

## Physical activity in three regional communities in Queensland

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**Title: Physical Activity in Three Regional Communities in Queensland**

Running title: Physical Activity in Regional Communities

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## Abstract

**Objective.** To describe physical activity participation in three Queensland regional communities.

**Design.** Cross-sectional mail survey of randomly selected residents, stratified by age and sex.

**Setting.** Esk, Mareeba and Mount Isa.

**Participants.** 1219 (58% female) adults, with a mean age 46.7 (SD 14.7) years.

**Main outcome measures.** Proportion of people inactive, meeting Australian activity guidelines (a minimum of 150 minutes/week and 5 sessions/week), and walking a dog daily; time spent walking and cycling for transport; location and type of recreational physical activities.

**Results.** Overall, 18% of respondents were inactive, with the highest proportions among women (22.3%) and older adults in Mount Isa (24.3%). The proportion meeting activity guidelines was 47% with the lowest proportions among women in Mount Isa (40.4%).

Although 63% reported owning a dog, only 22% reported walking a dog daily. Few people reported walking or cycling for transport. The most common types of activities were walking, home-based exercise, running/jogging, and swimming, and the most common location was at or near home.

**Conclusions.** Physical activity levels were lower in these regional communities than the state average. The findings indicate a need for physical activity policy and intervention strategies targeting regional and rural areas. This could focus on women and older adults, dog walking, and physical activity opportunities in or near the home.

**Word length:** 213

**Keywords.** Recreation, inactivity, exercise, leisure

## What this paper adds

### 1: What is already known on this subject?

- While some research suggests low rates of participation in regional areas, little work has been done to describe physical activity participation, such as types and location of activities.

### 2: What does this study add?

- Physical activity participation was lower, and levels of inactivity were higher, in the Queensland regional communities than in Queensland overall.
- Although almost two thirds of respondents reported a dog in the household, fewer than 25% reported that they walked the dog daily.
- Few people walked or cycled for transport.
- The most common types of physical activities were walking, home-based exercise, gym/aerobics/body building/weights, running/jogging, swimming, and gardening, and the most common location for physical activity was at or near home.

## Introduction

Australian physical activity guidelines recommend that adults participate in at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most days of the week.<sup>1</sup> Little research has been done however, to describe the physical activity participation of regional populations. A 2004-2006 study in rural South Australia and Victoria found that 17% of adults were inactive, and only 30% of men and 21% of women did moderate-vigorous activity for at least 20-30 minutes four or more times a week.<sup>2</sup> A 2007-8 survey of women living in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas in Victoria indicated that 26.5% of rural women were inactive, 45.5% were meeting guidelines, and 32% did less than 30 minutes/week of transport related activity.<sup>3</sup> Rural women may however, spend more time in transport related physical activity than those in urban areas.<sup>4</sup>

Queensland has previously been identified as having high rates of inactivity compared with the other states.<sup>5</sup> A 2006 study in rural and remote Central Queensland found that 17% of respondents were inactive, 48% were meeting activity guidelines, and 27% did at least 30 minutes/week of transport related physical activity.<sup>6</sup> A 2008 report identified the proportion of Queensland adults meeting guidelines as 53% in inner regional areas, 48% in outer regional areas, and 46% in remote areas.<sup>5</sup> In 2010, the figures were 49%, 49% and 46% respectively.<sup>7</sup> The aim of this study was to examine physical activity participation in three regional communities in Queensland, and to provide data on a range of indicators including inactivity, meeting Australian activity guidelines, walking and cycling for transport; and to provide new data on dog walking, and location and type of recreational physical activities.

## Methods

The study was awarded ethical clearance from the University of Queensland Ethical Review Committee (2008000886). This was a cross-sectional mail survey of residents in

three regional Queensland communities selected to reflect a small regional area (Esk - located 100km north-west of Brisbane, with a population of approximately 15,000 people), a large regional area (Mareeba - located 65km west of Cairns, population of approximately 18,000 people), and a large remote town (Mount Isa –in Northwest Queensland, with a population of approximately 19,600 people). Using the Australian Standard Geographical Classification – Remoteness Area system<sup>8</sup>, Esk is classified as RA2 (Inner Regional), Mareeba as RA3 (Outer Regional), and Mount Isa as RA4 (Outer Regional).

### **Sampling and Procedure**

Queensland Electoral Roll data were stratified by age (18-29, 30-49, 50-70 years) and sex separately for each of the three communities, and 5817 people (approximately equal age/sex groups) were randomly selected (2000 in Esk and Mount Isa, 1817 in Mareeba). Local media outlets were sent a press release about the study. Participants were mailed advanced notice, and approximately one week later the questionnaire was mailed, with a reply-paid envelope for return. After another week, participants were mailed a reminder postcard.

### **Data Collection**

Physical activity was assessed using items from the Active Australia survey on the frequency and time (hours/minutes) spent in the previous week doing walking, vigorous physical activity, and moderate physical activity (excluding household chores and yardwork).<sup>9</sup> These items have acceptable levels of reliability and validity in Australian samples<sup>10, 11</sup> and have been recommended for use in Australian population based research.<sup>12</sup>

Respondents who reported any activity were asked to list their three main types of physical activities (unprompted), and how often they had engaged in each of 14 specific recreational physical activities over the previous 12 months (*never, once every six months,*

once a month, once every two weeks, once a week, and more than once a week). Respondents were also asked

- whether there was a dog in the household (*yes/no*), and if yes, how often they walked the dog (*never, less than weekly, 1-3 days/week, 4-6 days/week, or daily*).
- whether or not they had access to a motor vehicle for personal use, and which type of transport was used mainly to get to and from places on weekdays (*public transport, car or motorcycle, walk, or bicycle*).
- time (hours/minutes) spent in the last week walking for transport and cycling for transport.

The questionnaire included items to assess sociodemographic characteristics and the last page invited participants to write any additional comments about doing physical activity in the local area.

## **Data Management**

Time spent in the last week walking, and doing moderate and vigorous leisure time activities were summed, with a weighting of two for vigorous activity given the greater intensity.<sup>13</sup> Outliers were truncated at 3360 minutes/week. *Inactivity* was defined as reporting no walking, moderate or vigorous activity in the previous week. *Meeting activity guidelines* was defined as at least 150 minutes of activity in the previous week, done on at least five occasions.<sup>13</sup>

## **Analyses**

Data were analysed using SPSS 16.0 and STATA SE10, and are reported as proportions, interquartile ranges, medians, and 95% confident intervals. Data on Queensland state averages for inactivity and meeting activity guidelines were provided by the Queensland Government using data from the Queensland 2008 Omnibus survey which also used items

from the Active Australia survey to assess physical activity.<sup>7</sup> Responses provided in the additional comments section of the questionnaire were identified by one of the authors (KM) to exemplify specific issues presented in the discussion.

## **Results**

### **Participants**

Of the 5817 questionnaires mailed, 337 were marked “return to sender” (Esk:80; Mareeba:126; Mount Isa:131) and 1,219 were returned with data (Esk:496; Mareeba:377; Mount Isa:346). The overall response rate was 22% (Esk:25%, Mareeba:22%, Mount Isa:18.5%). The sociodemographic characteristics of respondents are presented in Table 1. A comparison of the age and sex of respondents with electoral roll data indicated similar proportions for those aged 18 to 29 years, overrepresentation of women and those aged 50-70 years, and under representation of men and those aged 30-49 years.

### **Physical Inactivity**

The proportions of respondents, by sex and age, categorised as inactive are presented in Table 2. Overall, 18% were inactive, with the highest levels among women (22.3%) and older adults (24.3%) in Mount Isa. Inactivity was higher in the three rural communities than the Queensland average.

### **Meeting Physical Activity Guidelines**

The proportions of respondents, by sex and age, categorised as meeting activity guidelines are shown in Table 3. Fewer than half (46.8%) of all respondents were meeting guidelines, which is lower than the Queensland average (53%).<sup>7</sup> More men than women, and more younger than older people, met activity guidelines in all three communities. The lowest

proportion was among women in Mount Isa (40.4%), and the highest was among young adults in Mareeba (65%).

### **Dog Walking**

Just under two thirds (63.2%) of respondents indicated there was a dog in the household, but only 21.9% reported walking the dog daily and 8.6% reported walking the dog 4-6 days/week. The proportion reporting never walking the dog was higher in Esk (34.7%) than in Mount Isa (25.0%) and Mareeba (23.1%).

### **Active Transport**

The majority of respondents (87%) reported that they always had a motor vehicle for use, and 90% reported that their main mode of travel on weekdays was by car or motorcycle. Fewer Mareeba respondents used public transport (0.5%), than in Esk (2.4%) and Mount Isa (2.3%). The majority of respondents reported that they did not walk (63%) or cycle (81%) for transport. Walking as the main mode of transport was more common in Mareeba (6.9%) and Mount Isa (6.4%) than in Esk (3.3%). Cycling as the main mode of transport was more common in Mount Isa (3.5%) than in Mareeba (1.3%) or Esk (0.4%). Times spent walking or cycling for transport, among those who reported doing so, are summarised in Table 3. The median time for walking was 60 mins/week for all three communities. Among cyclists, the median time was highest in Esk (127.5 mins/week) and lowest in Mareeba (60 mins/week).

### **Location of Physical Activity**

Just under half (49%) of respondents indicated they did physical activity at home, and 43% indicated near home. One-quarter (26%) of respondents reported doing activity in the workplace, and just less than one-fifth (18%) did activities elsewhere.

## **Type of Physical Activity**

Figure 1 indicates what activities respondents identified as one of their three main physical activities. The most commonly reported activities across the three communities were walking, gym/aerobics/body building, gardening/yard work, manual labour/work, swimming, cycling, housework, and running/jogging. Figure 2 presents the proportion of respondents who reported participating in each of the 14 specified recreational activities at least weekly in the last 12 months. Those most frequently done activities were home-based exercise (which was intended to reflect any exercise done at home such as using home based equipment, but not house or garden work), followed by weight training, and running/jogging. Differences between communities were generally small, although swimming and team sports seemed slightly more popular in Mount Isa than in the other two communities. When invited to report recreational activities done but not listed, the most popular response was walking, (n=100), followed by horse riding (n=39), general outdoor activities (including fishing and hunting; n=23) and dancing (n=21).

## **Discussion**

When interpreting the results, the low response rate must be acknowledged, although it is comparable to that reported in other recent studies.<sup>14</sup> This may reflect a disinterest in research participation, or in the study topic. For example, some participants telephoned the researchers to decline participation saying that they got enough physical activity in their everyday work (e.g., on the land). The respondents may be, therefore, those who are interested in recreational physical activity. The over-representation of women and older people among the respondents should also be considered. Other demographic characteristics of the respondents, e.g., ethnicity household composition, education, BMI were however similar to those reported for the general Queensland population.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, 18% of respondents reported doing no physical activity, and 47% were meeting activity guidelines, which is comparable with other research in regional Australia.<sup>2,6</sup> The proportions of respondents meeting guidelines were lower than the Queensland average.<sup>7</sup> While these findings suggest there is a need to increase levels of activity in these regional communities, results also indicate that different priority groups should be targeted in different regional locations. For example, the proportion of people reporting no activity was comparable between men and women in Esk, higher among men than women in Mareeba, and higher among women than men in Mt Isa. It will be important to consider these community-specific differences if strategies for promoting activity are to reach the most inactive population groups in these communities. For example, as large workplaces provide much of the infrastructure for activity in Mount Isa, workplace based policy and program changes could be used to target women in paid employment to become more active.

One potential reason for low levels of recreational activity may be a lack of perceived need. For example, some respondents indicated in the additional comments section that work around the house, yard and property was a sufficient source of physical activity. :

*I do enough physical activity around the house to warrant not doing any more. (Mount Isa)*

*Rural lifestyle requires a fair amount of physical activity - looking after property & animals. (Mareeba)*

More work is needed however, to assess whether people are in fact sufficiently physically active in these contexts. If this is not the case, then interventions would be needed to raise awareness of the difference between incidental daily activity and purposive health enhancing exercise.

Almost two thirds of respondents reported owning a dog, but fewer than one quarter walked their dog/s daily. In some areas dogs may not be walked because they run free on properties. However, one quarter of respondents in Mount Isa never walked the dog, and

most people in Mount Isa do not live on rural properties. As the health benefits of dog walking for both dogs and owners are well documented<sup>16, 17</sup> there may be scope to attempt a dog walking promotion strategy, particularly in Mount Isa. A previous attempt in another Queensland regional community however, achieved limited success with this focus.<sup>18</sup>

The most popular types of physical activities were walking, home-based exercise, weights, running/jogging and swimming. Team sports (especially all codes of football) appeared more popular in Mount Isa than in the other communities, which may reflect the greater availability of facilities in this town, or the predominantly young male population. Team sports can also provide opportunities for social interaction. Swimming also appeared more popular in Mount Isa, which may reflect the warmer climate.

Overall, the majority of respondents reported doing physical activity at home (49%) or near home (43%) which highlights the importance of identifying and promoting local and self directed opportunities for physical activity. Accordingly, walking was the most frequently reported activity. As people in regional areas may live at a distance from town centres, structured centralised facility-based physical activity may be less viable. However, as one quarter of respondents reported doing physical activity in the workplace, this context may also provide a potential entry point for physical activity promotion in regional areas; this would avoid the need for travel to other locations.

There was an overwhelming reliance on private vehicles for transport which is consistent with other research<sup>6</sup> and reports that people in regional areas are more frequently required to travel greater distances to employment than those in urban areas.<sup>6</sup> In the additional comments section, one respondent reported:

*I drive 500 km a week to get to work. (Esk)*

People in regional areas may, therefore, be more reliant on private vehicles than public transport. The availability, diversity, and suitability of public transport options in these regional areas may also limit use in favour of private vehicles.

Similarly, few people in these communities either walked or cycled for transport. Only 6% of the Mareeba and Mount Isa respondents indicated walking was the main mode of transport. The median time for walking for transport was 60 minutes/week. Data from mid-aged Brisbane residents indicate that approximately 13% walk for transport at least 60 minutes/week.<sup>19</sup> Some respondents, particularly in Mareeba, indicated in the additional comments section that they would like to walk and cycle, but found it difficult because of poor infrastructure.

*No footpaths or are in bad condition & traffic is a hassle. I would walk with pram more often if paths were better. (Mareeba)*

*Being a rural area with narrow roads, walking or cycling is dangerous. Paths would help. (Mareeba)*

Other research has also indicated that infrastructure for, and participation in, transport related physical activity varies by degree of urbanization.<sup>6</sup>

## **Conclusions**

While acknowledging the limitations of the small sample size and possible biases in the respondents, the results of this survey indicate that levels of inactivity are high and levels of recreational activity are low in these three regional communities, particularly among women and older people. More work is needed to ascertain whether the measure used adequately captures daily physical activity in people who perceive that they have active jobs on the land. The heterogeneity of regional Queensland communities makes 'one size fits all' recommendations to increase physical activity levels challenging. Intervention responses are therefore, likely to be best developed in and by local communities, using local data to stimulate the development of appropriate strategies.

## **Acknowledgments**

## **Author Contributions**

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Figure 1. Number of respondents who identified the activity as one of their “three main physical activities”.

Figure 2. Proportion of respondents who reported participating in each nominated recreational activity at least weekly in the last 12 months.

Table 1.

Sociodemographic characteristics of survey respondents in each community, and overall.

	All (N=1219)	Esk (n=496)	Mareeba (n=377)	Mount Isa (n=346)
<b>Sex (%)</b>				
Male	42	42	40	43
Female	58	58	60	57
<i>Missing (n)</i>	25	9	11	5
<b>Age in years</b>				
Mean (Standard deviation)	46.7 (14.7)	47.3 (14.8)	48.4 (14.8)	45.0 (14.3)
<i>Missing (n)</i>	32	11	14	7
<b>Age Categories (%)</b>				
<18 – 29yrs	19	18	17	23
30 – 49yrs	33	34	31	34
50 – >70yrs	48	48	53	43
<i>Missing (n)</i>	32	11	14	7
<b>County of Birth (%)</b>				
Australia	85	85	86	84
Other	15	15	14	17
<i>Missing (n)</i>	29	10	12	7
<b>Living Arrangements (%)</b>				
Living alone	9	8	9	11
Single parent living with children	3	3	4	4
Single living with others	9	10	11	6
Couple living without children	37	32	39	40
Couple living with children	37	42	32	36
Other	5	5	5	4
<i>Missing (n)</i>	91	38	31	22

Education (%)

Up to year 10	34	358	38	29
Year 12	18	17	16	21
Certificate, Diploma, Associate Degree	31	32	29	34
Bachelor or Higher Degree	17	17	17	17
<i>Missing (n)</i>	<i>125</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>31</i>

Employment Status (%)

Full time	44	40	34	60
Part time	18	18	23	13
Home duties	9	9	7	9
Retired	11	13	13	5
Permanently unable to work	4	4	5	1
Unemployed, Work without pay or Student	5	6	6	3
Other	10	10	11	9
<i>Missing (n)</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>

Occupation (%)

Manager/ admin, professional	32	31	33	33
Clerical, sales or service	17	18	13	19
Tradesperson, production, transport, labourer	25	22	26	29
No paid job	22	24	24	15
Other	4	4	4	4
<i>Missing (n)</i>	<i>97</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>24</i>

Body Mass Index (kg/m<sup>2</sup>)

Mean (Standard deviation)	27.3 (5.8)	27.5 (6.2)	26.3 (5.1)	27.9 (5.9)
<i>Missing (n)</i>	<i>65</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>20</i>

Table 2.

Proportion (with 95% confidence intervals) of respondents, by sex and age, reporting no physical activity,<sup>†</sup> for the whole sample, for each community and for Queensland.<sup>‡</sup>

	All % (95% CI)	Esk % (95% CI)	Mareeba % (95% CI)	Mount Isa % (95% CI)	Queensland <sup>‡</sup> % (95% CI)
<b>Sex</b>					
Men	18.0 (14.8, 21.6)	18.8 (14.0, 24.8)	19.3 (13.7, 26.5)	15.4 (10.3, 22.3)	12.0 (9.7, 14.7)
Women	17.8 (15.1, 20.8)	17.7 (13.6, 22.6)	14.0 (9.9, 19.3)	22.3 (17.0, 28.7)	12.2 (10.0, 14.8)
<b>Age group</b>					
18-29	14.4 (10.4, 19.7)	15.3 (9.0, 24.6)	11.7 (5.5, 22.5)	15.6 (9.0, 25.4)	12.2 (9.7, 15.4)
30-49	14.5 (11.3, 18.3)	14.6 (10.0, 20.9)	13.6 (8.3, 21.4)	15.0 (9.5, 22.9)	12.5 (10.1, 15.4)
50-69	21.3 (18.1, 24.8)	21.0 (16.3, 26.7)	19.1 (14.1, 25.5)	24.3 (18.0, 32.0)	18.0 (13.5, 23.6)
Total	18.2 (16.2, 20.5)	18.4 (15.2, 22.1)	16.2 (12.8, 20.3)	20.2 (16.3, 24.8)	12.1 (10.5, 13.9)

<sup>†</sup> Reported no minutes/week of walking, moderate- or vigorous-intensity leisure time physical activity.

<sup>‡</sup> Data from 2008 Queensland Omnibus Survey

Table 3

Proportion (with 95% confidence intervals) of respondents who met physical activity guidelines,<sup>†</sup> for the whole sample, for each community and the Queensland average.<sup>‡</sup>

	All % (95% CI)	Esk % (95% CI)	Mareeba % (95% CI)	Mount Isa % (95% CI)	Queensland % (95% CI)
Sex					
Men	50.2 (45.8, 54.6)	46.0 (39.3, 53.9)	51.7 (43.7, 59.7)	54.5 (46.4, 62.5)	55.2 (51.1, 59.2)
Women	45.0 (41.3, 48.7)	44.2 (38.5, 50.0)	50.2 (43.6, 56.9)	40.4 (33.7, 47.5)	50.9 (47.2, 54.5)
Age					
18-29	55.9 (49.3, 62.2)	49.5 (39.0, 59.8)	65.0 (52.3, 75.9)	55.8 (44.7, 66.4)	53.2 (48.9, 57.5)
30-49	47.5 (42.6, 52.5)	47.0 (39.5, 54.6)	52.7 (43.5, 61.8)	43.4 (34.6, 52.6)	51.8 (47.7, 55.9)
50-69	43.4 (39.3, 47.5)	41.6 (35.5, 48.0)	45.4 (38.3, 52.6)	43.8 (35.9, 51.9)	41.2 (35.2, 47.5)
Total	46.8 (44.0, 50.0)	44.7 (40.4, 49.1)	50.7 (45.6, 55.7)	45.7 (40.5, 51.1)	53.0 (50.3, 55.7)

<sup>†</sup> Calculated as  $\geq 150$  minutes/week of walking, moderate- and vigorous-intensity leisure time activity, (with time in vigorous activity weighted by two to reflect its greater intensity), and at least five sessions/week.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>‡</sup> Data from 2008 Queensland Omnibus Survey.

Table 4

Median time (with interquartile range: IQR) spent walking and cycling for transport, among those who reported doing this.

	Walking for Transport			Cycling for Transport		
	Number	Median (min/week)	IQR (25 <sup>th</sup> -75 <sup>th</sup> percentile)	Number	Median (min/week)	IQR (25 <sup>th</sup> -75 <sup>th</sup> percentile)
Esk	97	60.0	110.0 (30.0, 140.0)	8	127.5	127.5 (45.0, 172.5)
Mareeba	122	60.0	127.5 (30.0, 157.5)	23	60.0	150.0 (30.0, 180.0)
Mount Isa	117	60.0	90.0 (30.0, 120.0)	29	120.0	90.0 (60.0, 150.0)
Total	336	60.0	97.5 (30.0, 127.5)	60	105.0	105.0 (45.0, 150.0)

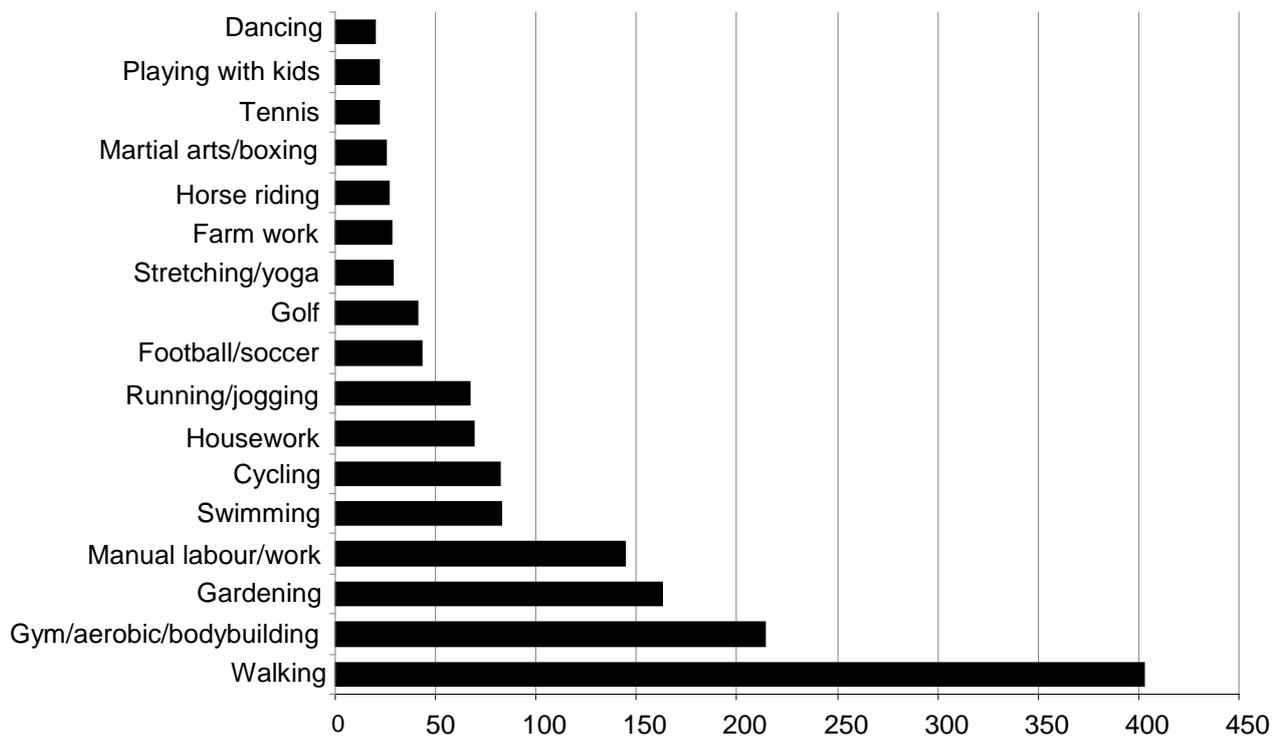


Figure 1. Number of respondents who identified the activity as one of their 'three main physical activities'.

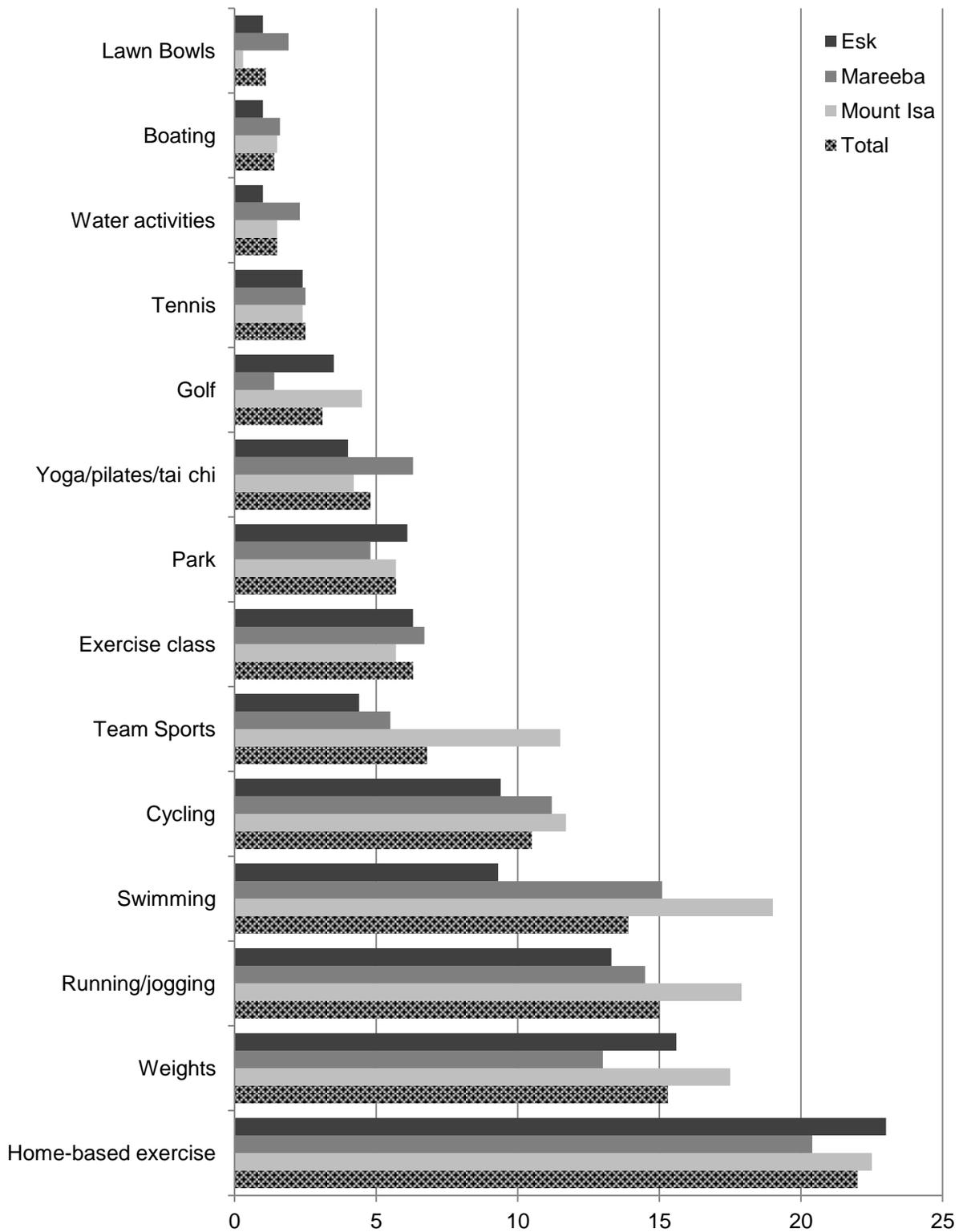


Figure 2. Proportion of respondents who reported participating in each nominated recreational activity at least weekly in the last 12 months.