



Introduction

This report provides an interim update on data collected during the first six months of fieldwork on the Irish Sports Monitor 2017. The Irish Sports Monitor is a large scale population based survey designed to measure physical and social participation in sport and other forms of exercise in Ireland.

This report presents data from 4,256 telephone interviews conducted between January and June 2017. As data collection is still in progress, the results provided should be interpreted with caution as they could change¹ once data collection is completed (December 2017) and data weighting is finalised. For the purposes of presenting data in this report, the data has been weighted by age, gender, region, working status and education to reflect the profile of the Irish population. For comparative purposes, full-year data is also presented for the previous survey in 2015.²

Summary

The 2015 survey identified a decline in sports participation within the Irish population. This followed an increase in participation levels across the previous surveys. A potential rationale for the decline in participation between 2013 and 2015 was considered to be the improving economic environment during that time, meaning that some may have had less time to invest in sport and physical activity. The numbers involved in social participation in sport were broadly unchanged between the 2013 and 2015 surveys.

Initial results from the 2017 survey indicate that involvement in sport in its widest sense has not changed since 2015. While the 2017 survey identifies a lower proportion participating in active forms of sport than in 2015, this change is not statistically significant. Declines in social forms of participation in sport – volunteering and club membership – are also evident through the initial survey results (although these are not statistically significant).

However, the survey results do not indicate a universal decline in sports participation throughout the population, but instead suggest that any decline is focussed on specific population cohorts, and young males in particular.

The continued improvement in the wider economic situation in Ireland since the previous survey may again be a factor in limiting the potential for sporting activity – in both its active and social contexts. That young males are less active in sport than previously is noteworthy in this respect, as this is also the group seeing the largest proportional declines in unemployment³, and as such having less free time than during the recessionary period.

¹ Results may change for a number of reasons, such as revisions to the weighting scheme and seasonal factors which can impact on levels of sports participation

² Due to a methodological change noted in the 2015 report, figures for the 2015 survey provided here are different from those published previously

³ <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lr/liveregisteraugust2017/>



Physical Participation in Sport

Sports participation has undergone considerable change in recent years. There has been increased investment in facilities, and further availability of flexible forms of sport. This has meant that it has never been simpler for anyone wanting to become active or increase their activity levels to identify a way in which to do so.

Data from the Irish Sports Monitor in 2015 indicates that 43% of the population (approximately 1.6 million people) had participated in sport in the previous seven days. Interim data from the 2017 survey indicates that during the first half of 2017, 42% of the population participated in sport in the previous seven days.

While this change is not statistically significant it is noteworthy in the context of the many challenges faced in increasing sports participation in Ireland today. Busier lifestyles, increased numbers at work, longer commuting times and the increasing range of leisure activities are all competing factors within which sport needs to be accommodated.

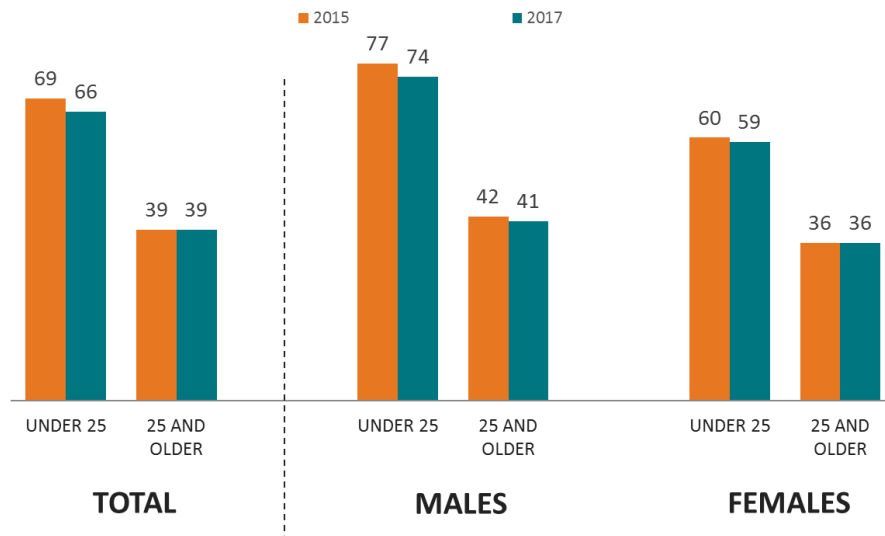
Figure 1: Participation in sport (%)



While sample sizes in this interim data are too limited to permit extensive analysis of different population groups, any decline in sports participation appears to be more focussed on younger individuals – those aged under 25 – than those who are older. Those aged under 25 remain more likely to participate in sport than older age groups, however the proportion doing so is lower than in 2015. Sixty-six percent of those aged under 25 have participated in sport in the past seven days, compared with 69% in 2015. In contrast, 39% of those older than 25 have participated in sport within the past seven days, unchanged from the proportion doing so in 2015 (39%).



Figure 2: Participation in sport by age and gender (%)

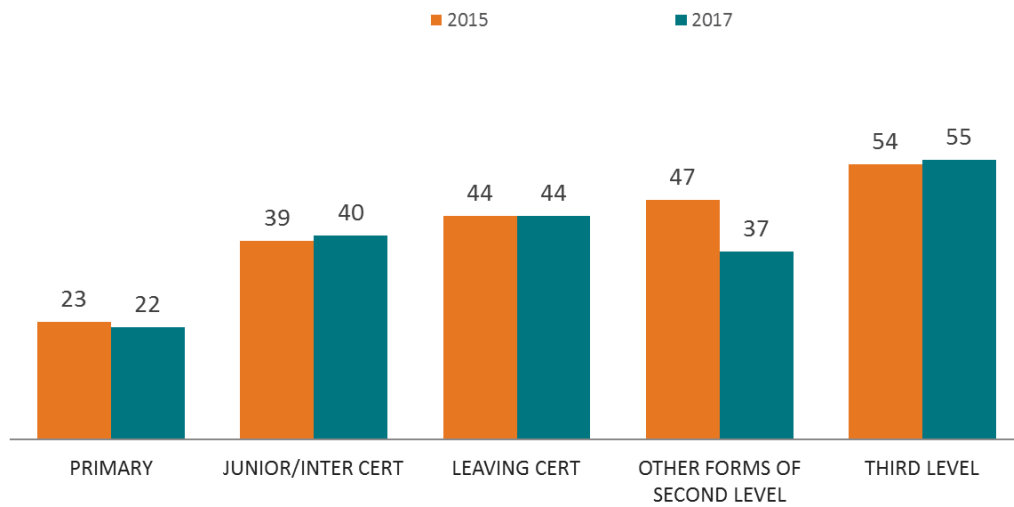


This dynamic is more evident among males than females. Seventy-four percent of males aged under 25 in 2017 play sport, compared with 77% among this group in 2015. In contrast, 59% of females in this age group currently play sport, compared with 60% in 2015. Forty-one percent of older males currently play sport, compared with 42% in 2015. Among older females, 36% currently play sport – the same proportion as in 2015.

Analysis of sports participation by highest level of education achieved and working status may provide a further understanding of those groups that may be less likely to participate in sport than previously. The proportion with third level education who participate in sport is broadly unchanged in 2017 when compared to 2015. In 2017, 55% of those with third level education participate in sport, compared with 54% in 2015. However, when looking at those with other forms of second level education (including technical and vocational qualifications), the proportion playing sport is lower in 2017 than in 2015 (37% and 47% respectively). For those whose education ceased at Leaving Certificate or earlier (or are still in education), the proportion playing sport is broadly unchanged.

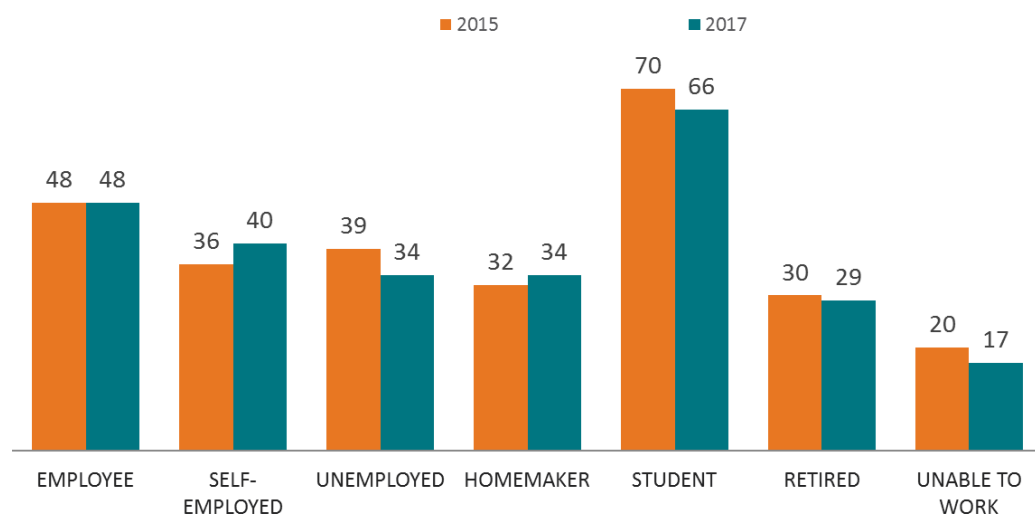


Figure 3: Participation in sport by highest level of education achieved (%)



Similarly, when examining participation by employment status it is evident that participation in sport is more resilient in some employment categories than others. However, with declining levels of unemployment, and those transitioning from unemployment to employment, the composition of these groups may not be identical so direct comparisons are more difficult. Those who are unemployed and those who are students may both be showing declines in participation levels (although these are not statistically significant). In 2017, 34% of those who are unemployed played sports in the past seven days, compared with 39% in 2015. Similarly, 66% of students are participating in sport in 2017, compared with 70% in 2015. Among employees, 48% participate in sport (2015: 48%), with 40% of those who are self-employed participating in sport (2015: 36%).

Figure 4: Participation in sport by working status (%)



Taking all of this into consideration may suggest that any decline in sports participation is focussed on particular population cohorts – notably younger people (males in particular), those with technical and vocational qualifications, and those who are unemployed. In turn, sports participation is more resilient among those who are middle-aged, with third level education and those in employment. Such a development would be concerning, not only because it leads to an overall decline in sports participation, but also leads to a widening social gradient in participation with those in less-advantaged groups becoming less likely to participate in sport.

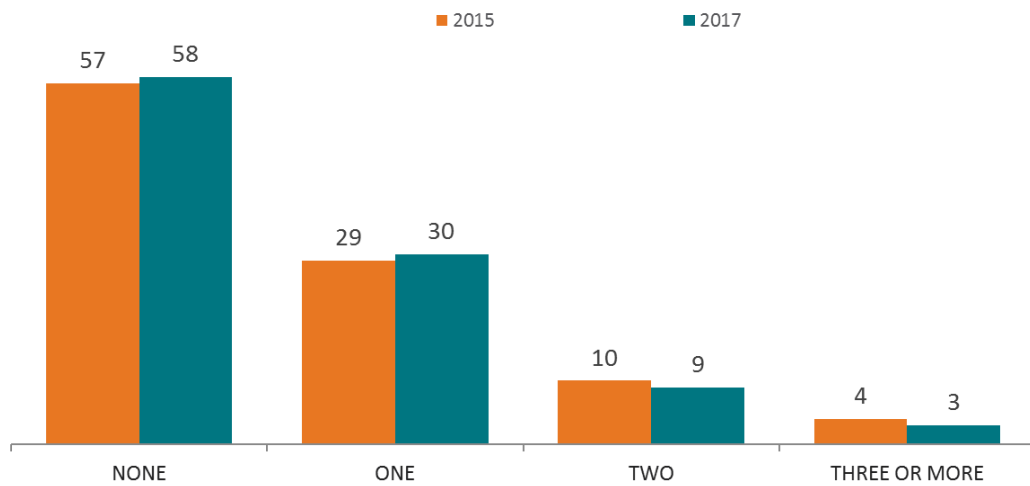
The past number of waves of the Irish Sports Monitor have recorded a decline in team-based activities, while most increases in sports participation have come through activities participated in on an individual basis. Previous reports include detailed discussion on this dynamic, with the more flexible nature of individual activities considered to be the key driver in this respect.

Interim results from the 2017 survey show that 37% of the population participate in a sport typically played on an individual basis (for example, gym activities, running and cycling), and 8% participate in a team-based activity (for example, gaelic football, soccer and rugby). This compares with 38% and 9% respectively in the 2015 study.

Just under 1 in 3 people (30%) play one sport, with 12% playing multiple sports. While the proportion participating in individual sports is consistent with the 2015 survey (29%), the proportion playing multiple sports is lower than what was recorded in 2015 (14%). While this is not necessarily an indication that those who were playing multiple sports are more likely to have dropped out of sport than those playing a single sport, it does provide further evidence of lower levels of sporting activity overall.



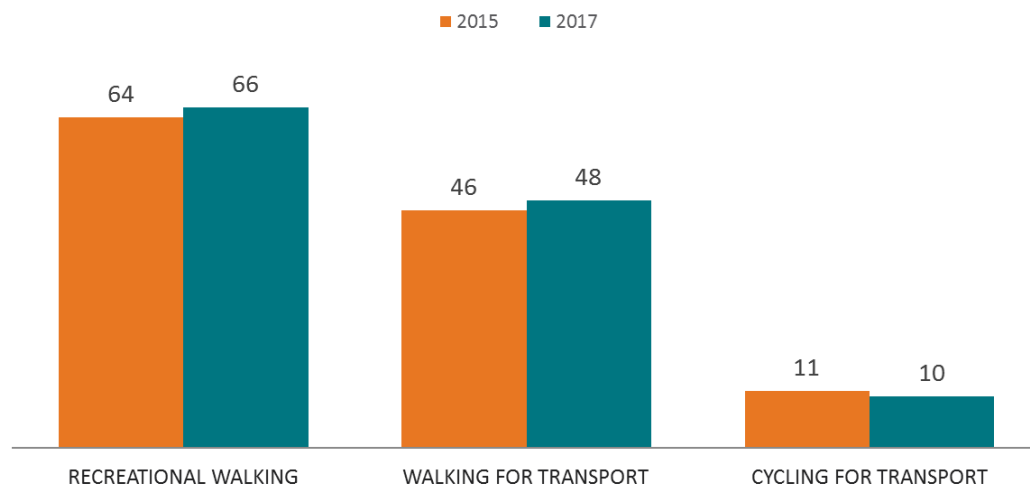
Figure 5: Number of sports played (%)



Other Forms of Physical Activity

The Irish Sports Monitor also measures three other forms of physical activity – recreational walking, walking for transport and cycling for transport. In 2017, two-thirds (66%) of the population were involved in recreational walking in the past seven days, with almost half (48%) walking for transport and 10% cycling for transport.

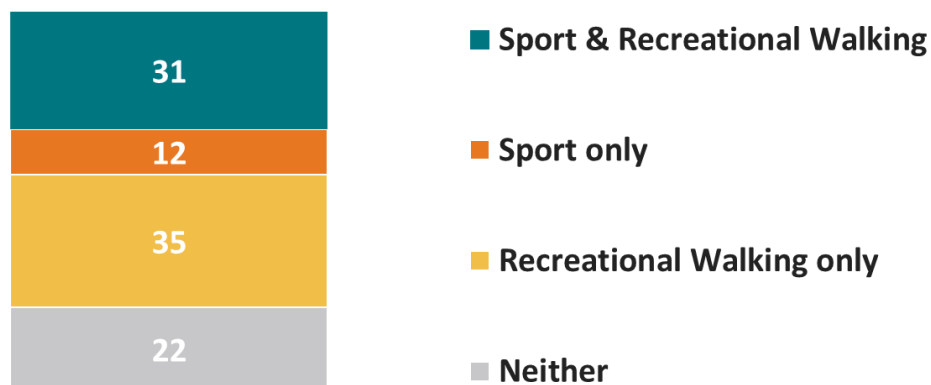
Figure 6: Other forms of physical activity (%)



For two of these forms of activity – recreational walking and walking for transport – the proportions involved have increased since the 2015 survey. In 2015, 64% walked for recreational reasons and 46% did so for transport. In terms of the latter, an increase is consistent both with an increased focus on active forms of travel as well as with the improving economic conditions. As more people are travelling to work, it follows that there will be an increase in walking for transport. An analysis of those in employment supports this, with the proportion of employees walking for transport increasing from 43% in 2015 to 48% in 2017. The proportion of those who are self-employed is the same in both years (37%).

However, the proportion that is cycling for transport is slightly lower in 2017 than in 2015. Currently 10% of the population cycle for transport, compared with 11% doing so in 2015. Any decline in this form of activity is worthy of specific focus, particularly in the context of the large increase in cycling as a way of commuting measured by the census between 2011 and 2016. This will be discussed in further detail in the Annual Report.

Figure 7: Participation in sport and recreational walking in past seven days (%)

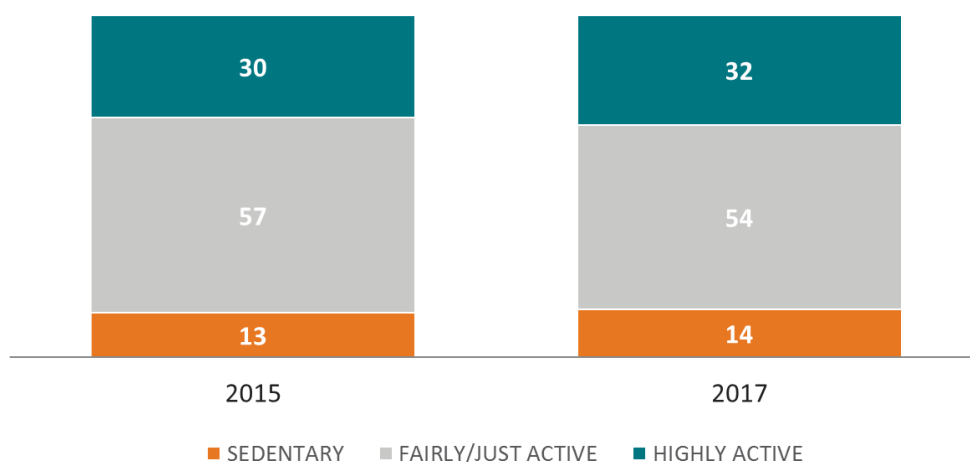


Examining participation in sport together with recreational walking shows that 31% have participated in both activities in the past seven days. A higher proportion – 35% - have participated in recreational walking only, and 12% participated in sport only. Just over 1 in 5 (22%) participate in neither activity.

As such, while almost three-quarters of those participating in sport also participate in recreational walking, less than half of those participating in recreational walking also participate in sport. This presents an opportunity in encouraging those already active through recreational walking to become active in sport.



Figure 8: Activity categories (%)



Combining the four modes of activity recorded by the ISM allows for estimation of the proportion of adults meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines (Highly Active) as well as those who are effectively inactive (Sedentary). A slightly higher proportion of adults are classified as Highly Active in 2017 compared to 2015, while the proportion which is sedentary remains broadly static at 14%.

Social Participation in Sport

The Irish Sports Monitor measures social participation in three forms – club membership, volunteering and attendance at sport events. As with the measurement of active participation in sport, survey respondents are asked about their participation within the previous seven days, and as such it focuses on recent and frequent participation rather than less frequent social involvement.

Just over two out of every five Irish people (43%) had some form of social participation in sport in the past week. Social participation in sport is a crucial element in maintaining sporting infrastructures and is key to the future development of sport in Ireland. Membership of a club is the most common form of social participation, with 32% involved in sport in this way. Roughly 1 in every 6 people (18%) have attended a sporting event in the past seven days, and participation in voluntary activities relating to sport is undertaken by 10% of the population.



Figure 9: Social participation in sport (%)



Any form of social participation in sport



As with active participation in sport, there has been a decline in social participation at an overall level. In 2015, 45% had participated socially in sport in the previous seven days. All three forms of social participation had higher levels of participation in 2015: club membership: 34%; attendance at sporting events: 19%; and volunteering 11%.

As with active participation in sport, the decline in social participation is more evident among younger age groups than older ones. Just over half (54%) of those aged under 25 have a social involvement in sport, compared with 41% of those older than this. The 2015 survey found that 59% of those aged under 25 were involved in sport in this way, compared with 43% of those older than this.

Additionally, the decline in social participation is more focussed on less-advantaged social groups. For example, just over 1 in 5 (22%) of those who are unemployed participate socially in sport, compared with 32% in 2015. Those who are working are more likely to participate socially in sport with 49% of employees, and 44% of those who are self-employed, involved in this way. This compares with 50% and 47% respectively in the 2015 measurement.

For more details on the Irish Sports Monitor, and to access previous reports, visit <http://sportireland.ie>

