

A Look at Leisure

Participation Trends 1981–2004

Introduction

The *Alberta Recreation Survey* has been conducted every four years since 1981. The seven surveys in the series, provide a wealth of data about how Albertans take part in recreation, and represents one of the most extensive longitudinal research projects available in North America.

The last comprehensive review of trends in participation was reported in *A Look at Leisure* bulletin No. 43 using data from the 2000 survey. In this bulletin we present a further update using the data from 2004. The trends that are discussed are also compared against larger societal trends that can be expected to influence the demand for and delivery of recreation services in the future.

In this bulletin, we also take a closer look at how Albertans are taking part in walking and bicycling. We have also included a discussion of voluntarism to show how this important activity has changed in recent years.

Participation in Recreation and Changing Preferences, 1981–2004

Activity Preferences

The relative importance by household participation of activities in 2004 is largely the same as has been observed in previous *Alberta Recreation Surveys*. The main change in 2004 compared to the 2000 survey is that ‘visiting a museum/art gallery’ drops to 10th rank from the third place it occupied in 2000 (Table 1). It is replaced in third place by participation in crafts and hobbies. The remainder of the top ten activities is mostly the same but with the exception that attending live theatre, an activity that was separated from visiting a museum/art gallery for the first time in the 2004 survey, ranks ninth, pushing overnight camping to eleventh.

Outside of the top 10 activities there are also some changes of note. Attending educational courses, for example, has ranked no lower than 12th since the 1988 survey but has slipped to 14th in 2004, a possible indication of a reverse trend resulting from an active economy where jobs are easier to find in 2004 than in previous years and training is given less importance.

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Table 1
Highest Ranked Activities,
Household Participation 1981 to 2004

		Survey Year											
1981		1984		1988		1992		1996		2000		2004	
Activity	Rank	Activity	Rank	Activity	Rank	Activity	Rank	Activity	Rank	Activity	Rank	Activity	Rank
Walking	1	Walking	1	Walking	1	Walking	1	Walking	1	Walking	1	Walking	1
Crafts/hobbies	2	Gardening	2	Gardening	2	Bicycling	2	Bicycling	2	Gardening	2	Gardening	2
Dancing	3	Crafts/hobbies	3	Crafts/hobbies	3	Sports spectator	3	Crafts/hobbies	3	Visit a museum/ art gallery	3	Visit a museum/ art gallery	10
Sports spectator	4	Sports spectator	4	Visit a museum/art gallery	4	Swim (in pools)	4	Gardening	4	Crafts/hobbies	4	Crafts/hobbies	3
Gardening	5	Bicycling	5	Sports spectator	5	Crafts/hobbies	5	Sports spectator	5	Sports spectator	5	Sports spectator	4
Visit a museum/ art gallery	5	Visit a museum/ art gallery	6	Bicycling	5	Visit a museum/art gallery	6	Swim (in pools)	6	Bicycling	6	Bicycling	6
Camping	7	Dancing	7	Swim (in pools)	7	Camping	7	Visit a museum/ art gallery	7	Attend a fair/ festival	6	Attend a fair/ festival	5
Bicycling	8	Educational courses	8	Camping	8	Picnicking (in the countryside)	7	Video/electronic games	8	Swim (in pools)	8	Swim (in pools)	7
Ice skating	9	Camping	9	Picnicking (in the countryside)	8	Ice skating	8	Camping	9	Video/computer/ electronic games	9	Video/computer/ electronic games	8
Fishing	10	Ice skating	10	Fishing	10	Golf	10	Golf	10	Camping	10	Attend live theatre	9
Jogging/running	11	Video/ electronic games	11	Dancing	11	Educational courses	10	Picnicking (in the countryside)	11	Golf	11	Camping	11
Engaging in drama/music	12	Fishing	11	Ice skating	12	Video/electronic games	12	Educational courses	12	Educational courses	11	Golf	12
Video/electronic games	13	Jogging	13	Educational courses	12	Dancing	13	Ice skating	13	Picnicking (in the countryside)	13	Educational courses	14
Bowling	14	Engaging in drama/music	13	Golf	14	Fishing	13	Picnicking (within a city)	14	Day hiking	14	Picnicking (in the countryside)	16
Callisthenics	15	Aerobics/ fitness/jazzercise	15	Video/electronic games	15	Swim (in lakes, rivers, ponds, etc.)	15	Day hiking	15	Taking part in drama/music	15	Day hiking	18
Softball/baseball	15	Softball/baseball	15		15					Picnicking (within a city)	15	Taking part in the arts	15
										Aerobics/fitness/ aquasize	15	Picnicking (within a city)	15
												Aerobics/fitness/ aquasize/yoga	13

Other activities of note include golf dropping to the 12th rank from the 11th place it occupied in 2000 but aerobics/fitness/aquasize/yoga rising to the 13th rank from its 15th placing in the 2000 survey. Picnicking in the countryside has also dropped, from 13th in 2000 to 16th in 2004.

Participation Rates

A *Look at Leisure* bulletin No. 43 “The Road Well-Travelled and the Road Ahead” described a number of trends in the rates of participation for the many activities investigated by the *Alberta Recreation Survey*. These trends are considered again in this bulletin using the latest 2004 data. Probably one of the most notable changes is that the rate of household participation in a number of activities for 2000 dropped back to 1996 levels in the 2004 survey.

In bulletin No. 43, between 1981 and 2000, 48 activities were identified as having experienced decreases in participation, seven had remained unchanged and nine had increased. Despite the increases observed in the 2000 data compared to 1996, just six activities have continued to experience increased participation while 19 activities in the 2004 survey have stabilized at 1996 levels. The main increases were found for:

- playing bingo, casinos increased to 23% from 20% in 1996,
- aerobics and fitness increased from 30% in 1992 to 44% in 2004,
- weight training increased from 27% in 1988 to 36% in 2004,
- jogging/running increased from 27% in 1992 to 36% in 2004.

There were also smaller increases in participation in ATV use (from 10% to 12% between 2000 and 2004) and skateboarding (from 8% in 1996 to 10% in 2004).

This list of activities demonstrates several key societal trends. First, the growth in gambling activities raises questions about the value Albertans are placing on their leisure time, moving away from active pursuits to ones that are passive and that have economic and social implications. Second, the continued increase in participation in fitness and weight training activities indicates that between one-third and one-half of Albertans are recognizing the value of these activities and the benefits they offer.

What is also evident is the growing popularity of activities that can be done individually and on a flexible schedule, a trend that lends support to Collins’ contention that individualistic activities are more attractive than more traditional team sports and games (Collins, 2004, p. 28). There is evidence to support this argument in the 2004 *Alberta Recreation Survey* results with the declining levels of household participation in many team sports.

We can also note that no team activities or those activities that require lots of organization are showing increased rates of participation. Household participation in ice hockey has decreased from 28% in 1981 to 17% in 2004, and soccer has also experienced a decline at the household level (23% in 2000 to 19% in 2004). Downhill skiing has also experienced a decline between 2000 and 2004 (30% to 23%) after being relatively stable at around 33% throughout the 1990s. It can be argued that declines of the types noted reflect demographic change and the aging of participants or participant households.

Demographic change and changing attitudes towards consumptive recreational activities can also be used to

explain the continuing decline in popularity of hunting, shooting and fishing. In 1981 28% of Albertans reported that they had hunted but by 2004 just 8% were taking part. Similarly, participation in fishing has steadily decreased since 1981 from 55% to 29% in 2004, and shooting (trap, skeet or target) has declined from 16% in 1984 to 6% in 2004.

Non-consumptive outdoor activities such as orienteering, horseback riding, overnight back-packing and mountain biking have also experienced decreased rates of participation, a trend that may suggest the growth of urban attitudes among Albertans, preferences for activities that require less time commitment, and preferences for activities that are easily accessible.

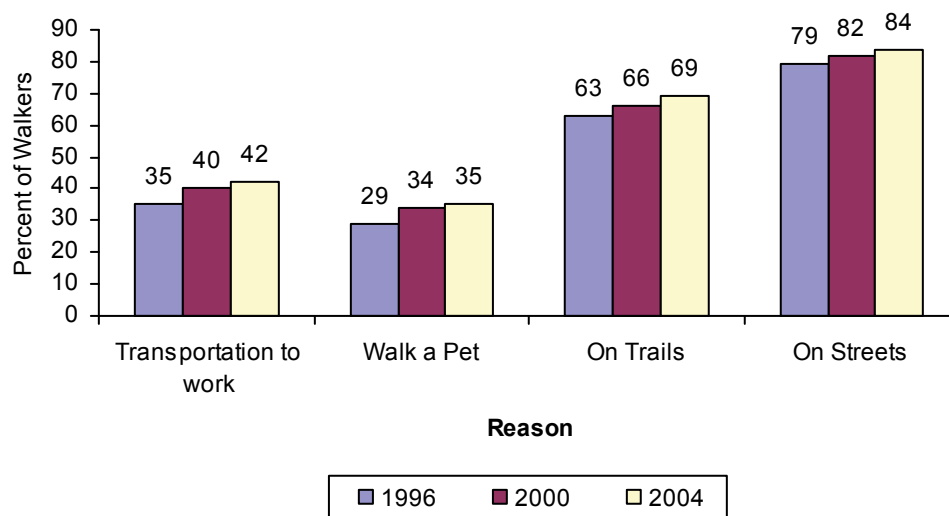
A Closer Look at Walking and Cycling

The *Alberta Recreation Survey* recognizes the importance of walking and cycling to Albertans. Since 1996, the survey has been designed to learn more about these activities by asking about specific purposes for which walking and cycling are used.

Walking

Since 1996, there has been an upward trend in the percentage of Albertans who walk for various purposes. The general category of walking on streets has increased from 79% to 84%, while trail use has increased from 63% to 69%. Walking a pet has also increased as has walking to work. Such positive results demonstrate success of the promotional efforts to encourage Albertans to walk as a simple way of taking exercise to keep healthy. Improved access to opportunities to walk such as neighbourhood walkways and community trails may also be part of the increasing level of participation.

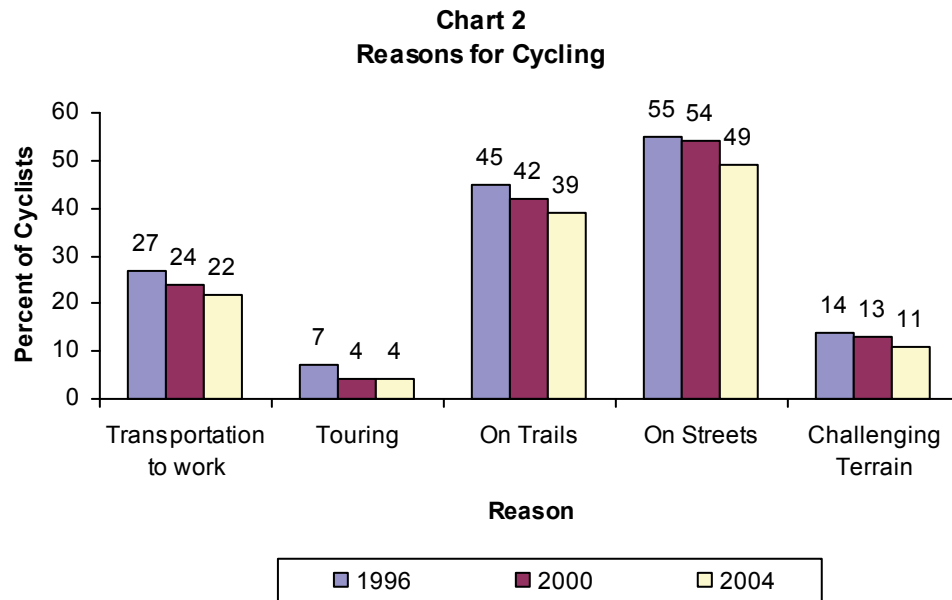
Chart 1
Reasons for Walking



Cycling

In contrast to walking, cycling has trended downwards since 1996. This applies to all forms of cycling, whether it be on streets, touring, using trails, or cycling on challenging terrain.

The downward trend may be a reflection of changing trends whereby a surge of participation occurred when an activity is initially introduced, or given widespread promotion, and people are encouraged to try it. Once it has been tried some people decide to discontinue, leaving those with most interest as the core group of participants. Future results from the *Alberta Recreation Survey* may show a leveling off of the trend seen previously.



Volunteerism

In Canada, the national rate of voluntarism is estimated to be 27%, (National Survey for Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 2000), significantly ahead of countries like Australia where the rate of voluntarism is less than 10% (Collins, 2004, p. 27). Volunteers contribute an average of 162 hours per year which is further estimated to be the equivalent of 549,000 full-time jobs. In Alberta, the rate of participation is 39%, higher than the national average, although Albertans tend to give less time (139 hours) compared to other provinces (National Survey for Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 2000).

The 2004 *Alberta Recreation Survey* found that 41% of Albertans have worked as a volunteer. This is generally consistent with the national results and those from previous *Alberta Recreation Surveys*. In the 2000 survey, 44% reported that they had volunteered which was higher than the 37% reported in 1996. Similar

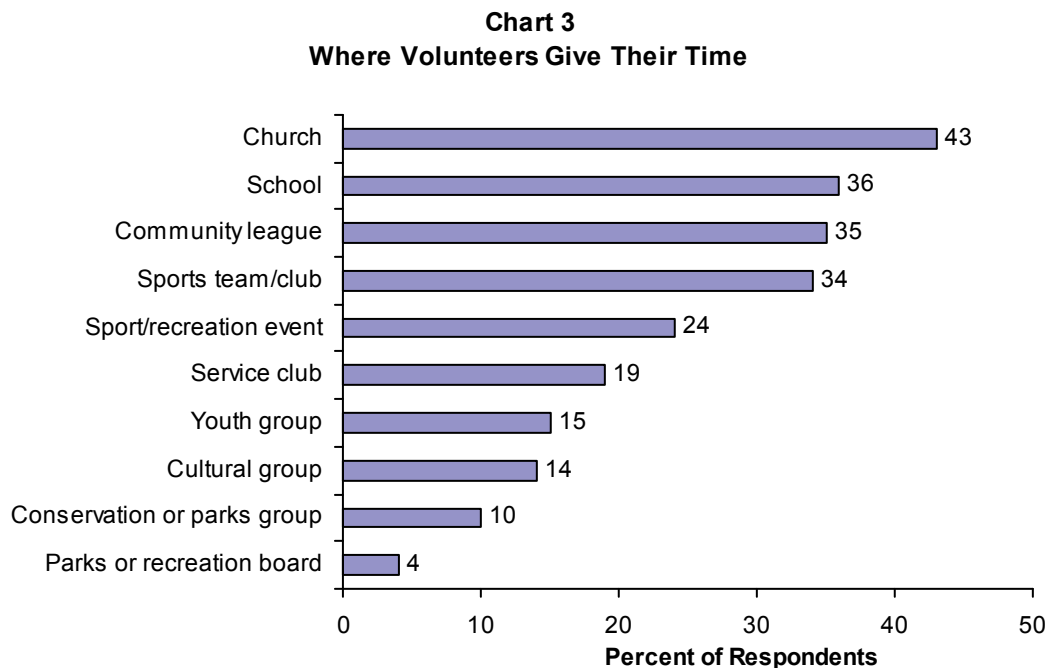
fluctuations were also observed in the surveys conducted during the 1980s, when volunteer rates were at 40% in 1981, 38% in 1984, and 36% in 1988.

Voluntarism is slightly more popular among females (43%) than males (41%). Volunteers also tend to be:

- between the ages of 36 to 45 (47%) and under 25 years (47%),
- university educated (51%),
- couples with children (49%), single parents (47%) and households with 2 or more unrelated adults (47%).

Who Benefited

The organizations that have benefited from those who have volunteered are illustrated below. Volunteering for a church was found to be the most popular form of volunteering (43%), closely followed by volunteering for a school (36%), volunteering for a community league or organization (35%) and volunteering for a local sports team or club (34%).



A comparison of the profile of people who volunteer for different organizations (Table 3) finds that age, education, gender, and whether there are children in the household, all influence the types of organization that benefit from voluntarism. Those with university level educations, for example, are more likely to be volunteers for schools, conservation groups, churches, cultural organizations, service clubs and local sports clubs. Males are more likely to be volunteering for local sports clubs while females are more likely to give

their volunteer time to schools and churches. It is also evident that older people are more likely to be volunteering for service clubs, churches and cultural organizations, while younger Albertans volunteer for schools, special events and local sports clubs.

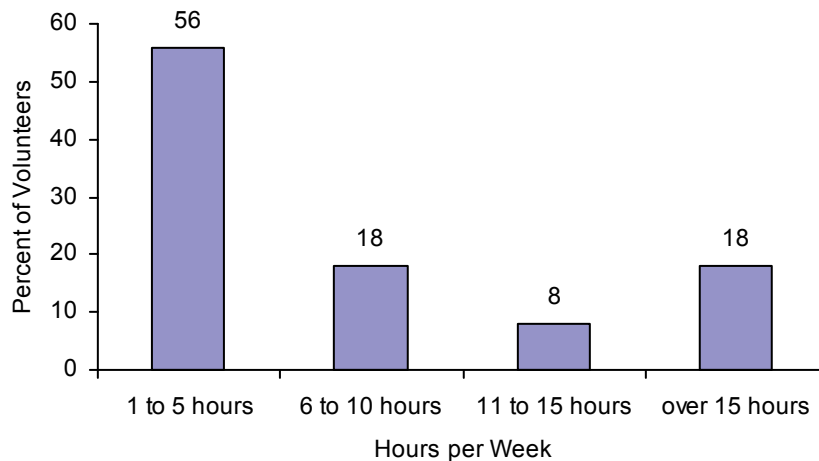
Table 3
Demographic Profile of Volunteers at Different Organizations

Organization	Demographic Profile of Volunteers
Conservation	Males 36 to 65 years old University education Households of two or more unrelated adults
Community League/Association	Males and females 36 to 55 years old Technical/vocational training Couples with children
Youth Group	Males and females Under 25 years old Technical/vocational training Couples with children
School	Females Between 36 to 45 years old and under 25 University education Single parents and couples with children
Church	Females Over 55 years old University education Various household types
Cultural Group	Males and females Over 55 years old University education Single adults
Service Club	Males Over 46 years old University education Single adults
Local Sport Team/Club	Males 36 to 55 years old University education Couples with children and single parents
Recreation/Park Board	No specific groups are dominant
Special Sport/Recreation Event	Males Under 25 and between 36 to 55 years old Two or more unrelated adults and couples with children

Volunteer Time Commitments

Based on the number of respondents who indicated that they had volunteered, over half of Albertans who volunteer do so for between 1 and 5 hours per week (56%). An additional 26% volunteer for more than 11 hours per week.

Chart 4
Time Devoted to Volunteering



The time devoted to various recreation and sport groups tends to vary. Table 4 shows that volunteers with conservation organizations are most likely to give one to five hours per week. By contrast, 48% of volunteers with cultural organizations give one to five hours while 23% of these volunteers give between six and ten hours. Of further note is that 25% of volunteers with service clubs give more than 15 hours, as do 23% of those who volunteer for recreation boards and 22% of church volunteers. From these results it appears that certain type of groups are more demanding than others.

Trends and Implications for Practitioners

In *A Look at Leisure* bulletin No. 43, some of the key trends that were regularly associated with influencing recreation participation were noted:

- an aging population, with the Baby Boom generation passing 50;
- greater interest in individualized activities and activities which are family-oriented;
- the constraint of time and the greater value placed on leisure time;
- the growth and diversity of the Alberta economy and the influence of this on population migration from across Canada and elsewhere;
- an increasing role of private partners in public ventures;
- the appearance of specialized niche programming to meet demands from women, seniors and youth.

We can add to these broader trends by considering families with two working parents, longer working hours, and higher stress levels as people try to cope with an increasing fast-paced and demanding world (Robinson, 2004, p. 1). A consequence of this is that recreation starts to lose its priority among all household activities, and this gets further reflected in how the budget priorities of service providers are allocated for the provision of recreation opportunities. Pressure on operating budgets also increases with the increase in concern for safety and compliance for recreation equipment and maintenance procedures (Robinson, 2004). The bottom line is that recreation opportunities that do not have high operational costs, and indeed access costs, are becoming more in vogue.

Certainly there is evidence to suggest that messages about the value and benefits of recreation are becoming accepted amongst Albertans. The continuing popularity of walking, and the continuing growth in participation for fitness related activities identified from the 2004 *Alberta Recreation Survey* results show that Albertans are keen on finding ways to keep active.

The motivation to take part likely reflects the growing significance that Albertans place on the need for personal well-being in a rapidly changing and stressful world. Under these circumstances, flexibility in recreation program and service delivery is becoming more critical to meeting the needs of time-pressured consumers.

Targeting segments within the population will also continue to be worthwhile. Walking, gardening, fitness at home, swimming and bicycling are the five most popular activities identified in the Statistics Canada National Population Health Survey, 1998-1999 (Robinson, 2004, p. 4) and subsequent analysis of this data has shown that women were more likely to take part in walking and fitness while men prefer team and individual sports, as well as gardening and biking.

Shifts in activity preferences can reflect more than demographic change. Melamed (2001), for example, notes the contribution of recreational activities – whether active or passive – to personal psychological well-being, physical well-being, community well-being, and personal enhancement.

Further supporting the desire to find personal well-being is the reasonably well-educated, well-off, and

relatively health-obsessed “boomer” (45+ years of age) generation (Johnson, 2003; Foot, 1996; Kelly & Warnick, 1999). This group has an understanding of the benefits of keeping active and has the means to access opportunities to help them do this. Their needs create demand for self-directed activities, from gardening to biking, where physical and mental health are the by-products.

We must remember that the demand created by boomers reflects the relative size of this group. Behind them are relatively smaller segments so absolute demand may decline. However, growing the value of recreation among what are presently younger age cohorts will help to drive future demand.

Participation rates in Alberta, however, will be supported by continued economic growth (City of Edmonton, 2003). The age groups of under 9 years of age, 10 to 14 and 15 to 19 are all forecast to have slow or no growth, while the higher growth is anticipated for all other adult age groups. This pattern reflects the continuation on in-migration of working age adults from other parts of Canada in response to Alberta’s strong economy. For Alberta, then, recreation programming needs to continue to offer the types of opportunities desired by young families while adding those opportunities associated with the needs of the seniors population.

The nature of programming is also beginning to shift. However, activities that meet the needs of specific market niches – for example, older seniors, working women, youth, family-groups – and which may not have mass appeal but have limited levels of demand may prove to be successful for programmers (Foot, 1996; Alberta Recreation and Parks Association Conference, 2001). Further, the ways by which demand from these groups is met are expected to reflect preferences for individualized participation, often on a drop-in basis as opposed to regularly scheduled class-based programming. Being prepared to meet both the shift in demographic patterns of participation and the individualized focus presents new challenges for recreation practitioners.

Linking Society’s Trends and the Alberta Recreation Survey

There is evidence from the survey data to indicate that many of the trends noted above are being demonstrated in the participation patterns of Albertans. The continuing importance of walking shows that Albertans are willing to find recreation in its simplest form while the popularity of gardening confirms the desire for home-based stress-relief. Community-based support for these activities will become more important, including how communities are planned as well as making program opportunities available. Elsewhere, the *Alberta Recreation Survey* is beginning to show a shift away from more traditional activities, such as ice hockey, curling and consumptive recreation (fishing and hunting) to more contemporary activities such as personal fitness (aerobics and weight training).

Such changes can be expected to continue as urban Alberta continues to experience growth with increased in-migration from both within and outside of Canada. This presents new challenges for rural regions where population levels remain stable or are in decline and where resources are restricted. In such circumstances the need for partnerships between various community organizations becomes greater. This may be most important for those communities that are furthest from major urban centres and where access is difficult. However, for rural areas adjacent to cities, challenges in meeting demand may directly relate to city people moving to the country and bringing their urban expectations to an under-served area. Consequently, for

the recreation practitioner, trends in recreation participation can be expected to include alternative models of recreation development and service delivery

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