



Alberta
Recreation & Parks
Association



Recreation: A Best Buy in Public Health



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Inactivity and related lifestyle habits cost Canada more than \$2 billion a year in direct health care,

not counting the pain, suffering and indirect expenses caused by epidemic increases in obesity and inactivity-related diseases. In a time of heightened concern about the need to steward both human potential and financial resources, recreation holds the potential to serve as the best health antidote Alberta could buy. Besides acting as prevention against illness, recreation can maintain and improve health. Its benefits are distinctly physical, but also psychological, mental and social. Extending beyond individuals, the resulting sense of well-being enhances families, workplaces, neighbourhoods and entire communities.

The benefits of recreation, in turn, link directly to the mandate of nearly every provincial government ministry and community service. A recent review of Alberta government strategic plans, for example, found that the benefits gained through recreation match outcomes pursued by Alberta Health and Wellness, Learning, Community Development and Children's Services, as well as segments of Economic Development and Environment.¹ Thus recreation fits perfectly into a province-wide shift from short-sighted, disease-focused (downstream) thinking to the farsighted (upstream) goal of achieving a culture of wellness. In sum, enabling recreation and wellness opportunities for all citizens is crucial to achieving Alberta's overarching vision as a "vibrant and prosperous province where Albertans enjoy a superior quality of life and are confident about the future for themselves and their children."²

In charting Alberta's course, therefore, it is imperative to involve recreation as part of an expanded public health strategy. As recent provincial and federal advisory commissions confirm, the warning "pay now or pay more later" applies particularly well here. Whether visiting a library, playing soccer, running a potter's wheel, doing yoga, exploring a heritage site, hiking a protected landscape or learning a new skill, actively engaged Albertans are key to keeping human and financial costs from spiralling out of control. A sustainable future depends on enticing people off the couch and ensuring they have access to the recreation that suits them best.

We can build a healthy Alberta without reinventing the wheel. Already, the people and facilities in the recreation sector are helping Albertans turn knowledge into action by offering a plethora of options that are not only health-promoting, but fun. It's time to realize that recreation is providing an essential public good – and fully integrate it into the population health team.

"It sounds like just good common sense, but perhaps the best way to sustain Alberta's health system over the long term is to take steps to enable people and communities to stay healthy."

Premier's Advisory Council on Health

"Evidence piled on top of evidence says that [recreation] can achieve benefits, and those benefits precisely parallel the outcomes being pursued by Albertans, their communities and their governments."

*Ken Balmer
ReThink West*

"We can't possibly afford health care at its current rate; we will have less and less education, roads and other services if we don't get health care under control. And health and wellness is one of the methods for reducing use of health care and sustaining healthy lives."

*Doug Mitchell, Co-Chair
Alberta Future Summit, 2002*

"Most Albertans are aware that physical activity contributes to their health and quality of life. They just don't have the motivation or resources to put that knowledge into action. Recreation can provide options for healthy living through programs, parks, facilities and trained personnel. In short, we're the 'how people.'"

*Carol Petersen
Recreation Consultant*

¹ *Alberta Recreation and Parks Association, Strategic Considerations for Recreation and Parks: In Support of the Alberta Vision, 2001.*

² *Government of Alberta Business Plan, 2000-2003.*

BACKGROUND

Recreation encompasses all those things that a person or group chooses to do to make leisure time more interesting, more enjoyable and more personally satisfying.

Canada's Federal / Provincial-Territorial Ministers responsible for Recreation and Sport

Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

World Health Organization

Recreation as defined by Federal/Provincial-Territorial Recreation and Sport Ministers includes not only sport and play, but arts, culture, socializing, therapy and learning – whatever we do to re-create, to restore and refresh body, mind and spirit. Traditionally viewed as a “soft service” (just fun and games), recreation is still upstaged by crisis response when cutbacks occur. Yet it’s becoming increasingly clear that biomedical interventions are not enough to foster health as envisioned by provincial, national and global leaders. Health that is not simply the absence of disease or infirmity, but as optimum physical, mental and social well-being.

That focus on prevention – on maintaining and enhancing health – is a distinct shift from our society’s traditional reliance on patching people up (often in institutional settings), in what might better be termed “illness care.” Beyond caring for the sick, health care at its best involves helping people learn the art of being well and creating an environment conducive to well-being.

Recreation can play a key role in building both individual and community well-being by fostering positive personal and interpersonal dynamics. As people master their chosen form of recreation, they feel a sense of control and empowerment. As they play together, networks form whose members count on each other, building social capital. The presence of those two dynamics – social capital and control over life – can significantly improve health, beyond what one might expect based on an individual’s income, education, employment and diet. In sum, recreation’s benefits that are synergistic, often achieve outcomes that outstrip the investment made.



Epidemic of Physical Inactivity

“Sedentary living dominates as the number one health burden affecting ALL Canadians across ALL life stages in the 21st century.”

Provincial/Territorial Ministers responsible for Physical Activity, Recreation and Sport

“Mental disorders come second only to respiratory disease among the reasons why Albertans visit physicians. In part, this reflects the fact that we have medicalized a lot of our mental needs, but it also indicates that our society is under stress and distress.”

*Dr. Gerry Predy
Capital Health Authority
Medical Officer of Health*

Despite all we know about the importance of recreation, Canada is caught in an epidemic of physical inactivity – as many of half of us are not active enough for optimum health.³ Although overall activity levels improved somewhat in the late ‘90s,⁴ inactivity remains particularly pronounced among older women (67% across Canada in 1998), girls (64%), less educated individuals (64%) and those living on low incomes (62%).⁵

Equally troubling, the nation’s youth are exercising too little, watching more TV and leading the world in time spent playing video games.⁶ As many as 84% of 12 to 19 year-olds may not be active enough to meet international guidelines for optimal growth and development.⁷ A disturbing 40% to 90% of inactive children will continue to be sedentary as adults.

Not surprisingly, obesity is skyrocketing, doubled among Albertans in 15 years and tripled among youth. More than a quarter of us are overweight. The problem is particularly acute among boys (35% overweight) and adults age 45-64 (37% overweight).⁸

It’s no coincidence that diseases definitively linked to physical inactivity and excessive weight are spiking upward, particularly heart disease, high blood pressure, Type II diabetes, osteoporosis, stroke, depression and certain cancers. A full 70% of Canadians aged 45 and older report one or more chronic conditions directly related to physical inactivity, which contributes to more than one in 10 adult deaths. As our population ages, with about 11% of us soon destined to be over 65, only determined intervention will keep those figures from continuing to escalate.

Other frightening indicators signal lifestyle issues that add to our health care burden – issues recreation could help redress:⁹

- **Suicide:** At nearly 16 suicides per 100,000 individuals, Alberta’s suicide rate is second highest in Canada.
- **Alcohol and drug addiction:** an increasing number of Albertans are resorting to various forms of risk behaviour.

³ 1998 National Population Health Survey (NPHS) as quoted by Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, found 55% of Canadians, 50% of Albertans inactive. www.cflri.ca/cflri/ca.

⁴ A 1999 survey conducted by the Alberta Centre for Well-Being found 54% regularly active for more than six months (up from 44% in 1995) and 6.6% who’ve been active for less than six months. www.centre4activeliving.ca.

⁵ National Population Health Survey.

⁶ Dr. Gerry Predy, Capital Health Authority Medical Officer of Health, speaking at ARPA Vision 2015 event, May 2002.

⁷ International guidelines for youth require greater energy expenditure (6-8 kilocalories/kg body weight/day [KKD]) than the bar set by Canada’s NPHS, which defines physical inactivity as expending less than three KKD. The NPHS level can be achieved by a half hour of martial arts plus walking for at least one hour/day.

⁸ Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, www.cflri.ca.

⁹ Sources include Statistics Canada, Pembina Institute, National Population Health Survey, World Health Organization.

- **Lung cancer:** Nearly 30% of Albertans over the age of 15 smoke; national lung cancer rates are up about 50% for men and quadrupled for women in just three decades.
- **Asthma:** Among children, who are most sensitive to contamination, asthma rates quadrupled in the 20 years leading up to 1997.
- **Aboriginal struggles:** Aboriginal individuals are more likely than the rest of Albertans to die early and to suffer from diseases such as diabetes, obesity, and heart disease, as well as from injuries and other causes. There's also high incidence of respiratory problems and infectious disease due to poor housing.
- **Environmental degradation:** Although our air is clean compared with other parts of Canada, water quality is already so poor in many Alberta lakes that swimming is not permitted. Booming resource extraction and inadequate environmental stewardship exacerbate concern about the greenhouse effect, skin cancer, asthma – indeed, about global liveability.
- **Unhealthy poor:** More than 80% of low-income Albertans report chronic conditions, compared to about 55% of upper income Albertans. Nearly half of low-income adults say health problems restrict their activity, compared to less than 15% in upper incomes. Concerns begin even before birth, as illustrated by above-normal incidence of low birthweights in high-need neighbourhoods.¹⁰

Albertans are not alone in those troubling realities. The World Health Organization terms the rapid escalation of noncommunicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, mental illness and cancer “a key determinant of global public health.” Unchecked, such diseases will account for 73% of deaths and 60% of disease burden by 2020.

Global and national leaders are heeding the need for corrective action:

- Governments across Canada have set a target of reducing physical inactivity by 10% as early as 2005, and Health Ministers are at work on a Pan-Canadian Healthy Living Strategy addressing physical activity as well as obesity and nutrition.
- The Canadian Medical Association has declared that campaigns directed at increasing physical activity should be as aggressive and persistent as those targeted at tobacco reduction.
- The World Health Organization has identified diet and physical activity as priority strategies for controlling non-communicable diseases, calling for integrated initiatives to “reduce the level of exposure to the major risk factors, namely, tobacco use, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity.”

EPIDEMIC OBESITY IN CANADA

National Population Health Survey,
Statistics Canada plus research by
Mark Tremblay and Douglas Willms

	Overweight BMI* > 27		Obese BMI* > 30	
	1985	1996	1985	1996
Adults	29%		12%	
Men	22%	34%	13%	
Women	14%	23%	11%	
Children			5%	17%
Boys	17%	35%	5%	17%
Girls	15%	29%	5%	15%

*BMI is calculated by dividing a person's weight in kilograms by the square of height in metres (kg/m²)

¹⁰ National Population Health Survey.

The Potential Savings

Expanded participation in recreation and wise use of leisure time could significantly reduce demand on Canada's health services, shrinking the expense side of the balance sheet for both employers and government.

- Physical inactivity is linked to at least 2.5% of Canada's direct health care costs, or at least \$2.1 billion a year in 1999.
- Regular recreation, when integrated with healthy eating, could stave off up to 80% of cases of coronary heart disease, up to 90% of Type II diabetes and about one-third of cancers.
- A one-percentage-point decrease in the number of inactive Canadians could reduce health care costs for ischemic heart disease by \$10.2 million a year. Savings for Type II diabetes and colon cancer have been estimated at \$877,000 and \$407,000, respectively.¹¹ These are just three of the illnesses in which physical inactivity plays an important role.
- A 10% reduction in the prevalence of physical inactivity in Canada could reduce direct health care expenditures by \$150 million each year.¹² Indirect savings could be three times that amount.
- A 16% increase in physically active citizens between 1981 and 1995 translated into savings of \$9 billion for health care, life insurance, sick leave, disability coverage, group life insurance and tax revenue.¹³

In Alberta, rates of stroke and suicide are higher than the Canadian average, and leading causes of death include such inactivity related markers as heart disease and cancer.

Alberta's health spending per capita stood at about \$20 million a day in 2002, nearly a third of the provincial budget. Without enhanced attention to recreation and other preventive measures, health care could reach half of Alberta's provincial program spending as early as 2010. Clearly, Alberta's budget will benefit if our citizens became more active.



¹¹ Conference Board of Canada study commissioned by Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute.

¹² Katzmarzyk et al, 2000.

¹³ Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, www.cflri.ca

"Physical inactivity is as much a public health threat as smoking, accounting for one in every 10 deaths in Canada."

Alberta Community Development

"Even though there has been great progress in the treatment of non-communicable diseases and in the pharmacological control of many risk factors, from a public health point of view, the greatest potential is in influencing the risk factor distribution in the population through general lifestyle changes, notably in diet and physical activity. This is a cost-effective and sustainable way for controlling such diseases. Successful primary prevention not only reduces human suffering and increases economic productivity, but also limits the growing cost of treatment."

World Health Organization, 2002

"While many Albertans advocated taking personal responsibility for active, healthy lifestyles, they also felt that governments and communities have a role in providing recreation facilities, infrastructure and programs."

Alberta Future Summit, 2002

"The high cost of health care and growing public concerns with quality of life are providing new motivators for recreation. No longer is recreation seen as equivalent to leisure activity. In fact, for many Albertans leisure, defined as spare time, is a rare commodity. Recreation, on the other hand, is increasingly being viewed as necessary to maintenance of both physical and mental health and wellness."

*Carr Leiren & Associates
The Quality of Life Sector in a
Re-creating Society, 2002*

ESSENTIAL MEDICINE

One group of asthma sufferers reduced their frequency of attack by 78% simply by engaging in a two-month swim program. Close to 60% of type II diabetes cases could be prevented by modest changes in diet and physical activity, double that of drug intervention. Major changes in coronary heart disease and diabetes can be seen within a few years.

World Health Organization

“I would go to more dances. I would ride more merry-go-rounds. I would pick more daisies.”

*Nadine Star, age 85
If I had to Live my Life Over*

“People come to parks with simple needs: rest, relaxation, recreation, and respite from the city. Good parks meet these needs but then also respond to deeper yearnings, giving us ideas, hope, and a sense of possibility in our own lives and communities.”

*Steve Coleman
The Invisible Park*

Beyond its ability to save dollars, recreation holds power to build capacity – to enable a whole new level of personal and community health. Recreation entices people to be active, offering diverse and enjoyable ways to translate knowledge into action. That’s crucial in a time when computers, cars and other labour-saving devices have largely replaced hoes, legs, washboards and other sweat-inducing work. Intrinsically motivating, recreation often proves more effective than denial in reducing such destructive behaviours as smoking, alcohol/drug abuse and unhealthy eating.

Compared to traditional medical interventions such as drugs and surgery, recreation can be relatively inexpensive – and its side effects are more often positive than negative. Addictive in the best sense, health-promoting and disease preventing, recreation is one of the best medicines money can buy.

Physical Benefits

Regular, moderate physical activity, when coupled with healthy eating, offers an antidote to obesity and ill health. Recreation:

- Improves cardiovascular and respiratory functioning.
- Increases muscular strength and endurance.
- Significantly reduces rates of heart disease, stroke & certain cancers.
- Combats chronic conditions such as diabetes, arthritis, asthma & osteoporosis.
- Helps manage weight, blood pressure & cholesterol levels.
- Increases life expectancy.

Psychological Benefits

Humans seek not merely to survive and live long, but to live life to its fullest. Recreation that fits personal lifestyle and interests provides confidence from meeting goals and achieving success. Recreation:

- Promotes self-esteem, the single most significant variable in emotional and mental health.
- Invites people to help themselves, exercising freedom of choice that enhances a sense of control, while adding balance and spice to life.
- Reduces anxiety, stress and depression.
- Helps fill our need for challenge, purpose & achievement.
- Earns attention, recognition and acceptance respect.
- Builds brainpower.
- Promotes a positive lifestyle that avoids risky behaviours.
- Substitutes for work satisfaction, which has declined in recent years.

In a province where stress is rampant and the suicide rate is second highest in Canada, it’s crucial to engage a therapy that can prove more effective than a tranquilizer drug.

Environmental Benefits

Recreation plays a unique role in enabling people to interact and live with the earth. Recreation:

- Connects people with life-affirming, anxiety-reducing wonder.
- Protects parks, open spaces, heritage sites and natural environments – investments that boost health potential for generations.
- Discourages environmental degradation, whose harmful effects include skin cancer, asthma and toxicity.
- Encourages sustainable community design that encourages active living by reducing mechanized travel.
- Increases property values.

Both humans and the environment benefit when Albertans stay in touch with the environment that sustains us.



Social Benefits

Recreation changes strangers into neighbours, bringing people together in settings where friendships and abilities can grow.

Recreation:

- Combats isolation and loneliness.
- Strengthens families.
- Mitigates the effects of poverty.
- Encourages learning through healthy competition.
- Develops social and recreational skills.

As traditional ties weaken and machinery replaces human contact, recreation may improve health just as much by building social supports as by enhancing cardiovascular functioning.

“...parks and recreation are not extras in any culture, they are an integral part of our economic, environmental and cultural foundation. We must continue to support these programs so that future generations can take full advantage of the natural bounty of Alberta’s environment and the wisdom of our pioneers in sport, culture and recreation.”

*Honourable Lois E. Hole
Lieutenant Governor of Alberta, 2001*

“If we are to build a healthier population, we need to build communities where everyone is involved and participating. This is the challenge.”

*Dr. Gerry Predy
Medical Officer of Health
Capital Health Authority*

“We have not even scratched the surface of the impact parks could have on the revitalization of communities.”

*Fred Kent
Project for Public Spaces*

Community Benefits

Made to be shared, recreation often unites people and equips them to build community. Recreation:

- Knits neighbourhoods, adding to identity and pride.
- Builds social capital, attracting dedicated volunteers and grooming them for leadership.
- Enhances capacity for community development by inviting shared management and ownership of resources.
- Serves as a key training ground for democratic behaviour, teaching citizenship and group problem-solving skills.
- Develops and maintains healthy, innovative and self-renewing voluntary and public organizations.
- Increases safety by providing positive alternatives to drug abuse, vandalism and other destructive behaviour.
- Boosts sustainable economic development by attracting businesses and tourists seeking quality of life.
- When accessible and affordable, re-engages disenfranchised sectors of the community, promoting ethnic and cultural harmony.

Recreation can do for a community what it does for individuals: help make it a more vital, cohesive place – a place that can solve its own problems, achieve its own dreams and build its own culture.

Indeed, active communities are typically creative communities, and as economist Richard Florida notes, creative communities have the best potential for success. In today's knowledge economy, creative buzz attracts and holds skilled workers and the businesses that need their labour. Realizing that well-developed recreation, culture, parks and open spaces become magnets, wise communities invest in enhancing those assets – and each dollar devoted to recreation yields multiple returns.



“The task before us is to build new forms of social cohesion appropriate to the new Creative Age—the old forms don't work, because they no longer fit the people we've become—and from there, to pursue a collective vision of a better and more prosperous future for all.... If the Creative Class does not commit itself to this effort, the growing social and economic divides in our society will only worsen, and I fear that we will find ourselves living perpetually uneasy lives at the top of an unhappy heap.”

*Richard Florida
The Rise of the Creative Class*

LEARNING TO RE-CREATE: BUILDING HUMAN POTENTIAL

Leisure choices impact intelligence. When we are engaged in physical activity that involves learning, new neural pathways form, nourished by increased blood flow to the brain. Just as listening to classical music can raise a preschooler's IQ, so a steady diet of TV may cause Alzheimer's.

Wise use of leisure time is not a given, however; it's learned behaviour. Tapping recreation to create the capacity needed for "a vibrant and prosperous province" where Albertans "enjoy a superior quality of life"¹⁴ requires far more than wishful thinking, or even smart slogans. Recreation must become integral to learning (and life) for every citizen, prenatal to post-career. To accomplish that, we need to deliberately foster the desire, knowledge, skills and resources that enable all citizens to use recreation in creating positive healthy lifestyles and vibrant communities.

Children: Positive Development Through Play

For children, play is essential. Varied, flexible and fun recreation helps our youngest learn skills and habits they are apt to use all life long. Just as obese children are more likely to become obese adults, so active children more likely to become active adults.

Ironically, school sport and physical education has been squeezed and neglected in recent years, even as realization grows that fully two-thirds of Canadian children and youth (particularly girls) are not active enough to lay a solid foundation for future health and well being. Yet recreation is as important as literacy and numeracy throughout schooling years. Quality physical education reaps proven benefits:

- Makes schools better learning environments.
- Encourages healthy development of cardio respiratory system, bones and muscles.
- Enhances educational performance.
- Builds resiliency and self-esteem.
- Reduces anti-social behaviour.
- Encourages healthful habits.
- Equips for positive citizenry.
- Combats the growing trend of childhood obesity.
- Builds capacity to laugh and play.
- Strengthens ties with caring, supportive adults.

¹⁴ Government of Alberta Business Plan

"Having leisure time doesn't necessarily mean we know how to use it, any more than having a plane means that we know how to fly it. People need to be supported in learning how to use their leisure time so they can 'fly,' not 'crash.'"

*Carol Petersen
Recreation Consultant*

"Sports and other forms of vigorous physical activity provide educational experience which cannot be duplicated in the classroom. They are an uncompromising lab in which we must think and act quickly and efficiently under pressure and they force us to meet our own inadequacies face to face and to do something about them – as nothing else does."

*Bryon White
Supreme Court Justice*

"There does seem to be a strong correlation between high levels of physical activity and high academic achievement in schools. It increases the concentration of children and their ability to learn. In schools that invest in PE and after-school sport you can see a major improvement in academic achievement."

*Ben Tan
Loughborough University*

“Being afraid to tell your mom that you need gym shoes.”

One Grade 4 student’s definition of ‘poverty’

“Programs that work emphasize the positive, not the negative. A positive approach does not define itself in terms of fixing problems, even though it may be set up to address a specific problem such as crime, low literacy, boredom or gang membership. Instead, it aims to offer positive experiences to people who are having problems.”

National Crime Prevention Council

“Parks and recreation are not an end in themselves they’re tools of our trade. When we bring young people in, we give them a high dosage of self-esteem, appreciation for education, social harmony, anger management, environmental education. And we do it in such a way that the kids don’t realize what we are doing. Parks and recreation becomes a little bit of sugar that helps the medicine go down. That’s why we are so successful. If they knew we were serving more than fun and games, they would not come.”

*Charles Jordan
City of Portland, Oregon*

Overall, children involved in quality recreation achieve higher academic levels and are more engaged in school and community life.¹⁵ Those benefits extend to children with disabilities, who often respond to physical activity with improved self-esteem and reduced secondary complications. Similarly, competence in arts and sports assists children at risk by fostering resiliency (ability to rebound from stress), a key ingredient in managing both opportunities and challenges.

Recreation is particularly powerful when offered as part of an integrated package, beginning in preschool years. The more life-risks a child faces, the more important such opportunities become. With one in five Canadian children living in poverty, among the highest rates in the developed world, it’s ever more crucial to heed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and ensure that all children have access to “play and recreational activities as an essential service, regardless of economic status, gender or cultural heritage.”¹⁶

Youth: Positive Alternatives

Contrary to popular assumption, an adolescent who attends school, obeys laws and avoids drugs is not necessarily equipped to meet the complex demands of adulthood. Ensuring viable recreation opportunities for youth is part of a broadening of scope that’s needed, from focusing on youth at risk to building capacity among all youth.

When carefully planned, recreation can teach life skills through adventure, challenge and fun. For teens, who together record Canada’s lowest levels of mental health, the resulting sense of meaning and purpose provides an antidote to behaviour that easily becomes destructive to self and society. Often, benefits are life-changing:

- Self-respect, self-esteem, confidence.
- Leadership, time management and problem-solving skills.
- Better physical conditioning and habits.
- Greater likelihood of performing well (and continuing) in school.
- Positive experiences and peers.
- Commitment to school and other appropriate institutions.
- Opportunity to identify with respected mentors.
- Fewer negative behaviours such as drinking, smoking and TV viewing.

¹⁵ *In a six-year study in Quebec reported by the Canadian Medical Association, for example, children who participated in five hours of sport per week had significantly higher marks than children who did not. In Alberta, students in EverActive Schools not only improve academically but become less stressed, more positive about school and themselves and less aggressive at play.*

¹⁶ *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 13.*

“The National Strategy’s community based projects tackle the root causes of crime, such as family abuse, parental neglect, difficulties in school, and lack of recreational and educational facilities. As a community finds ways to eliminate these root causes, the number of people who will turn to crime and, in turn, the number of people who will end up incarcerated, will decrease.”

National Crime Prevention Centre

“Economic evaluations of crime prevention programs that encourage the social development of children, youth and families have shown reductions in delinquent behaviour with returns ranging from \$1.06 to \$7.16 for every \$1 spent; while efforts to reduce the opportunities for victimization have produced returns from \$1.83 to \$7.14 for every \$1 spent.”

*Timothy Hartnagel
University of Alberta*

Indeed, strong links exist between participation in extracurricular activities, staying in school and avoiding risky behaviours. Girls active in sports, for example, are 92% less likely to use drugs and 80% less likely to have an unwanted pregnancy.¹⁷

Investing in recreation can decrease rates of homicide, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, and auto theft, saving \$100,000 a year per avoided inmate, not to mention salvaged human potential. Given the complex, multi-dimensional causes of crime and disenfranchisement among young people, it would be naïve to think recreation alone can reduce youth crime. When linked with other supports, however, recreation can play a significant role. A youth centre taking that integrated approach in Bristol, Great Britain saw a 43% drop in juvenile crime in the neighbourhood within a year of opening.¹⁸

Notoriously tough customers, youth are quick to vote with their feet. To build trust, recreation for this age must involve participants from start to finish and strive for consistent staffing. It requires flexible programming that recognizes diversity, coupled with goals broad enough to foster social and life skills.

Mid-life: Balance and Stress-Relief

In the often busy middle years of life, recreation is crucial for balance and contentment.

In the family

Recreation is one of the most important forces in developing cohesive, healthy relationships between partners, parents and children. The family that plays together is more apt to stay together, particularly when fun and the outdoors are involved. The health of family relationships, in turn, is the most significant determinant of quality of life.



¹⁷ *Institute for Athletics and Education.*

¹⁸ *Sport England*

Recreation's benefits are particularly essential for individuals and families challenged by poverty, disability, discrimination or other debilitating factors. Take single parent mothers; access to recreation coupled with other supports has been shown to double their ability to exit from social assistance while reducing anxiety levels, need for medication and use of crisis aid such as food banks.¹⁹

Because the family in its various forms continues to serve as the starting point in life development, families offer an important training ground for healthy adulthood. Indeed, early recreation experiences in the family tend to predict adult recreation habits.



At work

In a shift from past generations, perceived quality of life in today's Alberta is linked more often with recreation than with the quality of work-life. Wise employers tap into that reality and consciously promote recreation among their employees. Small investments consistently yield large returns:

- Improved health and energy.
- Reduced absenteeism and fatigue.
- Increased productivity.
- Positive attitudes toward those enabling recreation (e.g. employers).
- Work satisfaction.
- Reduced job turn-over.
- Reduced costs for medical care, insurance and other consequences of ill health.²⁰

¹⁹ Canadian Parks & Recreation Society

²⁰ Physical activity programs save 76 cents to \$3.43 for every dollar spent by reducing medical costs, absenteeism & disability expenses, according to the Association of Worksite Health Promotion. One company enjoyed benefits equal to \$513 per worker-year plus higher production quality, which in turn had potential to boost sales and reduce warranty and insurance expenses.

In any athletic activity, we are thrown upon our own resources to succeed in the face of a strong and immediate challenge. Sports resemble life in capsule form and the participant quickly learns that his performance depends upon the development of strength, stamina, self-discipline and a sure and steady judgement."

*Bryon White
Supreme Court Justice*

“Aging may result more from lack of exercise than from the number of years one can count on the calendar.”

*Walter Bortz, M.D.
A fit third age*

“Man does not cease to play when he grows old; he grows old when he ceases to play.”

George Bernard Shaw

“People in different societies have long sought the fountain of youth. But if you really want to know, it is physical activity.”

*Dr. Gerry Predy
Medical Officer of Health
Capital Health Authority*

Seniors: Longer, Happier Lives

In later years, active living encourages the social engagement and brain function that can mean the difference between life and death. By being active, seniors can cut the physical effects of aging in half while reaping statistically significant benefits:

- Improved quality of life.
- Socialization and engagement.
- A sense of personal control.
- Decreased rate and severity of falls and injury.
- More disability-free years.
- Stronger immune system to combat chronic conditions such as diabetes, arthritis and asthma, and reduced osteoporosis.

It's not unusual for master athletes in their 70s to match the performance of a sedentary 20-year-old, and even moderate exercise can forestall institutionalization by as much as nine years. Equally important, seniors who choose regular recreation have the satisfaction of making decisions at a time of life when it's easy to feel everyone else has taken control out of their hands.



It's significant to note that Alberta's largest gains in physical activity have come in this age group – a 12% increase since 1995. Those gains follow targeted programs and information campaigns, signalling that such efforts can make a difference.²¹

²¹ 1999 Alberta Survey on Physical Activity.

ACTING ON INACTIVITY: RECOMMENDATIONS

As the previous pages outline, recreation offers stunning potential to enhance individual and community health. In Alberta, that potential remains largely undercapitalized. What will it take to take full advantage of recreation's benefits? The following recommendations reflect the collective wisdom of recreation professionals within ARPA.

1. Commit to a vision of a culture of wellness as capacity building

"Not sick" is no longer good enough; what Alberta needs now is health care that builds capacity. As the Alberta Future Summit and other recent advisory bodies affirm, our society can no longer afford to focus on "urgent" at the expense of "important"; on "illness care" at the expense of "prevention". Yet the proportion of the province's health care budget directed to advancing provincial health promotion goals is only a fraction of one per cent, and provincial funding for recreation and parks is on the decline. It's time to clearly define bold outcomes, commit resources, demonstrate progress, salute milestones and enjoy the quality of life that results.

2. Expand the wellness service team.

Given the complex cause-effect relationships between health, lifestyle and the environment, no single organization has the expertise or resources to deliver the solutions required. Indeed, today's holistic definition of health begs an expanded service team, beyond now-overburdened doctors and nurses to many other partners, including users and recreation professionals. In building expanded health teams, it is crucial to foster mutual understanding of roles, and to guarantee quality through training and certification. Ideally, the result will be highly skilled, integrated teams offering mutually reinforcing service at health/wellness (rather than medical) centres.

3. View recreation delivery agencies as essential quality of life and health providers.

Recreation remains notably absent around the tables where leaders wrestle with the very issues that lie directly within its sphere of expertise. That fact shrinks the available pool of talent at a time when maximum creativity is needed. The community recreation sector, with its grassroots ties, positive image and huge force of volunteers, is uniquely positioned to serve as a trusted leader and broker in enabling individual and community well-being. Cross-linked to human, social, economic and environmental sectors, recreation offers a unique blend of expertise and infrastructure. Deeply committed to a community development approach, it builds social capital by equipping citizens to take responsibility for their health. In short, accessible recreation is key to building a publicly funded health system that is affordable.

"One thing I suggest: move from being silos to being icebergs. Icebergs look separate on top of the water, but nine-tenths is below water, and that's where they're connected."

*Lynne Dale
Willow Bridge Consulting*

"Health and recreation are like two rails of a train track. We have a common destination yet we offer different strengths. Both rails are needed to support Albertans in their journey to wellness."

*Carol Petersen
Recreation Consultant*

“Measures aimed at health promotion and at building healthy communities offer the potential to improve both the health of Alberta’s citizens and their quality of life.”

Alberta Future Summit, 2002

4. Build a strategic quality of life alliance

The numerous organizations positioned to impact Canadians’ health are neither vertically nor horizontally linked. Within sport and culture alone, a plethora of public and private entities has grown up, and connections with the medical community are tenuous. Strategic alliances are needed to ensure collaboration at the core rather than the margins of health delivery – networked entities that reflect and involve Alberta’s diverse cultures, incomes, settings and leisure activities. Putting aside territoriality, those allies must tap the best available talent and resources to seek long-term solutions. Only then can medicine, government, parks, culture, environment, arts, cultural groups, libraries, sports and other traditionally disparate groups build the intelligence and synergy needed to ensure that every citizen is able and motivated to pursue the recreation required for health.



5. Link population health strategies to social, economic and environmental policy

Population health strategies cannot be developed in isolation. Government leaders in agriculture, recreation, culture, education, environment, health, social services, trade and transportation must work together toward realistic policies that embrace a holistic view of health, optimize available resources and equip individuals and communities to determine local solutions.

Research in New Zealand focused on “Solving the Mystery of Inactivity” found lack of time a real barrier for many, but in most cases, the greater barriers to being active were attitudinal and emotional.

Heylen Research Co, 1994

6. Ensure access

Many citizens realize health is a personal responsibility and recognize the benefits of recreation, yet fail to act on that knowledge due to a disconnect between their own life circumstances and the opportunities available to them. Alberta's community recreation sector puts significant energy into inclusion, offering continuous participation paths from preschool through teen years and into adulthood. But growing multiculturalism, an aging population and increasing income disparity multiply the challenge of ensuring that every Albertan has access to the opportunities required to be healthy. Increased reliance on user fees rather than public funding widens the gap between those who can participate and those for whom cost is a deterrent.

It's time to commit wholeheartedly to a "no exceptions" recreation policy and dismantle the barriers to participation. Ideally, core recreation services would be accessible to all, with user contributions for some services accepted on an ability to pay basis. Equitable access also requires nonthreatening and barrier-free facilities staffed by welcoming and helpful individuals who put participant needs before administrative convenience. In addition, stronger links between recreation providers and schools, parents, clubs, volunteers and others are needed to ensure everyone is served.

Governments have important roles to play in making sure families have money for basic needs and safe housing, key prerequisites for participating in recreation. Adequate and consistent recreation funding also is crucial, coupled with enforcement of high standards.

Five ways recreation policies and practices create barriers for women on low income:

1. Assuming subsidies work;
2. Requiring proof of poverty;
3. Espousing community development but operating from a direct delivery model;
4. Lack of in-service training for frontline staff;
5. Making cost recovery and revenue generation the priority.

"They Just Don't Want Us Here: Poor Women Speak Out About How Recreation Policies and Practices Limit Accessibility."
BCRPA Recreation Magazine, 2002 (CPRA 2003)



“Of what good are widespread health benefits of recreation if, through systemic inequities in service availability and delivery, recreational opportunities are not widely available to the population.”

*Kerry Mummery
Recreation Alberta*

“There is a certain threshold for most of these interventions. If you need \$10 million, there’s no point in taking \$1 million; it will just waste resources.”

*Dr. Gerry Predy
Medical Officer of Health
Capital Health Authority*

Fully 86% of individuals and 97% of households, users and nonusers alike, report their local parks provide them benefits, either personal, to household or to community at large.

*Jack Harper
Quoted in CPRA Tool Kit*

7. Ensure lifelong leisure education & sustained social marketing

Most inactive people want to be more active, but aren’t convinced the gain is worth the pain. Motivating behaviour change among those “wannabes” will take redoubled efforts aimed at quashing two underlying assumptions: first, that recreation results in strictly physical gain; second, that recreation by definition involves pain – or at the least, drudgery.

The many Albertans who still regard recreation as a mechanical function need to know that it serves the mind and spirit as well as the body, that it boosts potential by teaching life skills. Those who cannot imagine a pleasurable form of recreation need exposure to its varied options, coupled with lifestyle coaching to discover their own preferences and develop skills.

Changing the way wannabes think about physical activity requires social marketing just as compelling and strategic as the campaigns that have changed attitudes and behaviour regarding smoking, seatbelts, helmets and driving drunk. Those campaigns must be carefully crafted and targeted to cut through communication overload and convince Albertans to take responsibility for their own health – and result in behaviour change.

Past failures and successes suggest that promotion and education aimed at motivating people to recreate must be frequent, sustained and convincing, so that multiple messages reinforce new attitudes and behaviour. Emotive messages must be accompanied by opportunities to participate and learn skills, whether in schools or more informal settings. To enhance the sense of control that contributes to overall well-being, it’s important to offer a menu of options from which people can choose.

Activities that complement and build on existing relationships hold strong potential for becoming healthy habits and ultimately building social capital. It’s crucial, therefore, to encourage employers, schools, day cares, churches and all other places where people gather to initiate recreation programs as part of a larger focus on healthy lifestyle. Incentives may be appropriate, including tax rebates and wellness credits for citizens or businesses participating in or supporting healthy living. Where individuals need lifestyle coaching to improve their well-being, for example, it would be cost-effective to fund that assistance as a health benefit.

In short, we must promote recreation as a provincial habit, making all citizens aware of the importance of recreation and helping them move from contemplating action to becoming regularly involved.

**ACTION RECOMMENDED
AT THE ALBERTA FUTURE
SUMMIT**

Delegates proposed that Alberta launch the following initiatives immediately and that they should be ongoing:

1. Market and promote the benefits of recreation and wellness.
2. Reintroduce daily physical activity into the school curriculum.
3. Update, implement and promote active living strategies.
4. Maintain and upgrade aging recreational infrastructure in growing communities.
5. Invest in an Alberta sport plan.

*Alberta Future Summit, 2002
Report Highlights*

8. Focus on outcomes, not facilities

Recreation and active living professionals can no longer view themselves first of all as building owners, but as coaches and catalysts who use buildings to foster well-being. While the sector has scrambled to keep aging infrastructure afloat amid budget cutbacks in recent years, the greatest uptake in recreation has occurred in outdoor pursuits. That's but one of several key shifts in the leisure market. Making recreation a provincial habit requires both visionary leadership to determine the recreation options most needed in today's Alberta and an infusion of resources to meet those needs.

9. Steward our natural heritage.

Continued quality of life depends on immediate action to extend the personal and corporate sense of responsibility for well-being to the environment that - now, at least - sustains and nurtures us. Amid marked increase in asthma, cancers and other ailments linked to pollution, public concern about the environment is significant. In a 1996 study, almost two out of every three Canadians said their health was affected by pollution, and more than half said they were very concerned about the air around them.



The Government of Alberta must take a leadership role by carefully balancing economic development with environmental sustainability. A 1999 commitment to sustainable resource and environmental management provides the framework for an integrated total landscape approach, but too often economic values tip the scale. Meanwhile, top researchers trumpet the need for large and interconnected natural corridors to protect biodiversity – corridors that could also serve expanded interest in outdoor pursuits. Alberta needs an agency mandated to integrate natural, cultural heritage and amenity values into land use planning in both rural and urban areas, an agency with the influence to insist on wise stewardship by every landowner, private or public.

“When Albertans think about the future, they would like to see a clean, healthy natural environment where economic development and environmental protection are carefully balanced.”

*Alberta Future Summit, 2002
Report Highlights*

“It’s imperative to move the provincial economy to exist within Alberta’s ecological carrying capacity.”

*Symposium Participant
ARPA Vision 2015*

“Indicators and guidelines for the surveillance of diet, nutrition and physical activity in populations are essential.”

World Health Organization

BECOMING ACTIVE

There are several stages in the shift from inactive to active living. Below, a typical typology, followed by 1999 findings regarding the percentage of Albertans in each stage.

- **Precontemplation:** do not exercise and do not intend to in the next six months. 11.9%
- **Contemplation:** do not exercise but are thinking about beginning to exercise in the next six months. 7%
- **Action:** exercising regularly but for less than six months. 6.6%
- **Maintenance:** exercise regularly and have for more than six months. 54.1%
- **Relapse-Precontemplation:** do not exercise, have participated in the past six months, but do not intend to participate within the next six months. 4.2%
- **Relapse-Contemplation:** do not exercise, but have in the past six months and intend to participate again within the next six months. 16.3%

Alberta Centre for Well-Being

10. Crystallize well-being indicators.

Without a clear and well-founded definition of what it takes to live the healthy life, we will continue to confuse the citizens we aim to motivate. Long-term commitment to research is imperative – research balanced between preventive and curative aspects, involving both healthy and unhealthy subjects, using both qualitative and quantitative health measures. As part of that effort, Alberta must remain actively involved in both the Canada Health Survey and Canada Fitness Survey, as well as the Alberta Recreation Survey, ensuring that the data can be translated into Alberta-specific trend indicators of physical activity and its impact on health.



11. Find out what motivates whom.

Lifestyle change is not easily won. Success requires sensitive strategies that motivate people to become active and personally responsible for their own health. We know distinct segments of the population respond differently to recreation initiatives, but basic questions remain unanswered about those groups. Fees may prevent some from re-creating while time constraints keep others away. Some may fear failure while others welcome challenge. Fragmentary information about motivations and barriers limits our ability to provide equitable service and target persuasive messages for best effect. In particular, we must gain better understanding of the dynamics surrounding at-risk populations. Such information can only be obtained through longitudinal projects, adequately funded.

IN CONCLUSION: EXPECT NOTHING LESS

To achieve its vision of a vibrant future offering citizens superior quality of life, Alberta must not only cure the sick but nurture well-being. With recreation increasingly becoming a predictor of quality of life, a golden opportunity exists to tap recreation as an essential tool for achieving that future – for enhancing health and life.

Already, the recreation sector is providing truly essential services: transforming lives, enhancing wellness, building social capital, facilitating grassroots resolution of community issues. In partnership with social services, education and crime prevention, it is piloting appropriate and accessible services for children, youth and their families, paying particular heed to those living in distressed neighbourhoods and communities. Staffed by passionate “how people,” it is helping Albertans translate knowledge into action.

As these examples show, recreation is far more than fun and games – although it most definitely is that. It is serious business, a public good. What’s more, it’s in Alberta’s best interest to treat it as such.

Ideally, recreation will become a partner in an expanded health care system with these cornerstones:

- Well-being recognized as personal responsibility that is impacted by lifestyle.
- Health promotion aimed at enabling people to take control of their health.
- Community-initiated action supported by enlightened government.
- Stewardship and conservation of resources as an acknowledged prerequisite for a healthy society.
- New and improved alliances and information-sharing.

Recreation makes sense – and saves dollars. Increasingly, we know that. As the cost of curing the sick skyrockets, seizing recreation’s potential as a wellness investment is imperative for a healthy and affordable future.



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