alberta. Household participation rates dropped at least 10% during the 1980s for about one-quarter of the activities included in the survey. A further 40% of activities also showed declining participation, but to a lesser extent. For about one-third of the activities, participation was stable from 1981 to 1988.

Several activities showed a fairly marked decline during the 1980s. These are identified in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Declining Participation 1981-1988



Other activities which have declined, but to a lesser extent, are:

- Cross-country skiing (31 % to 21 %)
- Overnight backpacking (20% to 8%)
- Tennis (30% to 20%)
- Crafts and hobbies (78% to 68%)



- Attending sports events as a spectator (75% to 64%)
Ice skating (58% to 46%).

There are additional activities which appear to have lost participants since 1984. But since these activities were not assessed in 1981, no information is available about longer-term trends. These activities are:

- Attending educational courses (58% in 1984 to 46% in 1988);
- Aerobics/fitness/jazzercise (44% to 34%)
- Tobogganing/sledding (40% to 28%); Q Table tennis (26% to 15%);
- Weightlifting/body building (37% to 27%);
- Motor boating (37% to 27%);
Motorized trail biking (20% to 9%)
- Other interesting patterns or trends were identified for specific activities. These are:
 - Participation in video and electronic games appears to have peaked in 1984, and has now declined to levels below that of 1981.
 - Participation in Softball/baseball and arts (drama/music/art) activities was quite stable from 1981 to 1984, but has shown a decline in 1988.
 - There was a noticeable decline in the popularity of bowling/lawnbowling in the early 1980s, but participation has been quite stable since then.

There is evidence of declining participation rates from studies in other settings (Warnick, 1987). What are some of the factors that contribute to this picture? One possibility is the changing structure of the population. Since participation in most activities declines with age, overall participation rates decline as the population ages. The large baby-boom generation is moving toward middle age. Many have time demands associated with established family situations, and their physical capabilities are changing (O'Sullivan, 1988).

There is also an increasing proportion of immigrants in the province. This segment of the population may have leisure interests which are different from the traditional activities addressed in the *General Recreation Survey* (Statistics Canada, 1987). For outdoor recreation activities, weather conditions



such as lack of snow can certainly influence participation patterns. Lack of discretionary funds may be a factor for many households. In addition, the amount of leisure time is decreasing for many segments of the population (Siehl, 1988).

The 1988 survey did not look at frequency of participation, so it is not possible to determine if this has changed as well. Declining participation rates may not be evident if there is a core group of repeat users who patronize recreation facilities and programs. Although heavy repeat users of recreation facilities make up less than 10% of the adult population, this group provides the major share of use that occurs in public park and recreation agencies (Howard and Edginton, 1987).

IMPLICATIONS

Information on recreation participation is a basic tool for recreation researchers and practitioners. It provides one measure of demand for activities, and an indicator of how demand may be changing.

The survey data show that the most popular activities have remained relatively consistent during the 1980s. However, declining rates of participation are a concern for recreation agencies in the province. It will be a challenge to find out why these patterns are occurring, and what may be done to address some of these trends.

To assess local trends, recreation agencies and associations should look closely at the rates of participation they are experiencing for their programs. Maintaining good registration records will allow agencies to look at trends from year to year, and to share this information with others.

Research in other settings has indicated that there is an increase in home-based recreation. As people age or develop family responsibilities, they prefer to spend more time at home (CXSullivan, 1988). This growing trend will be a challenge for recreation practitioners in the future.

In order to best serve the needs of their clients, it will be necessary for recreation agencies to move into non-traditional service areas. CXSullivan (1988) stresses the importance of recognizing the "baby-boom" market, which is large and will have income available for leisure pursuits. For example, the increased interest in travel shown by baby-boomers is one area



that could be incorporated into recreation programming (O'Sullivan, 1988).

Early life leisure experiences are an important basis of adult leisure preferences. What implications does this have for recreation programming. To what extent are the leisure patterns of today's children and youth an indication of leisure demand in the future?

We are now recognizing the importance of the "repeat" user of recreation facilities and programs. Special attention should be given to "building a loyal following of repeat participants", in addition to attracting new customers. There is a great deal of potential to increase attendance by simply keeping and holding on to existing users (Howard and Edginton, 1987). Understanding the reasons why people join a program, and how their needs change during the program are important ingredients in obtaining this goal.

This bulletin has outlined some of the recreation patterns and trends we are observing in Alberta. The changing demand for leisure activities is just one of the many challenges to be faced by recreation practitioners as we move into the 1990s.

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THE NEXT ISSUE

The next issue in the *Look at Leisure* series will focus on FAVORITE ACTIVITIES. It will examine respondents' favorite activities and their reasons or motivations for participating in these activities.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Would you like more information about the *Look at Leisure* publication? Do you have any requests for future *Look at Leisure* topics? Do you have any requests for special analysis?

For further information about the survey, or to have your mailing address changed, please contact:

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