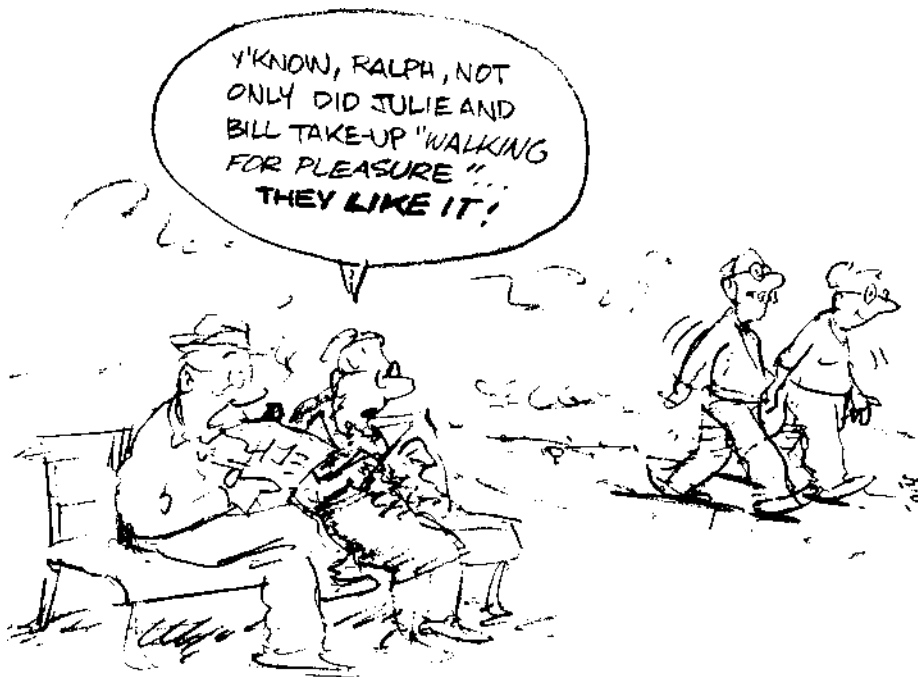


# A Look at Leisure

Results of the 1984 Public Opinion Survey on Recreation conducted by Alberta Recreation and Parks No. 18

## RECREATION PATTERNS OF OLDER ADULTS

This issue of "A Look at Leisure" focuses on the recreation interests and concerns of Alberta's senior population. The discussion is based on results of the 1984 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation* as well as other current research in this field.



**Alberta**  
RECREATION AND PARKS  
Recreation Development Division



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## HIGHLIGHTS

Highlights of the findings which are discussed in the bulletin include the following:

- Walking for pleasure, golf, fishing, and swimming are the most popular outdoor and sports activities for seniors. Participation in active pursuits is increasing.
- Relaxation, enjoyment of nature, keeping busy, using skills and talents, and meeting new people are reasons for participating in recreation activities which are more important to seniors than to any other age group.
- Physical inability and difficulties with transportation are significant barriers to participation by older adults.
- Seniors are a good potential market for volunteer recruitment.

## INTRODUCTION

Planning and programming for older adults is becoming an increasingly important aspect of recreation service provision. The size of the senior population is growing steadily as people are living longer, and seniors are becoming an increasing proportion of our population.

The number of older adults working as part of the labour force has decreased steadily over the decades. In 1981, only 8.6% of older Canadians were in the labour force, compared to 33% in 1921 (Selles, 1984). Retirement from an active working life means large amounts of free or non-scheduled time.

Recreation can play a key role in the well-being of older adults and in enhancing their quality of life. For seniors, as for people of all ages, involvement in recreation activities can satisfy a variety of needs. Among the important benefits of recreation for the senior population is increased health and fitness, as well as opportunities for socializing, for using skills and talents developed throughout their lifetime, and for learning new skills.

The senior population is quite varied, with a diversity of interests, strengths, and abilities. Some seniors have enjoyed a positive use of leisure throughout their life, and are able to find appropriate activities to suit their changing physical abilities and interests. Other seniors, however, may not be aware of the potential positive values of



recreation. In 1981, *the Public Opinion Survey on Recreation* found that people over 45 years of age were more likely than younger adults to express negative views about recreation. In addition, older adults may not have adequate information about the recreation opportunities which are available to them.

In the future, the numbers of seniors will continue to increase. As Albertans grow older, they will place increasing demands on all types of health and social services, including recreation services. The character of the older adult is also changing. It has been predicted that, "in addition to becoming greater in numbers, tomorrow's senior citizens will have a higher level of education, will be in better health, will have more leisure time and will desire greater input into policy planning and program development" (Selles, 1984). There are indications that these trends are already occurring (MacCallum, 1987).

The results of the 1984 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation* provide an indication of the current recreation interests and needs of older adults in Alberta. The age definition of seniors varies in different settings; in this bulletin, seniors are defined as adults 65 years of age or older. The following discussion looks at participation in recreation activities, changes in participation, and reasons for starting and ceasing activities which are particularly important for the senior population of Alberta.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SENIOR RESPONDENTS

Ten percent of the survey sample, or 397 respondents, were 65 years of age or older. This proportion is very similar to the percentage of seniors in the adult population of Alberta.

Almost two-thirds of the senior respondents (64%) reported a high school education or less. This situation appears to be changing, with increasing numbers of older adults reporting higher education levels.

The majority had household incomes which were at the lower end of the income scale. Almost three-quarters (73%) reported household incomes under \$20,000 per year, while only 23% of respondents under 65 years were at this income level. About one-third of the seniors had household incomes under \$10,000 a year. These findings



are similar to information about income levels which is obtained from census data. The incomes of women and seniors living alone may often fall beneath the poverty line.

Just over one-half of the senior age group lived in a household consisting of a couple with no children at home. A smaller proportion (13%) had children or other relatives in their households. Over one-third (35%) indicated that they were single persons, living alone or with others. Other evidence suggests that older adults are becoming more independent; more seniors are living in their own homes, and only a small proportion (about 7%) requires nursing home care.

Since women tend to outlive men, many of the seniors who are living alone are women. In fact, between 1961 and 1981, the proportion of older women living alone doubled from 16% to 32%. Loneliness is a problem for many of the seniors who are living on their own, indicating that agencies should pay particular attention to the social aspects of programmes for seniors.

Close to one-half of Alberta's seniors live in Edmonton or Calgary. Thirty percent live in small urban areas and 23% are rural residents. There appears to be a higher proportion of adults 65 years of age or over in the southern part of the province than in the central and northern regions (see Bulletin No. 16 in the *A Look at Leisure* series, "Regional Variations").

## **PARTICIPATION IN RECREATION ACTIVITIES**

Studies have shown that participation in active types of recreation pursuits generally declines with age (e.g. The 1978-79 Canada Health Survey). Leisure activities tend to become more passive, with media leisure activities (such as reading, television, and radio) among the main types of leisure interests for older adults (e.g., Levy, 1981). Levy found that people are socialized, or develop attitudes, to expect a decline in participation in active forms of leisure. He observed that participants in a pre-retirement planning program expected to increase their passive activities in their retirement years, and few thought they would start any new activities which were active in nature.

There is evidence, however, that older adults are



increasing their involvement in physical activities. Data from the Canada Fitness Survey (1981) showed that people 65 years of age or over have increased their participation in physical activities at a far greater rate than younger adults, when compared to 1976 rates of participation (Stone and Fletcher, 1986).

Based on data from the 1984 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation*, it was possible to look at participation rates in outdoor and sports pursuits, for Alberta's older adults. The results showed that most (70%) of the seniors who answered the survey participated in some form of outdoor or sports activity at least once during the previous year. The activities which were mentioned most frequently by the older respondents are listed in Table 1.

Table 1  
Outdoor and Sports Activity  
Preferences of Seniors

- 
1. Walking for pleasure (62%)\*
  2. Golf (26%)
  3. Fishing (24%)
  4. Swimming (22%)
  5. Picnicking (17%)
  6. Bowling/lawnbowling (13%)
  7. Overnight camping (13%)
  8. Curling (11%)

\* Percentage of active seniors who participated in activity.

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The percentages of seniors identifying walking for pleasure, golf, picnicking, and bowling/lawnbowling among their most frequent activities were higher than for any other age group. Rates of participation for fishing and curling were also above average, when compared to the survey sample as a whole.

Patterns of recreation participation for older adults are changing. Many activities such as aquacize, cross-country skiing, and cycling are enjoyed by the current generation of senior citizens. There is an increase in the number of seniors' clubs for activities such as hiking, cycling, and cross-country skiing, and there is a large demand by older adults for water-based programs (MacCallum, 1987). The



demand for these types of activities will likely continue to increase as mid-age adults move into the senior age range.

## STARTING NEW RECREATION ACTIVITIES

The 1984 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation* also looked at changes in recreation participation during the previous year, including starting and ceasing activities. Overall, the likelihood of starting a new activity declined with age. Thirty-seven percent of the senior age group had started a new activity, compared to 48% of the total survey sample.

Since a fairly small number of senior respondents started new activities, the following results (based on approximately 120 respondents) should be viewed with caution. The findings do, however, provide a general idea about types of activities started and reasons for participating in recreation activities which are important to people 65 years of age or older.

Almost one-half of the seniors starting new activities chose pursuits in the creative, cultural, social and passive category. This included activities such as handicrafts and hobbies, reading, and table games. Starting participation in creative, cultural, social and passive activities increased gradually with age, but showed a marked increase for people 65 years of age or older. This finding corresponds closely with results of other studies which have shown preferences for passive activities among older adults.

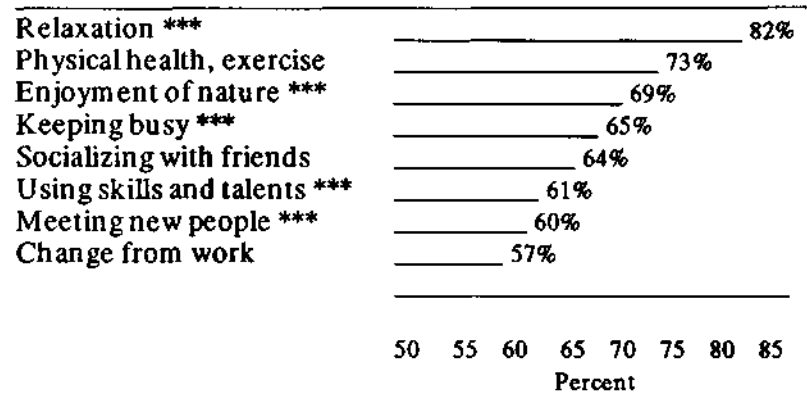
Although starting participation in exercise-oriented activities declined with age, just over one-fifth of the seniors did report that they had started activities in this category. The types of activities in this grouping included bicycling, walking for pleasure, and bowling. Other types of activities started by smaller proportions of seniors were: aerobics/fitness (7% of seniors), swimming (6%), golf (4%), team sports (3%), non-mechanized outdoor pursuits such as hiking (3%), and mechanized outdoor pursuits such as snowmobiling(3%).

The survey also examined reasons for participating in recreation activities. The results point out that recreation activities satisfy a broad range of needs for older adults. Of the eighteen reasons for participating which were included in the survey, one-half were important to a greater proportion of seniors than any other age group.



The reasons which were ranked most highly by the senior respondents are shown in Figure 1, along with the percentages of respondents who considered them to be important.

Figure 1 Importance of Reasons  
For Starting New Activities



\*\*\*More important to seniors than to respondents in any other age category.

Relaxation, enjoyment of nature, keeping busy, using skills and talents, and meeting new people were important to a greater proportion of seniors than any other age category. In addition, four lower-ranked reasons, namely being creative, helping others, contributing to the community, and showing others that they could do it, were also particularly important to older adults.

It was possible to compare these 1984 results with those from the 1981 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation*. The most interesting finding was related to the importance of physical health or exercise as a reason for participation. In 1981, this motivation decreased in importance with age. In 1984, physical health or exercise was just as important for senior respondents as for people in younger age categories.

## CEASING RECREATION ACTIVITIES

Forty-one percent of the seniors reported that they had ceased a recreation activity in the previous year. However, almost the same number of seniors had started up a new activity during the same time period. Therefore, no substantial loss in recreation participants was observed for the senior age group.

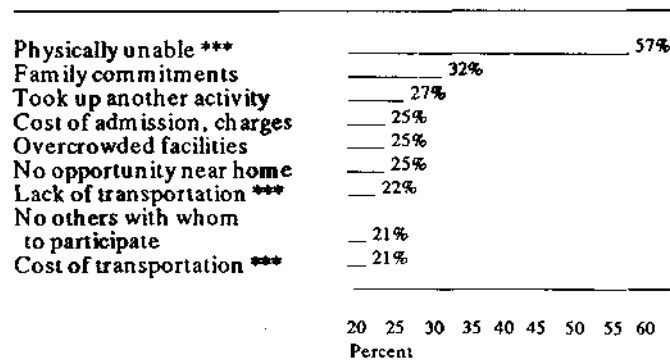


It is interesting to note that the greatest loss of participants in recreation activities occurs between 45 and 64 years of age. Among the survey respondents, more people in this age group ceased activities than started new activities. This stage of the life cycle, just prior to the senior years, is an important transitional point where recreation behaviour is adjusted to meet changing physical abilities and interests. It may be that those who do find suitable recreation activities at this age level remain participants as they move into the senior age range.

Creative, cultural, social and passive activities were attracting about five times as many new senior participants as were ceasing this activity. Just as many seniors started exercise-oriented activities as ceased activities in this category. The greatest loss of participants was for curling, which was discontinued by four times as many seniors as started the activity.

There were certain reasons for ceasing participation in recreation activities which were particularly important to older adults. These provide an indication of barriers to recreation participation which older adults face. By far the most important concern was physical inability to participate, which was identified by over one-half of the seniors who ceased activities (see Figure 2). Other reasons which were more important to seniors than to any other age group were lack of transportation and transportation costs. Seniors respondents were also more likely to indicate concerns about poorly maintained facilities.

Figure 2  
Importance of Reasons for  
Ceasing Participation



\*\*\* More important for senior respondents than for any other age category.





Overall, seniors tended to identify a relatively high number of barriers to participation in recreation activities. Several of the obstacles identified in the study relate closely to more general concerns which are expressed by older adults. These are barriers which may limit active participation in other aspects of community life. For example, the Alberta Council on Aging (1979) found that lack of adequate transportation to programs and services ranked highly among the problems faced by seniors. A grant programme, operated by Alberta Transportation, is designed to improve this situation by providing funding to municipalities for the transportation of seniors and disabled residents.

Other general concerns which were rated highly in the latter study were poor health and lack of money. Safety and security have also been identified as important issues for older adults. These factors need to be considered in the programming and planning of recreation services for the senior population.

Physical inability to participate was an important reason for ceasing participation for over one-half of the senior respondents. Older adults are more likely than younger age groups to experience chronic diseases or disability restrictions on their activities. It is important to note, however, that the "majority of the aged remain functionally well until an advanced age" (Government of Canada, 1982).

Among the seniors, there are varying levels of physical abilities. If a broad range of activities is made available to the senior population, it is likely that most will be able to find activities which are appropriate for their functional level. It is also important to note that sports facilities and equipment are mainly designed for the young athlete, and may be inappropriate for the physical abilities of the older adult. Modifying facilities and equipment, as well as rules, may encourage more senior adults to participate in active recreation pursuits.

## VOLUNTEERING

Another aspect of leisure behaviour is involvement in volunteer work. The survey results indicated that the rate



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of volunteering among seniors was similar to that for the Alberta population as a whole (about 40% participated). There was a decline in participation, however, from the high levels of volunteer involvement in the mid-adult years.

There is a trend toward increased volunteer participation by older adults. The survey results showed that a higher percentage of senior citizens was involved in volunteer work in 1984 (40%), compared to 33% in 1981. Seniors are participating actively in all types of community work, in addition to involvement in the activities of their own seniors centres, and are a good potential market for volunteer recruitment.

## IMPLICATIONS

Agencies providing recreation services can play an important role in creating a positive image of aging and the abilities of older adults. By educating the public and other service agencies about active participation, recreation agencies can help to change society's attitudes and expectations about leisure experiences for seniors. Many seniors are active, but there are still many who need to be encouraged to participate.

Just as every generation has certain programming needs, some specialized programming will be required to meet the specific needs of seniors. On the other hand, many older adults would like to participate in recreation activities with other generations, including other members of their families. It is important to recognize both approaches when designing programmes for seniors. While some special programming will be needed, it will also be necessary to ensure that regular programming for persons of all ages is accessible, physically and financially, to seniors (Engelmann, 1985).

It is important to provide a range of opportunities that vary in intensity, in order to meet the diverse needs and abilities of older adults. Some seniors are 'young', recently retired, and seeking challenging opportunities in their leisure time, while others may be 'frail' and isolated from the community. Creative programming approaches will be needed to deal with the various groups within the senior population.

Many of the obstacles which limit participation in recreation activities are also obstacles to participation in other



aspects of community life. Recreation agencies should work closely with other agencies in order to coordinate services. Since transportation is a problem for many senior citizens, a useful approach would be to locate a variety of services in one centre, on a public transportation route. These services could include recreation, health services, and legal counselling (Selles, 1984).

Agencies should provide opportunities for seniors to have input into programming and planning for their own recreation activities. Staff and volunteers working with seniors should have special training for working with the older population. In this regard, Alberta Recreation and Parks has been sponsoring leadership workshops for several years. The Alberta Senior Citizens Sports and Recreation Association, based in Calgary with branches in eight other areas of the province, is actively involved in the organization of the Alberta Seniors Games, and is a good source of information about activities for seniors.

Recreation can play an important role in the lives of older adults, satisfying many of their needs and providing opportunities for fulfillment in later years. As the numbers of seniors increase, recreation agencies will need to shift the focus of their programming to address the needs of older citizens. Coordinated planning with other service agencies, and with seniors themselves, will help to ensure quality recreation opportunities for older adults.

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FUTURE ISSUES

The next issue of *A Look at Leisure* will focus on rural-urban differences in recreation participation patterns.

INFORMATION

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