



# BALLPARK FIGURES

Key Research For Irish Sports Policy

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**KEY RESEARCH FOR IRISH SPORTS POLICY**

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# **INTRODUCTION**

The Irish Sports Council believes passionately in the value of sport and its potential to make a contribution to an enhanced quality of life of all citizens.

The Council's investment in research is based on our belief that the development of sports policy and programmes should be evidence based. Our research programme seeks to understand how the sports sector operates in Ireland and assess its impact and importance to our society. It also raises important policy questions for the future development of sport.

As well as providing us with a deeper understanding of the workings of sport the research programme provides us with the tools to measure the impact of sports programmes. We are committed to measuring the value of the investments in sport we make on behalf of the Irish people.

I want to thank the Economic and Social Research Institute for their outstanding work on our behalf since 2003. In keeping with the best research their work both confirms many of our deeply held convictions and provides new and interesting insights into sport in Ireland.

This document is an overview of the key findings of the ESRI's four major reports produced since 2004. The publication is designed to answer the most frequently asked questions in an easy-to-use format, we hope you find it beneficial and enjoyable.

Ossie Kilkenny  
Chairman  
Irish Sports Council

## **SOURCES**

Unless otherwise indicated, the results relating to Irish sport described in this paper, including those on physical and mental health benefits and childhood obesity, are derived from two surveys conducted by the Survey Unit of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). The survey of adult sport, carried out in late 2003, employed face-to-face interviews with a representative random sample of 3080 Irish adults. The survey of schoolchildren's sport, conducted at the end of 2004, collected questionnaires from more than 3,000 primary and 3,000 second-level students in a nationally representative sample of over 200 Irish schools.

Extensive data provided by these surveys was analysed by researchers in the Sports Research Centre at the ESRI. The results have so far formed the basis of four detailed reports on Irish sport, published jointly by the Irish Sports Council and the ESRI between 2004 and 2007. The current document presents a concise overview of the findings of these reports. It does not discuss the complex definitional, statistical and methodological issues surrounding survey design and statistical analysis. These issues are dealt with in detail, however, in the full text of the published reports, the references for which are provided on page 23.

# SPORT MATTERS

As a mass participation activity, sport is unrivalled. Sport touches the lives of almost everyone in Ireland. Many people play sport, volunteer for sport-related activity, join sports clubs, or attend sporting fixtures.

**79%** of adults have played sport at some time in their life

Irish people play more than **60** different sports

As well as the large majority who play sport at some stage, many people participate in other ways. Less than 1-in-6 has had no involvement in sport whatsoever.

Activity	% of population
Player	43
Former Player	36
Volunteer	15
Club Member	30
Spectator	46
No involvement at all	16

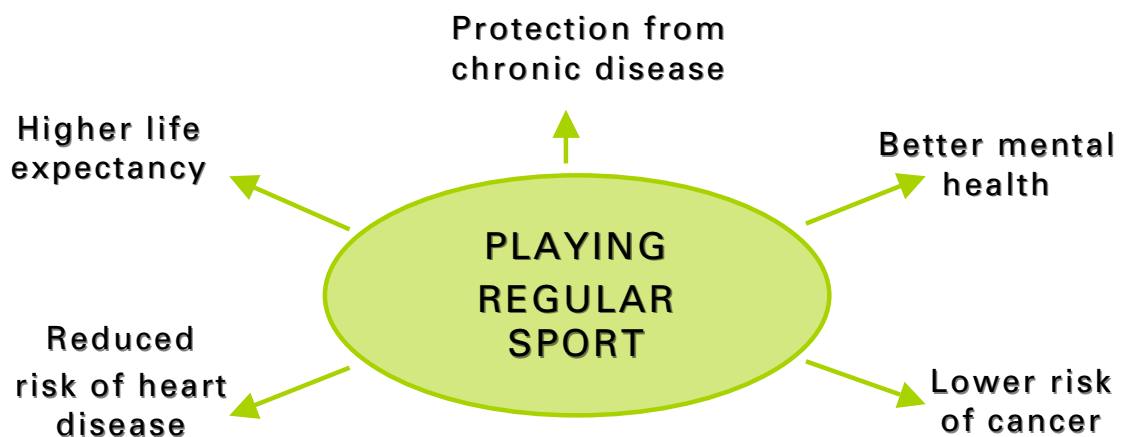
International research shows that sport provides health and social benefits. In Ireland, as in the rest of the developed world, government policy aims to increase participation in sport. This paper provides useful background research relating to the issue. More specifically, it seeks to answer the following:

- What are the known benefits of sport?
- How much sport is played by adults (over-18) in Ireland?
- Who plays sport?
- What sports are most popular?
- What factors determine whether people play?
- How much sport is played in schools?
- How many people volunteer, join clubs and spectate?
- What factors influence these other forms of participation?

The answers to these questions raise important issues and highlight significant challenges for Irish sports policy.

# THE BENEFITS OF SPORT

High levels of physical activity bring proven health benefits. While there are many other ways to keep active, international research has linked regular playing of sport to specific health outcomes. Published findings include:



In Ireland, adults who play sport have better physical and mental health. This link exists across all age groups, but is strongest for older people. Regular players enjoy the best health, but even irregular players are more healthy than those who are inactive.

In addition to the health benefits derived from playing sport, international research has linked playing sport with social and psychological benefits. Published findings include:



Sport also has the capacity increase 'social capital' – the degree of social interaction, interpersonal trust and shared understanding enjoyed by individuals in communities.

# HOW MUCH SPORT IS PLAYED?

Adults play sport in a variety of circumstances: in organised clubs and competitions, through formal classes, or casually with family and friends. Taken together, a snapshot of Irish adults shows that:

**43%** played sport at least once in the past year

**33%** played at least once a month

**28%** played at least once a week

**20%** played regularly with effort

A different way to consider the question is to measure how much sport people play across their whole lifetimes. Looked at this way:

the average man plays some sport for **36** years of his life

the average woman plays for **20** years of her life

Different countries measure participation in sport in different ways, so international comparisons are imprecise. However, these figures place Ireland roughly in line with many other developed countries, but well behind the world's most sporty countries – the Scandinavian nations, Canada and Australia.

## **BOX 1: The Importance of Walking**

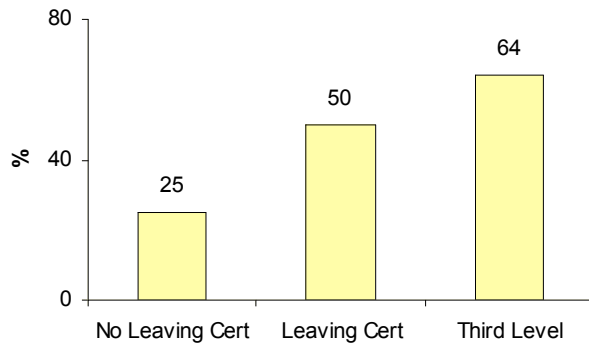
The figures on this page are based on a definition of playing sport that excludes recreational walking – an important source of physical exercise for many people. Once walking is included, 78% of Irish men and women either played sport or took a walk of at least 2 miles for recreation in the last year. Walking is therefore of central importance to levels of physical exercise.

However, the flip side of this figure is that the remaining 22% of Irish adults are completely inactive.



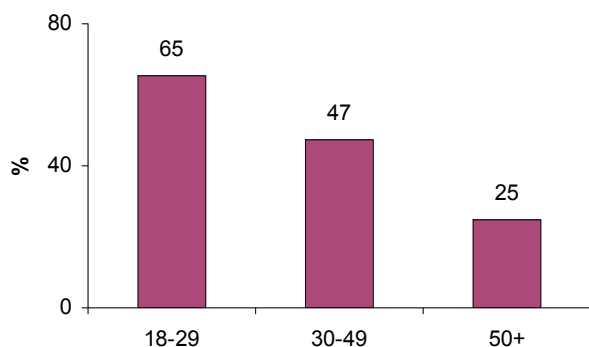
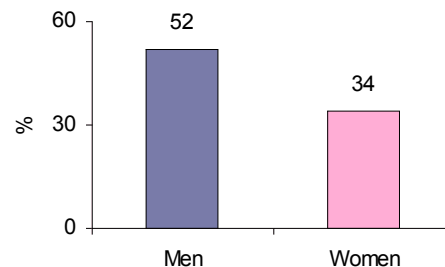
# WHO'S LIKELY TO PLAY SPORT?

Four factors have been shown to be the strongest determinants of whether Irish adults play sport: education, gender, age and income. The impact of these factors is large.



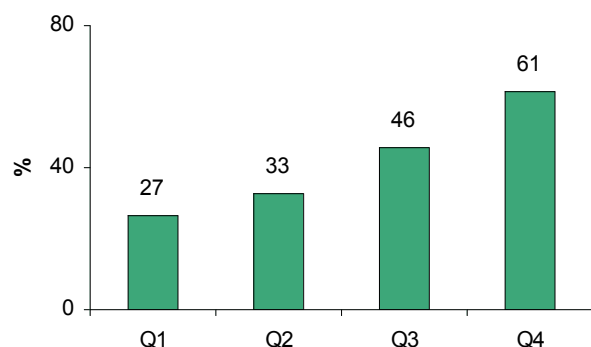
Only one quarter of people with educational attainment below Leaving Certificate play sport, while nearly two-thirds of those with a third-level qualification play.

Men are more likely to play sport than women.



Younger adults are much more likely to play sport than older adults.

People in the richest 25% of the population (Q4) are more than twice as likely to play sport as people in the poorest 25% (Q1).



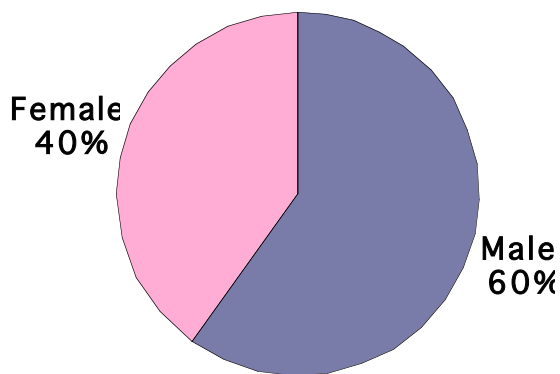
Other important factors are: coming from a sporty family, having access to transport, and being in good health. But educational attainment, gender, age and income are the strongest factors.

## PLAYER PROFILES

Because some people are more likely to play sport than others, the profile of those who play sport in Ireland differs from the population profile. Of adults who played at some point in the last year:

**43%** of players have a third-level qualification

compared with **28%** of the general population

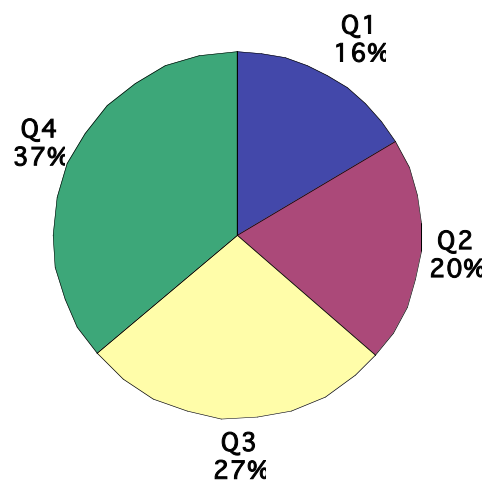


The majority of players are men, although a very substantial minority are women.

**42%** of adult (over-18) players are below the age of thirty

**82%** are below the age of fifty

More players are from the richest 25% of the population (Q4) than from the poorest 50% (Q1 and Q2 combined).



Overall, the people who play sport are far from a cross-section of society. They are, on average, better educated, more male, younger and richer than the general population.

## WHAT SPORTS DO PEOPLE PLAY?

Irish adults play over 60 different sports, some of which are more popular than others. Swimming and golf top the table for popularity:

	Sport	% of adults who play
1	Swimming	15
2	Golf*	12
3	Soccer†	9
4	Aerobics/Keep Fit	8
5	Cycling	5
6	Gaelic Football	4
7	Billiards/Snooker	4
8	Hurling/Camogie	3
9	Tennis	3
10	Jogging	3

(If recreational walking were included, it would top the table with 68%)

However, over 16% of Irish adults (or 1-in-6) play a sport that is not in this top ten. So the overall message is that no sport dominates the field – a wide range is played. Furthermore:

### **21%** of Irish adults play more than one sport

There is a big difference between the sports people play and the sports with high profile. Sports coverage in the media, with the clear exception of golf, concentrates mostly on competitive team sports, such as GAA, soccer and rugby. Yet:

**76%** of sport played by Irish adults is individual sport

while just **24%** is team sport

On the other hand, the majority of sport played by under-18s is team sport.

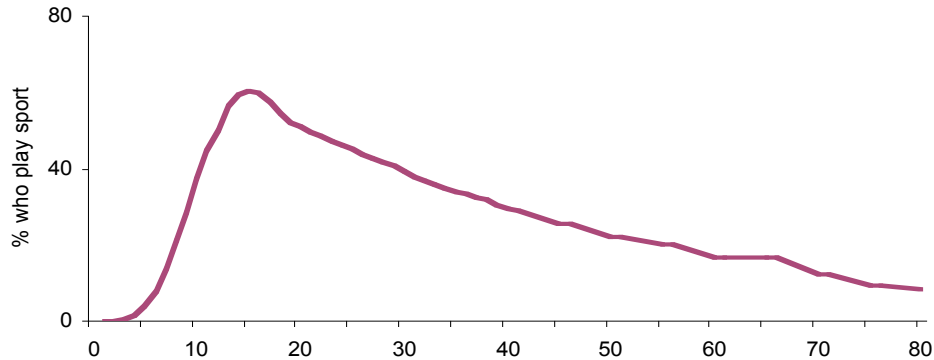
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\* Includes pitch-and-putt

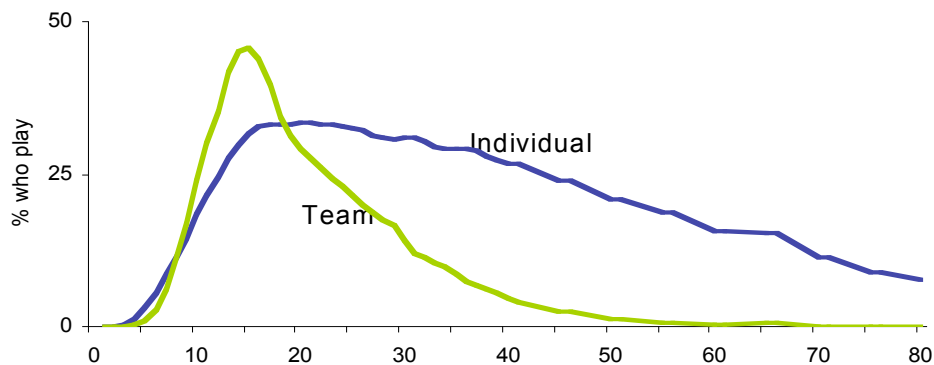
† Includes five-a-side

# A LIFETIME OF SPORT

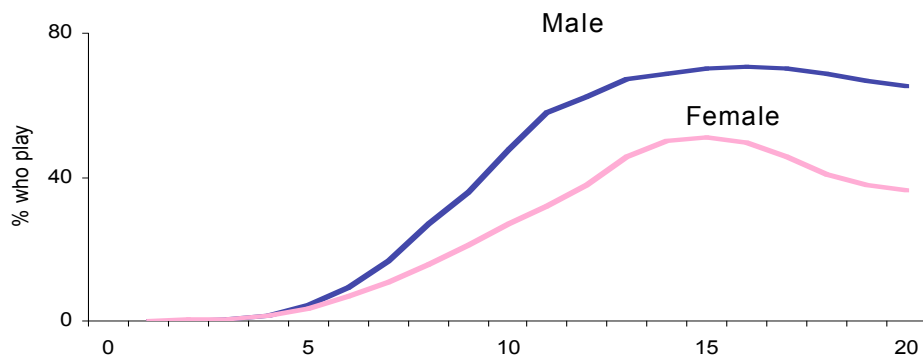
Playing regular sport follows a pattern with age. More than half of Irish adults played at age 15, after which they were less likely to play.



However, the pattern is very different for team sports and individual sports, which are more popular with older adults. This explains why most sport played by over-18s is individual sport, not team sport.



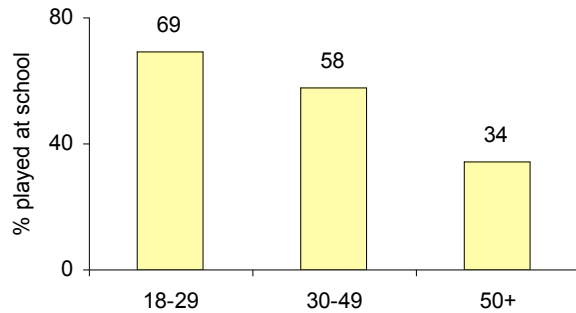
The pattern differs between genders too. Fewer adult women played at school and many quickly gave up sports they did play. Thus, by age 20, 36% of women were playing, compared to 65% of men.



However, after age 20, women are just as likely as men to start a new sport and no more likely to drop a sport they already play.

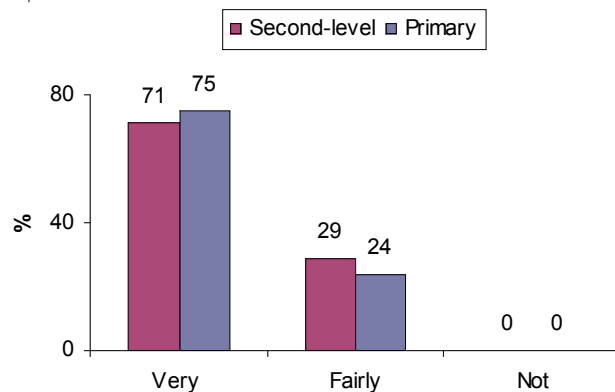
# SCHOOL SPORT: PERCEPTION AND REALITY

Common perceptions include that school sport is in decline, that lack of sport in schools is causing childhood obesity, and that more school sport is the way to promote sport generally. The evidence suggests otherwise.



Successive generations are playing much more sport at school. More than two-thirds of recent school-leavers played at school.

The large majority of school principals believe sport is 'very important' to the ethos of their school. No principals believe it is 'not important'.



Significant numbers of children do have problems with their weight:

**4%** of primary and second-level students are obese

and another **16%** are overweight

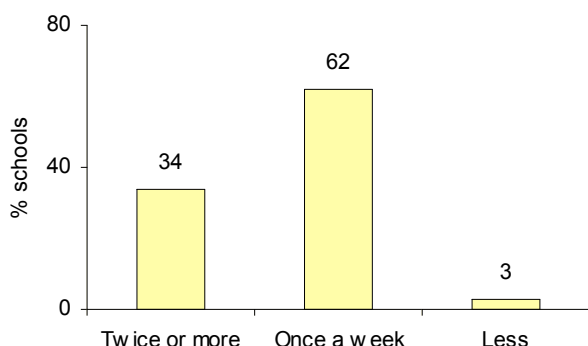
However, as in other countries, the relationship between weight and playing sport is weak. Overweight children play very nearly as much as other children. Dietary factors seem to be more important.

## BOX 2: The Impact of School Sport

As with other areas of adult life, there is a tendency to believe that people's experience at school matters a great deal. However, while people who played sport at school are more likely to play as adults, the effect is not large. Educational attainment, gender, age and income (see p.7) are bigger factors than whether a person played sport at school. Again, this finding matches research in other countries.

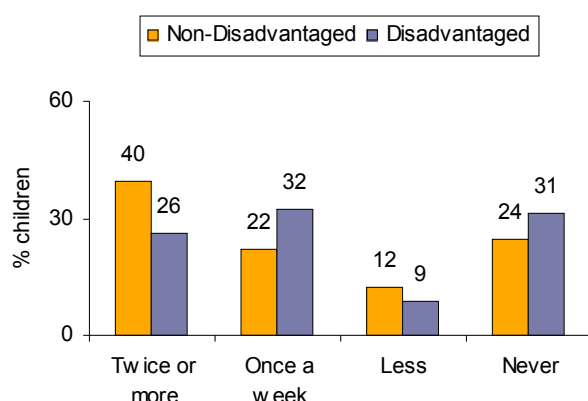
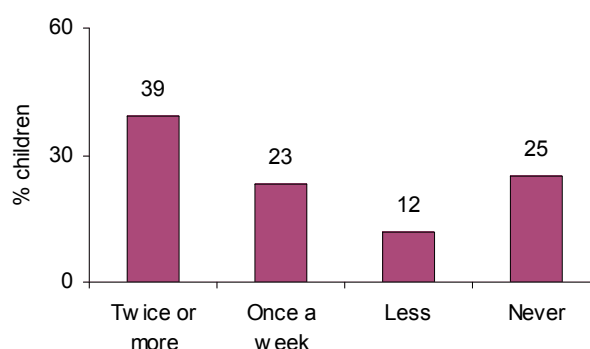
# PRIMARY SCHOOL SPORT

Schoolchildren play organised sport in three arenas: PE, extra-curricular school sport, and in sports clubs away from school.



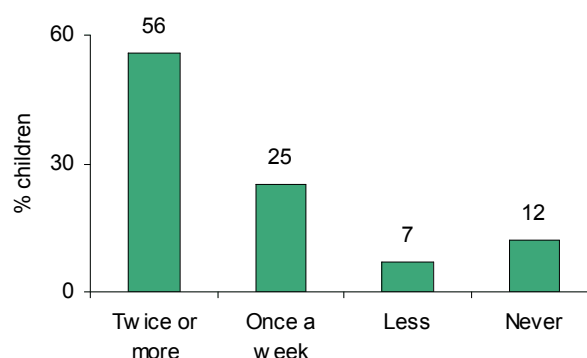
Most primary schools provide PE classes at least once a week. Soccer, Gaelic Football and Basketball are the most common PE sports.

Three-quarters of primary school children play some extra-curricular sport, often more than twice a week.



Children at primary schools designated as 'disadvantaged' by the Department of Education play less extra-curricular school sport. They also have fewer different sports on offer.

Nevertheless, primary schoolchildren actually play more in sports clubs away from school. Gaelic Football, Soccer and Swimming are the most popular sports.



At primary school age there is only a small difference between the participation in sport of boys and girls.

## SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOL SPORT

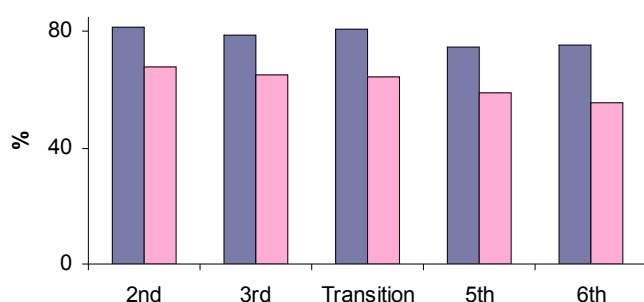
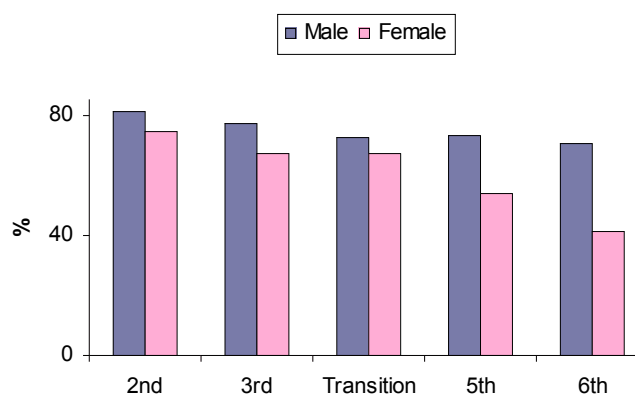
Second-level students also take part more frequently in extra-curricular sport and sport outside school than they do in PE.

the syllabus recommends **2** hours of PE per week but

the average second-level student does **69** minutes

Almost one quarter of second-level schools has no qualified PE teacher. The most common PE sports are soccer, basketball and badminton, all of which can be played indoors.

Most students play extra-curricular sport at school. But, as they move through school years, many drop out and the gender gap gets wider. At schools with lower pupil-teacher ratios there is more extra-curricular sport.



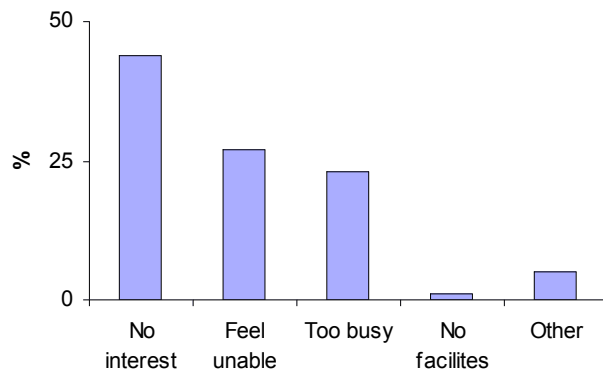
A majority of students also play in clubs outside school. Sports played in clubs don't lose popularity with age as quickly as school sports, especially among girls.

### BOX 3: The Key Role of Volunteer Teachers

The survey results in both primary and second-level schools show that most school sport occurs outside PE classes and is supervised by volunteer teachers with no formal training in PE. As the main delivery mechanism for school sport, volunteer teachers are therefore central to how much sport children play, what sports are offered, and how effectively sessions are organised and supervised. The number of teachers who volunteer is much lower in some schools than in others.

# GETTING MORE PEOPLE TO PLAY SPORT

International experience suggests it is hard to increase active participation in sport. But some countries have managed it, for example Finland and Canada.



In Ireland, the majority of non-players say they are interested in playing some sport. Those interested give two main reasons for not playing: feeling physically unable and lack of time. Lack of facilities is not an important issue.

The profile of non-players who are interested in playing sport gives an indication of who sports policy might target.



International evidence suggests some policy interventions have raised participation levels. Studies of best practice reveal that effective schemes involve communication and encouragement directed at targeted groups of potential participants.

## BOX 4: Young Adults

The most formative time in the development of sporting habits is early adulthood. Young adults who go to college or have high incomes are less likely to drop out from sport. They get contact with adult clubs and subsidised opportunities to try new sports. Many switch from team sports to individual sports. It is at this life-stage that the majority of people, who do not go on to college, are most likely to stop playing sport.



## IT'S NOT ALL PLAY

People participate in sport in other ways, including through volunteering, attending fixtures and belonging to sports clubs. These all contribute to the social and economic value of sport. The social value of sport is indicated by the fact that:

**59%** of players socialise regularly with fellow participants

as do **53%** of volunteers for sport-related activity

This social dimension is part of what motivates people to play:

**70%** say meeting people is a reason for playing

Taken together, the relationships and social networks that flow from mass participation in sport clearly contribute significantly to Ireland's social capital. Sport contributes economically too. Combining the cost of playing, club membership, attendance at events and volunteering:

the economic value of sport is an estimated **€1.4 billion**

or **1.3%** of Gross National Product (GNP)

These figures relate only to social participation in sport. They don't include the value generated by advertising, sports professionals, horse racing, gambling or sports tourism. Adding these other activities, the economic value of sport climbs to over €2 billion.

### **BOX 5: Sport and Alcohol**

One potential downside to participation in sport is its relationship with drinking alcohol. In general, members of sports clubs do not drink significantly more units of alcohol than the population as whole. But within certain sports, particularly in soccer and GAA clubs, there is evidence that club members, especially older members, drink significantly more than average.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTEERS

Volunteering for sport-related activity is the most common form of voluntary activity in Ireland.

**15%** of adults volunteered for sport in the last 12 months

which is the equivalent of **400,000** adults

and **11%** volunteered at least once per week

equivalent to **22,500** full-time workers

The GAA is the dominant organisation for sports volunteering, accounting for 42% of sports volunteers. Soccer comes next with 17% of volunteers.

	Activity	% of volunteering
1	Transport	26
2	Coach	15
3	Club Official	13
4	Activity Organiser	13
5	Kit Maintenance	10
6	Selector	8
7	Mentor	7
8	Referee	4

Providing transport tops the table of voluntary activities, followed by coaching and various organising roles.

On the basis of these figures, volunteering for sport can be regarded as an important contributor to social capital.

The profile of volunteers is more representative than that of players. Although still biased towards the better-off, educational attainment, income and age are less important influences. However, men are more likely to volunteer for sport than women (18% v. 12%). Many volunteers are former players and more than one quarter of volunteering is prompted by the involvement of people's own children.

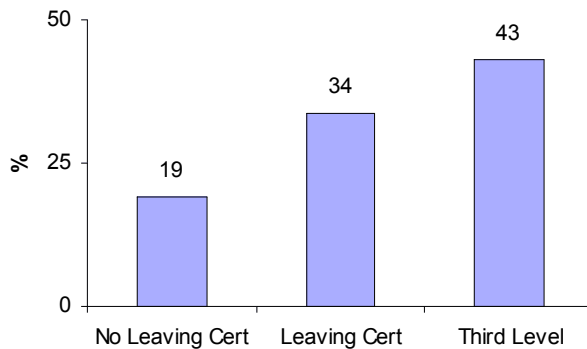
# SPORTS CLUB MEMBERS

Membership of a sports club offers the chance to extend social involvement in sport beyond people's playing days.

**40%** of men are members of sports clubs

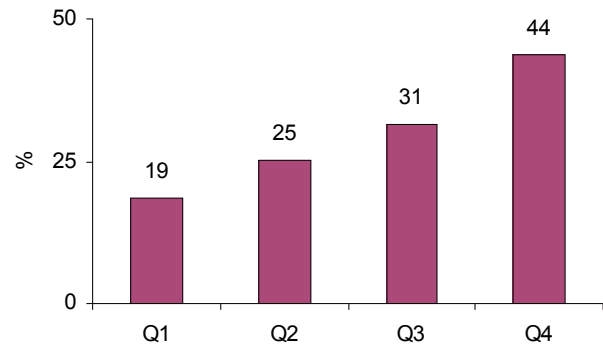
**20%** of women are members

One-in-five men over the age of 65 is a member of a sports club. As with playing, however, club membership is strongly skewed towards the better off:



Club membership increases sharply with levels of educational attainment.

The richest 25% of the population (Q4) are more than twice as likely to be sports club members than the poorest 25% (Q1).



	Sport	% of memberships	Av. sub (€)
1	GAA	26	20
2	Aerobics/Keep-fit	15	400
3	Golf	13	420
4	Soccer	13	25
5	Tennis	10	216

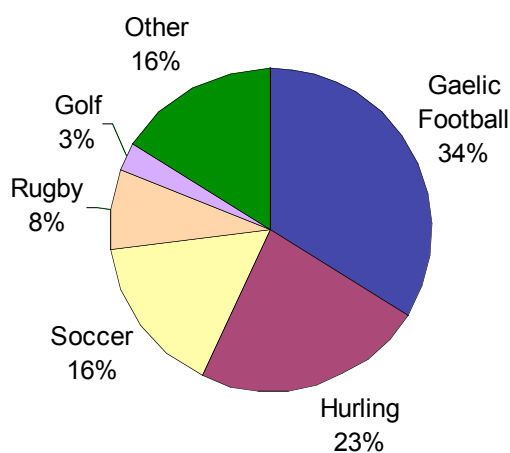
These patterns may partly reflect the cost of subscriptions. The five top **sports** for club membership cover over three-quarters of all memberships. Subs for individual sports are much higher than for team sports.

## SPECTATORS

As well as the enjoyment of watching the game, spectating is a social activity. It is also popular.

**46%** of Irish adults attended a fixture in the last 12 months

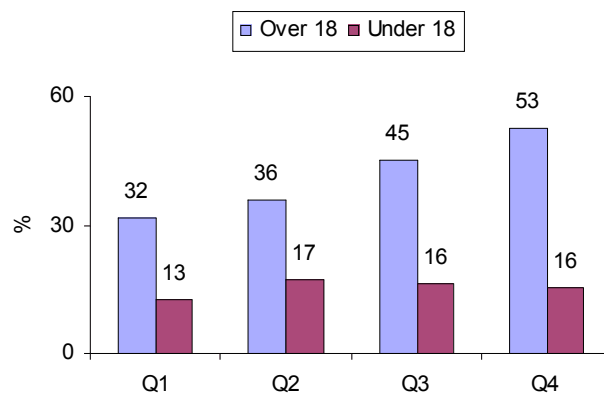
**58%** of men and **33%** of women



The GAA dominates spectating, accounting for over half of all attendances, followed by soccer and rugby. Almost 30% of fixtures attended involve players under 18, often the spectator's own children.

The profile of spectators varies with whether the event is an adult or children's fixture.

The top half of income earners (Q3 and Q4) are much more likely to attend an adult fixture than the bottom half (Q1 and Q2). But the same does not apply to children's sport.



### BOX 6: Other Background Factors

Considering all forms of participation in sport, two factors have a consistent impact: whether a person has access to transport and how sporty their family is. Those without access to a car (approximately 15% of the population) are less than half as likely to get involved in sport in any way, while people whose parents were sporty are over 50% more likely to play, volunteer, join a club, or attend a fixture.

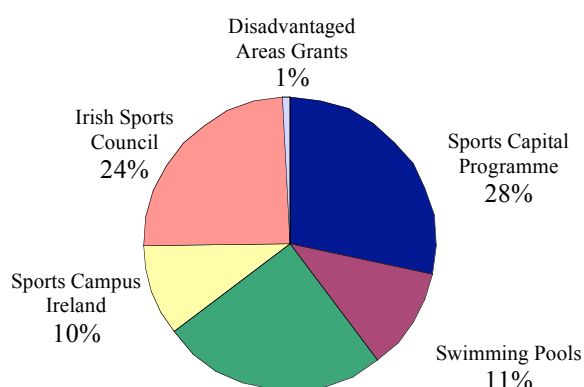
## CURRENT POLICY

How does the picture of Irish sport presented compare with current policy? The Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism has adopted the following 'High Level Strategy':

“Recognising the role of sport in fostering healthy lifestyles, to support and influence increased interest and participation in sport, the improvement of standards of performance in sport and the development of sport facilities at national, regional and local level, through an appropriate policy and resource framework.”

In 2007, the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism has €222 million\* to spend on sport, which is allocated as follows:

Regarding grassroots participation, the major programmes are:



### 1. Sports Capital Programme (€63 million)

This programme awards grants to sports clubs and organisations to build or improve facilities. Thus, this largest programme funds sporting infrastructure: pitches, clubhouses, gyms, halls, etc. The SCP aims to prioritise disadvantaged areas.

### 2. Local Authority Swimming Pool Programme (€25 million)

The LASPP awards grants for building/renovating swimming pools.

### 3. Irish Sports Council (€54 million)

As the development agency for Irish sport, the Council's main jobs are to co-ordinate competitive sport and to develop strategies to increase participation in recreational sport. Most of its €54 million is allocated to the Youth Field Sports initiative, the National Governing Bodies and elite sport. Approximately €7 million is committed to specific programmes to increase adult participation in recreational sport (including Local Sports Partnerships, Women in Sport and Sport for Older People).

\* Source: Department of Finance, Estimates 2007. The total of €166 million excludes €73 million for the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund and €56 million for the once-off redevelopment of Landsdowne Road stadium.

# **POLICY CHALLENGES**

The research presented raises many questions for policy-makers. The following are six policy issues that arise from the results and represent challenges for current policy:

## **1. THE IMPACT OF SPORT IS UNDERESTIMATED**

At present, sport punches below its weight as a policy issue. Its degree of mass participation is unparalleled, including in schools. But the health and social benefits of this mass involvement are easily undervalued. Sport is not 'only a game'. On the positive side, sport can make a significant contribution to public health, education and social capital. On the negative side, its strong socio-economic bias suggests that sport may contribute to social exclusion. The role of sport and its importance for public policy needs greater recognition across government.

## **2. OVER-RELIANCE ON FACILITIES**

A disjunction exists between the policy goal of raising participation in sport and the fact that the large majority of public funding is spent on facilities, which primarily benefit those who already play. Irish and international research suggests that providing more facilities is not the most effective way to raise participation. Much less of the budget is presently spent on programmes that, according to research, have a higher chance of attracting new participants to sport.

## **3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC BIAS**

The data show a strong bias in the socio-economic profile of Irish sport: people who currently play come from disproportionately better-off backgrounds. Furthermore, the large majority of funding comes from the National Lottery, which is disproportionately played by poorer socio-economic groups. Thus, even though the capital programme makes some effort to prioritise disadvantaged areas, the public money currently spent on sport is almost certainly regressive – the less well-off subsidising activities undertaken by the better-off. However, given the benefits sport can bring, this is not a reason to cut funding. Instead, it suggests that much greater policy effort needs to be directed at programmes to increase levels of participation in sport among the more disadvantaged.

## **4. IMPROVING SCHOOL SPORT**

The large majority of schoolchildren play some sport. To some degree, therefore, school sport is straightforwardly successful. However, there remain important challenges, particularly in trying to integrate education and sports policy. First, education policy prioritises PE, yet schoolchildren play far more sport outside PE classes. Second, there is a shortage of trained PE teachers. Third, the role of volunteer teachers, who supervise the majority of school sport, needs much greater attention and recognition, perhaps in terms of input from trained PE teachers. Fourth, disadvantaged primary schools need assistance to provide more sport. Finally, boys do more school sport than girls, yet this may not reflect an in-built gender difference in levels of interest, as after age 20 women are as likely to take up or drop sports as men.

## **5. SPORTS POLICY AND YOUNG ADULTS**

Whether an adult plays sport does not depend so much on whether they played **at** school, as when they **left** school. Many of the current adult generation, especially those from less advantaged backgrounds, dropped out of sport as young adults. Policy needs to ensure that the next generation fares better. In particular, people who attend college have much greater opportunities to try new sports, to establish contact with adult sports clubs, and to make the typical adult progression from team to individual sports; all at minimal cost. Sports policy needs to connect young adults who don't go to college with affordable sporting opportunities and encourage them to get involved.

## **6. RE-ENGAGING OLDER PEOPLE**

For the current generation of older adults, re-engaging them with sport requires policy to focus on sports that appeal to older people. Rather than traditional team sports, these are individual sports that can initially be taken up by people of limited fitness. Swimming, the most popular sport for active participation, cycling and walking are therefore priorities. The provision of pools, walkways and cycle routes needs to be supplemented by programmes to encourage participation, which international evidence suggests can work.

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