

INFORMAL SPORT

As a Health and Social Resource for Diverse Young People

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Date of publication

September 2021

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Suggested Citation

Jeanes, R., Penney, D., O'Connor, J., Spaaij, R., Magee, J., O'Hara, E., and Lymbery, L. (2021) Informal Sport as a Health and Social Resource for Diverse Young People. Monash University





INFORMAL SPORT

A game changer for sport participation in Australia

For several years now, it has been recognised that lifestyles, patterns of work and importantly, ways of participating in sport, are changing. For many people, the rigidity, time commitment, structure and competitiveness of formal sport is increasingly unappealing and inaccessible. Instead, they are opting to participate in unregulated and flexible opportunities that align with their evolving lifestyles. Participation is thus being negotiated to better match abilities and interest, to have a greater focus on health, restoration, and the body, and to further enhance social connectivity.

This Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project (LP 180100038) aims to enhance understanding of these trends and generate data that can inform future planning and provision across all tiers of government, sport and community stakeholders. This report summarises the first year of findings of the 3-year research project 'Informal sport as a health and social resource for diverse young people'. The research is funded by the ARC in partnership with VicHealth, Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries (Western Australia), Centre for Multicultural Youth and Cricket Victoria.

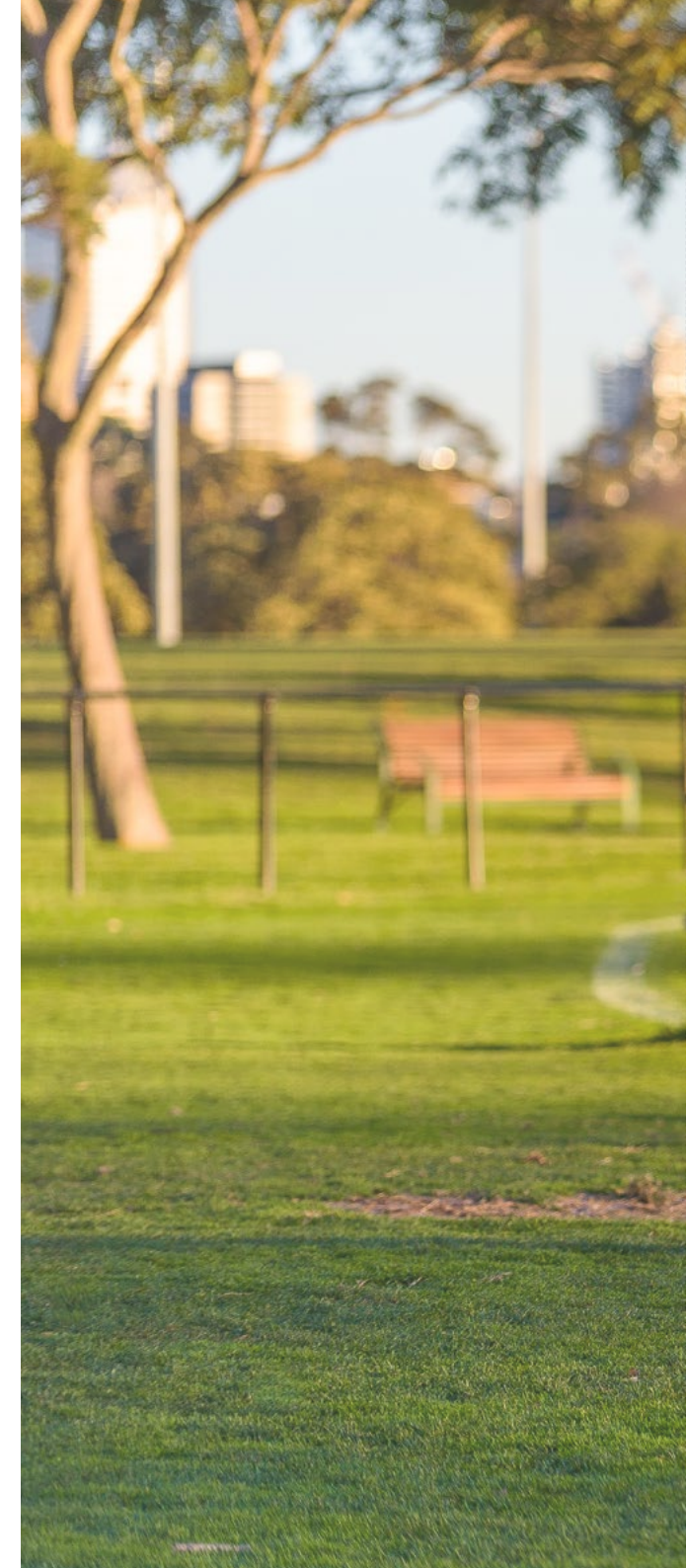
The participation, social and policy context

The Future of Australian Sport report (Haikowitz et al., 2013) was one of the first national strategy documents to acknowledge changing participation habits with a focus on people's increasing preference for flexible sport and physical activity opportunities that could be tailored to their lifestyles. The Intergenerational Review of Australian Sport (BCG, 2017) affirmed that participation in structured forms of sport (affiliated, club based, rule bound sport) is decreasing, with only 25% of the population engaging in formal sport. Formal participation is expected to decline by a further 15% among adults over the next 10 years. AusPlay (2019) data similarly highlights that participation in club-based sport is stagnating or decreasing, while participation in unstructured, informal forms of activity is on the increase. This latter trend, and the opportunities and challenges it presents for community sport stakeholders, has been the stimulus for this research (Jeanes et al., 2019).

Whilst changes in community needs and participation have been recognised within some key policy documents, since 2013, there has been limited strategic response across the sport sector. Australian sport policies have repeatedly sought to increase participation rates in sport, but in many instances, attention has focused on drawing people into club-based structures. Traditional forms of sport participation continue to make important contributions to health, social and community agendas and it is important this form of participation continues to be supported and encouraged to flourish.

The changing social context and the impact of COVID-19 on individuals and communities present important opportunities to broaden the type(s) of sport participation we are looking to increase (Jeanes et al., 2020). The growth in participation outside of club structures highlights that an increasing number of people are seeking opportunities to participate in different ways to those that have traditionally been provided. As Haikowitz et al. (2013) emphasise, a sports sector that can be responsive to these shifting participation trends will broaden the appeal of sport to a richer diversity of communities and ensure its continued relevance to local communities for decades to come.

As this report moves on to elaborate, the findings of the research to date suggest that broadening support for sport participation to more readily include informal forms of participation has significant implications for how stakeholders can support, promote and develop sport within Australia. We recognise that policy, funding, facilities and support for traditional sporting formats together with pathways for talented individuals to progress to their chosen level is and should remain an important focus. A key message from our research is that significant attention also needs to be directed to the growth sector of informal participation. We suggest that the informal sport sector represents a critical opportunity in efforts to grow and sustain sport participation within communities and ensure the well-established physical, mental and social benefits that sport participation can provide are accessible to a larger proportion of the population.





Organised sport is only going to provide opportunities for such a small margin of the Victorian community to be active and we need to almost adopt a lifecycle approach that is flexible for different opportunities for people to be active around the rigours of their daily routine, changes in going from primary school to high school, getting a part time job, going into further education, having a family, etcetera. So, it's really about trying to design a system, if you like, that is responsive to where people are at through different stages of their lives to be active”

Government Stakeholder





PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

The research project has two key aims:

1.

To understand how informal sports that engage diverse young people are self-organised and managed, and provide evidence for the social, health and economic benefits that these activities provide within diverse communities;

2.

To enhance the capacity of government, sport, physical activity and health agencies to harness the health and wellbeing potential of informal sport by generating guidance and practical resources to assist with reconceptualising current policy and operational approaches.

Data is being collected in Victoria and Western Australia (WA) across four case study local government authorities (LGAs). This summary discusses findings from the first of three data collection phases. Phase 1 comprised interviews with over 100 stakeholders including representatives from national and state sporting associations, state and local government, (both within and outside our case study LGAs), health and community agencies, sports clubs and informal sporting group leaders. The interviews sought to understand current policy and provision for informal sport as well as the associated opportunities, tensions and challenges. Phase 1 also included a policy analysis where key public policies at local, state and national level were examined to determine existing support and constraints in relation to informal sport participation. The next phases of the project involve in-depth data collection with informal groups. (Details of the methodology provided on our project website).

WHAT IS INFORMAL SPORT?

Defining informal sport is not an easy task. Indeed, it is likely that the uncertainty surrounding informal sport as a concept has contributed in part, to the limited engagement with informal sport in policy and practice. Across policies, a range of terminology is variously used, sometimes interchangeably, such that informal participation is linked with active recreation, physical activity, social sport and/or community sport. For this project, we have defined informal sport participants as individuals and groups who are not affiliated with a formal sporting club or governing body, self-organising their participation in sport, outside of traditional structures. We have particularly focused on informal engagement in traditional sports (including soccer, basketball, cricket, volleyball) or modified versions of these sports, rather than activities such as yoga or personal training.

The stakeholder interviews suggest that multiple forms of informal participation are occurring in communities. The different forms affirm that informal participation should not be regarded as unorganised. Neither should informal sport be assumed to be non-competitive. Different modes of group organisation and communication are used to support regular participation opportunities designed to suit individual and group interests. The case studies opposite provide a sample of the different groups that are active and how they operate.

Case Studies:



Friends Basketball Group

How: Evening basketball, round robin tournament format, formed by a group of young people with players paying a \$10 fee to cover indoor court hire. Communication takes place through WhatsApp, casual turn up and play.

Impact: Initially started with a small group, now over 50 regular participants.



Women's Futsal program

How: Organised by a soccer coach looking to continue participation in the 'off season'. Sourced a futsal venue and invited friends to attend, players contribute to venue hire costs. Turn up and play with participants organized into teams and play a series of games across two hours. Weekly booking and advertised through Instagram.

Impact: Expanded to 100-150 regular participants, organiser sought sponsorship from local businesses to pay for equipment, uniforms and facility hire.



Community Volleyball

How: Initiated by a small group of friends, took nets and balls to their local park and played most weekday evenings. Attracted more participants from people using the park and now have a WhatsApp group to communicate timings each evening. Modified rules to suit abilities, turn up and play.

Impact: Regularly attracts 15-20 players daily, catalyzed other groups starting in the park.

The research to date has highlighted the complexity and breadth of informal participation. This includes intersections with formal, club and/or sport association provision. Around 30% of the opportunities we have identified in the research so far, may be considered semi-structured and/or characterised as facilitated informal sport. This reflects groups drawing on the mechanisms of more traditional forms of sport (such as leagues and competitions, wearing of uniforms) but in ways that enable participants to engage in informal ways (e.g. no membership fees, no requirement for training, participants can pick and choose when they play). Examples also include participants who move across formal and informal participation opportunities, and clubs and associations that seek to build relationships with informal participants or groups. Due to the diversity of informal sport that we have mapped to date, we would argue that informal sport is best thought of as a significant sector of sport participation in Australia – that intersects with and complements formal sport, contributes to multiple policy agendas, but currently struggles for recognition, access to funding and investment.



WHY INFORMAL SPORT PARTICIPATION?

Informal sport has a range of potential benefits for individuals and communities. These include physical health benefits that come from regular participation in physical activity; mental health benefits that come from social connection and a sense of belonging.

Informal sport offers a form of participation that aligns with current societal shifts and the need for flexible opportunities that align with individual and family lifestyles and resources.

Key drivers of participation identified in the research include:

- Informal sport is free or low cost. Where there is cost associated with participation (such as facility hire fees) participants only have to pay this when they play. This is in contrast to the registration/membership, uniform and equipment fees often associated with traditional club-based opportunities.
- Informal sport is flexible. It allows participation around work patterns, competing engagements or domestic and family responsibilities. Despite often having a predictable schedule, participants can pick and choose when and how frequently they engage.
- Informal sport groups can dictate the terms of engagement. Informal groups are able to modify rules and equipment to engage in formats that best suit the skills and abilities of the group. Competitiveness can vary dependent on group agreement.

- Informal sports groups are self-regulating. There is no requirement for external coaches, umpires or referees. Play is invariably managed and rules adhered to by the playing group and in some instances, group members will adopt an officiating role.
- Being able to just play a sport they love is highly appealing to informal groups. The format of informal sport facilitates this.

Informal opportunities often appeal to groups that traditionally engage less in club-based sport, including people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and/or low socioeconomic backgrounds. Our data has affirmed that CALD groups are particularly active in creating community-oriented informal participation opportunities. Stakeholder data points to participation in public spaces tending to be dominated by men of varying ages, but the research has identified pockets of participation among women and girls. Greater exploration of the gender dynamics inherent in informal sport will be undertaken in phase 2 of the research.

The stakeholder interviews highlighted a range of constraints to the growth of informal participation that exist at all levels of the sport system. These are summarised below across two key themes: 1. Space, facilities and access; and 2. Policy, legislation and funding



SPACE, FACILITIES AND ACCESS

Space, facilities and access were the most commonly raised issues within the initial analysis, pointing to multilayered complexities associated with space. These are summarised according to relevance for different stakeholders.

Local Government/State Government

- LGAs face constraints on available spaces and struggle to cater for the needs of traditional sport clubs.
- LGAs and State government stakeholders recognise that funding for facility development is often based on historical investment approaches and tends to prioritise sports facilities that cater for structured forms of sport participation .
- LGAs recognise that they frequently lack meaningful data documenting informal sport participation rates. Facility need is often determined through registered usage and requests for bookings with data relating to participation by informal groups frequently missing in assessments of usage if they do not formally book spaces. This makes it challenging for LGAs to respond/justify investment in spaces and facilities for informal sport because of a lack of tangible evidence of need.
- Whilst LGAs engage in community consultation with regard to facility development, stakeholders acknowledge that informal groups may not contribute to/be aware of these processes.
- Maintenance and use of facilities (and hence access) invariably relates to established formal sport seasons, limiting all-year round informal participation in a specific sport.
- LGAs are required to curtail 'unauthorised use' of facilities which prevents informal groups from participating.

State Sporting Associations (SSAs) and affiliate clubs

- The priority for SSAs historically is ensuring facilities are available to support registered and affiliated membership.
- There are positive examples of sports clubs and informal groups sharing facilities and negotiating access around the other groups needs. However, informal groups sharing spaces and facilities can create tensions between groups and sporting clubs, when informal groups are not considered to be contributing to maintenance and upkeep of facilities.
- Similar to LGAs, SSAs recognise that they do not readily have data available to make judgements on levels of informal participation and potential facility and space requirements. With a funding model for community sport facilities that is driven by a federal system based on club membership participation numbers, informal participants remain hidden in needs assessments for facilities and sporting spaces.

Informal Groups

- Groups frequently experience difficulties gaining access to facilities, many will often do so illegally and are moved on, particularly when attempting to share facilities used by sporting clubs.
- Facilities that are available for informal participation can be inappropriate with no toilets, changing facilities, water fountains, lighting etc.
- Informal groups may use facilities and spaces in ways that do not reflect their intended purpose, for example roller hockey taking place on a tennis court, which leads to groups being prevented from using some facilities.

POLICY, LEGISLATION AND FUNDING

Local Government/State Government

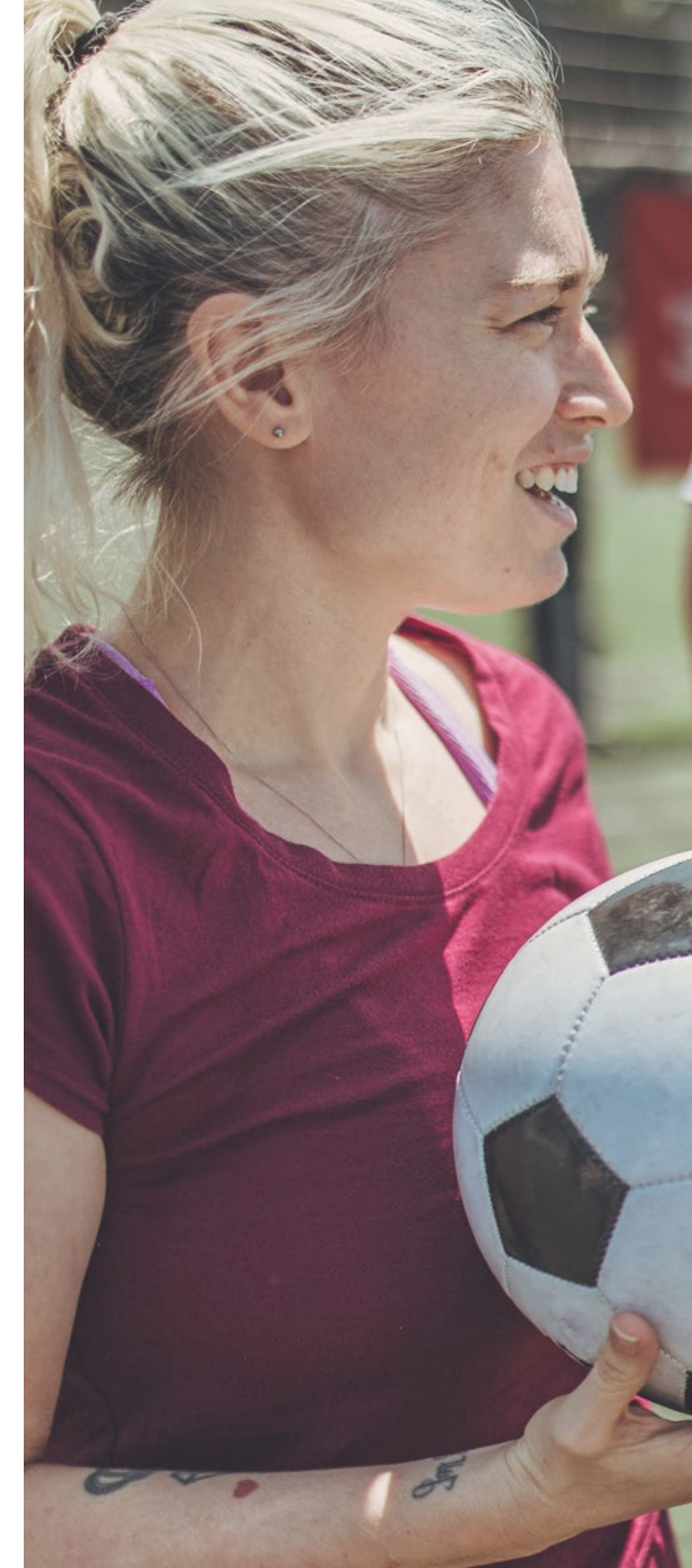
- Informal sport is recognised as a form of participation that can support health and physical activity agendas in key policies, but there is limited focus within policies on how to support or increase informal forms of participation.
- A lack of clear data surrounding informal sport hinders effective policy formation. LGAs are finding the current data context challenging with available statistics and data difficult to interpret and predict need. Sources of data include AusPlay, SSA data and LGA data sets which all measure participation in varying ways.
- Funding opportunities to support sport development generally require distribution through regulated, affiliated organisations, limiting the opportunities available to informal groups to access funds to support participation.
- Policies around facility usage can hinder informal groups. Examples included priority given to pre-existing or long term bookings, EOI processes where only affiliated clubs could express interest in using facilities and requirements for groups to have public liability insurance.
- Seasonal usage policies also constrain participation with, for example, soccer groups struggling to find spaces to play when goals are removed in order for the space to switch to supporting cricket participation.

SSA's and affiliate clubs

- Policy priorities focus on supporting members, pathways and talent development.
- Alignment of funding to affiliated membership numbers results in SSAs unable to acknowledge and leverage informal participation within their structures.
- SSAs acknowledge the appeal and importance of informal participation and some are attempting to facilitate more social versions of their sport, usually driven through affiliated clubs. Similarly, some clubs are exploring diversified participation and membership options.

Informal Groups

- Informal groups often cannot formally book facilities due to the requirement for public liability insurance, the cost of booking and/or the need for regular and fixed booking times.
- There is a lack of awareness and understanding of how to book and difficulty navigating booking systems.
- Groups are impacted by seasonal changes with resources such as goal posts being removed, despite their desire to participate all year round.
- There is limited desire to align with a formal club, with this perceived as creating too many restrictions and requirements for participation.





“

So, just in terms of for example running the soccer tournament [for informal participants]. So you obviously have a project plan, you'd have a risk management, you'd make sure you have the right sports injury cover. Have public liability, making sure that whoever's on the council and the people that are working within the community have the appropriate checks in terms of Working with Children Check, Police Clearance. So we are complying with the government requirements in terms of the city, but also with us wanting to do the right thing. Soccer rules, FFA, we're complying with those as well.“

CALD Community organisation WA

IMPLICATIONS OF THESE ISSUES

Informal groups are largely organic, self-organising and self-sustaining. If groups have access to appropriate local spaces, with accompanying supportive infrastructure, this form of sport participation requires limited further investment and can potentially contribute significant health and social benefits to individuals and communities. However, structures and systems can make it challenging for groups to participate and counteract the broader political and policy objective to increase sport participation for health, wellbeing and community connection.

Informal sport participation in Australia currently lacks recognition at a national, state and local government level, yet it merits serious consideration within sport and health policies and planning. Informal sport has implications for multiple areas of government including health, sport, community development, urban planning, but it is not readily owned by one portfolio.

Planning to grow and sustain informal sport requires cross-government communication, policy alignment and coordinated approaches to innovation and investment.

Recognition of informal sport in facility planning decisions is crucial if informal groups' access to facilities is to be improved. The findings to date point to the need to rethink sport and recreation facility planning and development, using approaches that consider informal sport on equal footing with other forms of participation.

The current funding system for sport prioritises traditional formats based on affiliation and membership which potentially reduces the capacity of sporting stakeholders to engage with informal participants as they cannot be counted within membership figures. A sport system capable of supporting and extending informal participation would require alternative funding models that recognise the breadth of participation occurring, and support its growth.

Whilst for local government facilitating local, accessible physical activity is an important objective, some policies and legislation limit informal participation. Considering possibilities for how groups can readily gain access and strategies for countering current constraints such as insurance requirements will form a focus for further research and exploration across the next stage of the research.

What is currently working?

Whilst stakeholders pointed to a lack of strategic and coordinated approaches to support and grow informal sport participation, we identified a number of examples of creative practice, cooperation between stakeholders and modifications and accommodations made to support informal participation. Within the sport sector in particular a number of sports embrace and encourage 'social sport' as a potential hybrid between traditional formats and informal participation. These sports have made modifications to support greater levels of informal participation.

Case Studies:



Tennis Victoria Book-a-court system

Aim: To facilitate casual tennis participation to non-club members.

How: Tennis Victoria work with affiliated tennis clubs to negotiate timeslots during the week for open court hire. Online booking system and nominal court hire fee. Online registration process provides a pin number that allows access to courts.

Impact: Greater levels of casual engagement, participation can be tracked through online booking system, successful relationship between clubs and casual users.

CMY Welcome Football



Aim: To support resettlement through soccer participation amongst newly arrived migrants and CALD young people.

How: CMY book facilities through LGAs to negate booking system and requirements for insurance. Young people turn up and play, no requirement for commitment or booking. CMY access external funding to support administration of program and booking costs.

Impact: Young people engaged regularly in local, accessible soccer opportunities. Opportunity to connect with other young people in their local area.



Perth Cricket

How: Weekly Sunday morning T20 cricket tournament for all abilities. Promoted through social media, players pay \$10 for weekly games, no commitment required, turn up and play.

Impact: Currently has approximately 400 players engaging weekly in cricket and demand for further tournaments to be established.



Volleyball WA working to promote and support growth in social participation

How: By developing new partnerships with LGA leisure centres and universities and expanding sites for casual volleyball in parks and beach locations. Volleyball WA also offer various levels of membership for both individuals and/or groups. One such level is suitable for players/groups who only wish to participate socially, which provides the individual/group with Personal Accident Insurance for volleyball related activities

Impact: Social sport groups have joined with Volleyball WA to access insurance. One of these runs a competitive tournament on Thursday evenings and social matches on Sunday afternoons and now have a waitlist of people wishing to attend/participate.

WHERE TO NEXT?

This report focuses on data collected from phase 1 of our 3-year research project. Phase 1 of the research has identified some core barriers that exist across multiple layers of governance that constrain informal sport activity within communities. An ongoing aspect of this research is finding solutions to these issues and identifying alternative ways of addressing barriers across policy, legislation and funding. This will be a priority in the next stages of the research.

The next stage is to collect in-depth data with informal groups to map their prevalence and reach within our case study areas. We also want to answer important questions around frequency of participation and what this form of participation contributes to health within communities. In the second phase of the research, we are collecting data that will allow us to quantify the economic and social benefits of informal sport to communities.

We will also be working with more informal groups to better understand how they self-organise and manage participation, what support they require to sustain and/or expand involvement, and to explore the dynamics of informal groups. This analysis will involve a critical consideration of who is participating, how informal activity may continue to exclude certain groups, and consider some of the issues that may emerge within sports spaces that are largely unregulated.

Phase 3 of the research will draw together key stakeholders and informal groups to begin to co-design possible solutions that can address some of the current constraints identified in this research and leverage the opportunities evident for growth of this significant sector of sport in Australia.





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Further information

To find out more about the project, please visit the project website and follow us on twitter.

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 @informal_sport

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