

# Activity Check-In

Underrepresented  
Young People

**The Activity Check-In tracks behaviours and attitudes from both adults, children and young people towards sport and physical activity, revealing the impacts of a rapidly changing world.**

**Each wave captures views on a specific topic of current relevance – in this publication we focus on the decline in the physical activity of young people aged 16–24 and explore what factors may be influencing this.**

**Full data sets are available on our website.**

**This document is for partners and organisations who work in the sport and physical activity sector. It explores our current understanding on the activity levels of young people and the barriers they face.**

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Activity Check-In, is conducted by Savanta via an online survey. Completed by n=2000 adults (aged 16+) and n=450 children and young people (CYP) in school years 1 to 11. Wave four sample was boosted to include 1,690 16–24 year olds.

All participants live in England and data has been weighted to be representative of the English population by age, gender, region and socio-economic status.

Fieldwork dates for quantitative research: Wave four 11–16 November 2022.  
Qualitative online community: 23–27 February 2023.



# Context

This report will explore the decline in physical activity levels we see in young adults age 16-24.

We know that interest in physical activity is low in this age group and they struggle to identify the importance and benefits of exercise.

Differences based on affluence levels and other socio-demographic factors have been recognised, in particular, those with a lower income finding sport less important and less enjoyable.

We therefore need to understand the following:

- Youth's perceptions of sport/activity - discovering how this aligns with what matters to them, and how it fits with their priorities.
- Explore if provision is meeting needs within their lifestyle in education/work. With an aim to better understand barriers to increasing exercise levels.
- Better understand this from the perspective of under-represented groups, and how inequalities make it harder to be active.





# Methodology

We conducted a deep dive into existing data using Savanta's youth tracker State of the Youth Nation, and employed participatory research methods using online community discussions designed and delivered by peer researchers, supported by Savanta.

The report is structured on Savanta's decision-making framework which is comprised of four key hurdles: inspiration, practicalities, experience, and benefits.

- For inspiration, young people need to have a genuine interest in the activity or understand what it will bring them.
- Practicalities refer to the considerations around fitting the activity into their existing routines, as well as factors such as cost and accessibility.
- Experience includes enjoying the activity and feeling positive while exercising, either alone or with friends, as well as addressing any potential barriers to participation.
- Lastly, recognising the benefits of being physically active, both in the present and the future, is crucial.

By addressing each of these hurdles, young people can be empowered to lead healthier and more active lives.



# Inspiration

When it comes to physical activity, finding inspiration is often key to getting started and staying motivated.

***'To do more sports I would need to suddenly develop a passion for sport and exercise.'***

Non-binary, 17-year-old, Mixed, Inactive.

**The main reason given for those doing less physical activity – Physical activity was compulsory at secondary school, and they now no longer have to do it (48%). In particular, 53% of young females and 52% of those in higher education/further education.**

***'I didn't enjoy PE in school and because of that I still don't really enjoy most physical activity.'***

Female, 18, White, Inactive.

Finding the inspiration to engage in physical activity can be particularly challenging if they have limited agency over their time. This is often the case for individuals with lower incomes, who may face inflexible responsibilities, such as work or care-giving duties that take priority over exercise.





## Bad influencers

It is important to consider how inspiration can be fostered in a way that is both realistic and adaptable to different lifestyles and circumstances.

As young people come across fitness influencers on social media who promote unrealistic standards, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy.

*'Cristiano Ronaldo, I would say is a fit person... He's got his own chef and obviously he's got his own diet requirements and... Obviously most of the time he's at the gym, putting in that work.'*

Male, 18, Black, Active

These sports role models have unattainable levels of fitness and there is a feeling that they will never be as good - so what is the point in trying.



# Motivation

There is a shared understanding that doing physical activity is good for both their physical health and their mental health. They are also motivated to do sport by these benefits. Yet, they see this as a longer-term connection and not something that can be gained instantly.

They are more inclined to do activities that they know will benefit their mental health in the short term, and these activities tend to be more passive (watching TV, scrolling on social media, listening to music, etc.).

The initial step into doing regular physical activity is the hardest, some have engaged in physical activity such as home workouts which have left them feeling sore and tired. They are put off from wanting to feel like that again.

There is also the concern that the atmosphere may be overly competitive. Many participants desire a social and enjoyable experience, in addition to getting exercise.

Individuals from lower income households may have different priorities and responsibilities that can make it challenging to prioritize physical activity. Education, employment, caring family members, as well as household duties can take up a significant amount of time and energy.





## Practicalities

The practicalities of physical activity can be a significant hurdle for many young people, particularly those with limited resources or busy schedules. From finding affordable options to fitting activity into existing routines, there are many practical considerations that can impact whether or not someone is able to engage in regular exercise.

***'The gym is very prestigious, and the monthly rolling subscription starts from £185 which is over my budget.'***

Male, 21-year-old, Black, Inactive.

**69% say that they do less physical activity than they would like to as their academic study gets in the way, whilst this drops to 42% who say so because of their job/work.**





## Provision

Many participants found gyms near them, however they are often either too expensive or run down.

Structured activities such as Pilates, ballet and boxing were also mentioned. However, some said that these are considered intimidating and can be off putting.

For those nearby parks and green spaces these were liked for their accessibility and benefit of being outside. However, this is location dependent not all participants have these on their doorstep. Outside gyms were also mentioned frequently, though usage of these is vague in practice.

Many participants pulled out less traditional activities such as skateboarding, ice skating, frisbee etc. These are seen as novel, fun, and something they can do when hanging out with friends, the competitive element is removed.



# Barriers

## Cost

Participants are cautious about where they spend their money, with the limited money they have they don't want to spend money it on gym memberships, traveling to clubs, sports gear and equipment.

## Location

Alongside cost location can also serve as a barrier. Travelling to places adds into the cost and further prevents people from making the effort to travel to gyms/clubs etc.

## Time

Finding time for physical activity is also problematic. It's not just about fitting it into an already hectic day, it's about the time spent before and after which eats into the time you can spend active.

Participants from ethnic backgrounds often have to juggle multiple responsibilities, including childcare, household chores, and caring for disabled family members. This leaves little time for leisure activities, such as sports.

*'I have college, revision, sometimes I would babysit my nieces and nephews, self-care, and coursework. As my mum is disabled, most times I help out with things she needs to do and/or look after my 3 younger siblings.'*

Female, 17, Black, Inactive.





# Experiences

The experience of physical activity is a crucial factor in determining whether or not young people will continue to engage in exercise over the long term. From the enjoyment of the activity itself to the social aspect, a positive experience is a powerful motivator.

*'There's a place near me where they do CrossFit. But it just doesn't really feel inclusive. You wanna feel like you're around the diversity of people and that you'll be welcomed and belong there.'*

Male, 20-year-old, Black, Inactive

**35% of young people who have not taken part in organised physical activity in the past 24 months have not done so because they are nervous/intimated about starting.**



## **Facilities**

Some felt that gyms near them were run down and had old equipment. They want their money's worth when it comes to memberships.

## **Safety**

Female participants mentioned feeling unsafe in gyms, which is a concern. Preference for female only gyms was highlighted.

## **Judgement**

Many are also deterred by the fear of being watched by others, in crowded spaces. They feel more comfortable working out alone.

Some were put off for fear of being an outsider. Certain classes they felt were for certain demographics that weren't inclusive of them. Whilst others are worried about joining established teams.

Socio-economic background plays a role in their perception of whether they fit in certain fitness spaces. Participants from ethnic minorities often choose fun physical activities as they spend considerable time in adult household roles.





## Outdoor spaces

Parks/ local nature reserves/ courts were mentioned by many participants. Seen as free and beneficial to mental health, participants liked that they could access these whenever they wanted and could enjoy being outside.

*'I found a skate park... there were skaters as well as those on roller blades...which was kinda cool, it felt like a big community...'*

Female, 17, Black, Inactive

Outdoor gyms were also mentioned by many participants however, when looking in more detail, it is likely that these are seen as a good thing to use, but in practice participants don't use them regularly.



# Benefits

Participants tend to consider the potential benefits and impact on their future success before making decisions. This is also the case when they decide to engage in physical activity.

*'From having a good job and education it will improve the quality of my life both physically and emotionally as well as the life of any possible family I may have in the future.'*

Female, 17, Mixed, Inactive

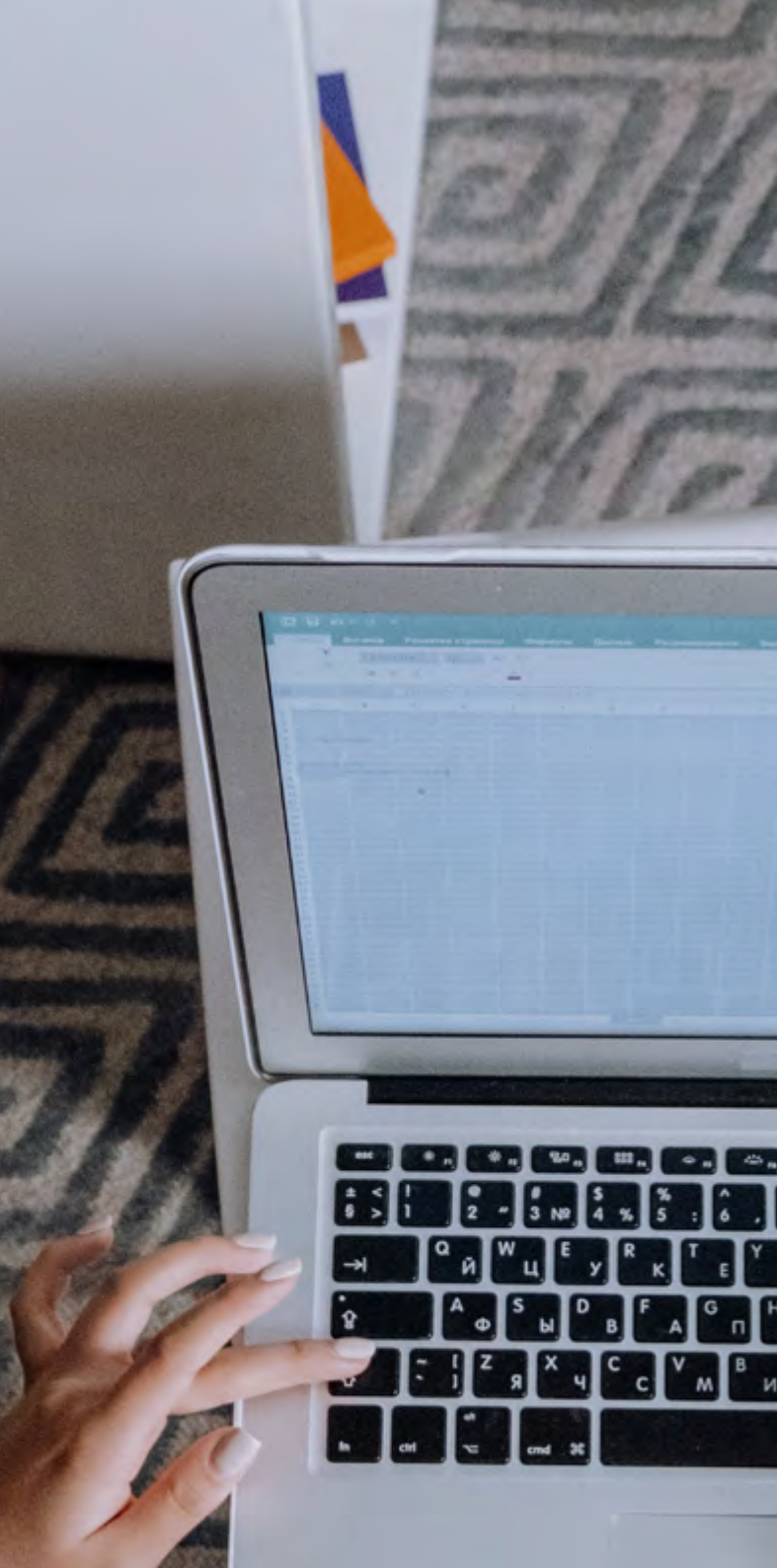
## **Physical, mental, and social well-being**

The traditional benefits of physical activity mentioned in the study refer to the positive effects that regular exercise has on a person's physical, mental, and social well-being. Improved health is one of the most commonly cited benefits of physical activity.

## **Weight loss**

A common reason why people engage in physical activity.





## **Socialising with friends**

Socialising with friends is another benefit of physical activity that many participants in the study mentioned. Exercise can provide an opportunity to connect with others who share similar interests, and it can also help build new friendships. Participating in group fitness classes or sports teams, for example, can be a fun way to stay active and socialize at the same time.

*'I found body pump interesting because there was lots of different people there and the instructor was really helpful and I was able to go with my friends and it was just an enjoyable way to get in physical activity.'*

Female, 19, White, Inactive