

A year into the pandemic, COVID-19 exercise slump has hit women harder

April 7 2021, by Chloe Sher and Caroline Fusco



World Day for Physical Activity is April 6. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, many peoples' physical exercise routines have been disrupted. Credit: Shutterstock

Exercising has been crucial to maintaining mental and physical health throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. However, not everyone can be equally active. Women are [generally less active than men](#) and this disparity between genders in exercise participation exacerbates the gender inequality in health.

Since March 2020, when countries and cities across the globe started their lockdowns, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched the [#HealthyAtHome campaign](#) to encourage populations to stay active while social-distancing or self-isolating at home.

The campaign recommends [a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical](#)

[activity](#) per week for adults and a minimum of 60 minutes a day of moderate to vigorous-intensity physical activity for children and adolescents (age 5-17).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, we have observed that peoples' physical exercise routines can be disrupted. Places where people are regularly active such as fitness centers and parks may have been temporarily closed. While on the other hand, working from home and online schooling have allowed for more flexibility in choosing when to exercise.

Whether people have been able to remain physically active these past 12 months, may depend on their backgrounds and circumstances—some may have had to continue working during the pandemic (for example, frontline and essential workers) and are exhausted by the demands of their jobs.

Our recent research shows that while people have become more active overall since the onset of the pandemic, [the gaps in exercise have been widening between gender, income, race and education.](#)



The World Health Organization developed social media shareables to encourage people to stay active and healthy at home during the pandemic. Credit: [World Health Organization](#)

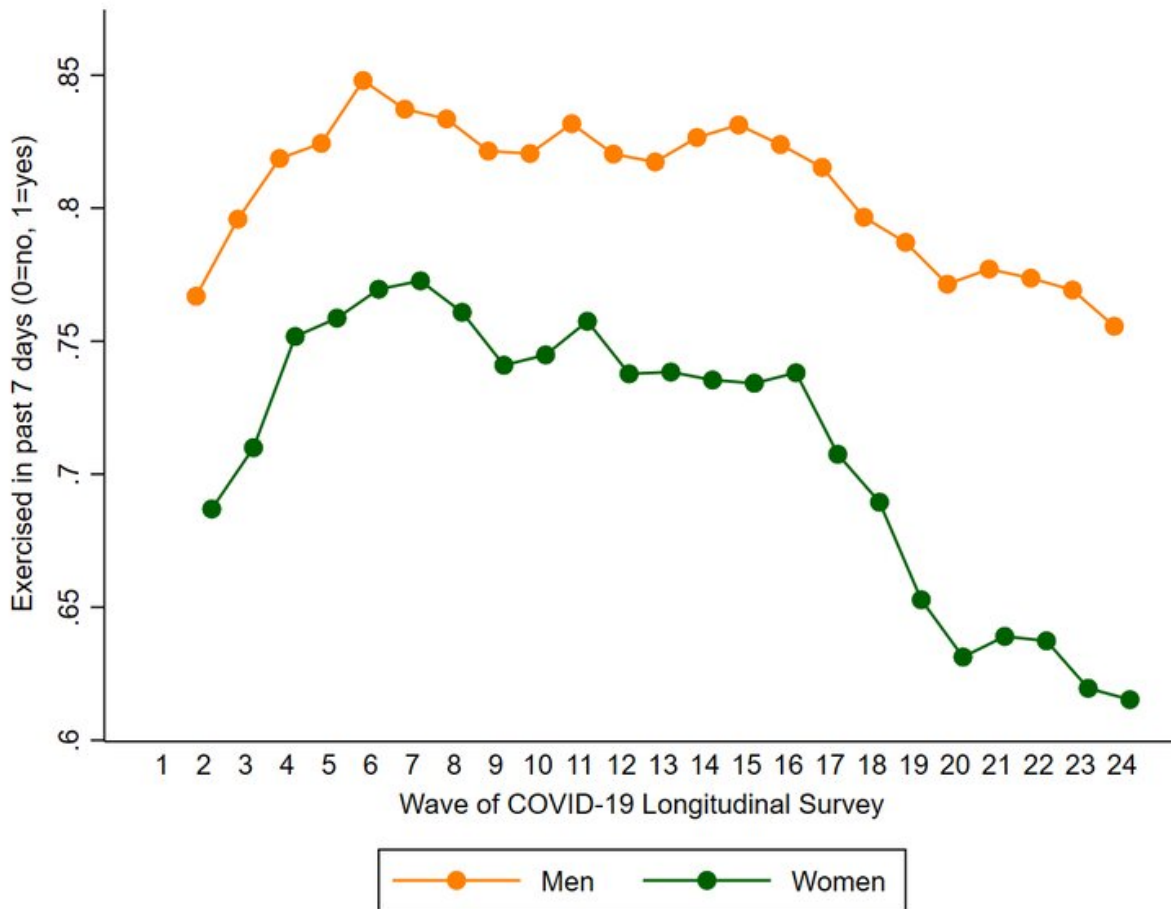
Exercise is critical for health during COVID-19

Physical exercise is crucial for maintaining both physical and [mental health](#). Research suggests that physical exercise can prevent [chronic diseases including diabetes, obesity, respiratory diseases and hypertension](#). Exercise can also [improve cardiovascular health, boost energy levels, control weight and enhance sleep quality](#).

Staying physically active during the pandemic can prepare and [strengthen people's immune systems against COVID-19](#), reducing the likelihood of severe symptoms caused by the infection.

Because of the pandemic, people and communities worldwide have been experiencing [higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression](#). They may worry about the well-being of loved ones, [fear getting sick, stress about losing their income](#) and feel emotionally isolated, insecure, bored and confused.

Those who exercise more frequently during the pandemic are found to report [more favorable mental health](#). Research finds that regular exercise can help [reduce the risk of depression](#) and help maintain calmness.



Gender inequality in exercise participation from April 2020 (Wave 2) to March 2021 (Wave 24). Note: From April 1, a new wave of the survey was fielded every two weeks, and a total of 24 waves of data have been collected by the end of March 2021. Data source: Understanding Coronavirus in America. Credit: Chloe Sher and Caroline Fusco

Gender inequality in exercise during COVID-19

Inequality in exercise participation was prevalent before the pandemic.

Women are often [less physically active than males across age groups](#) due to their [gender roles and responsibilities](#), and this is often exacerbated due to race, class and disability.

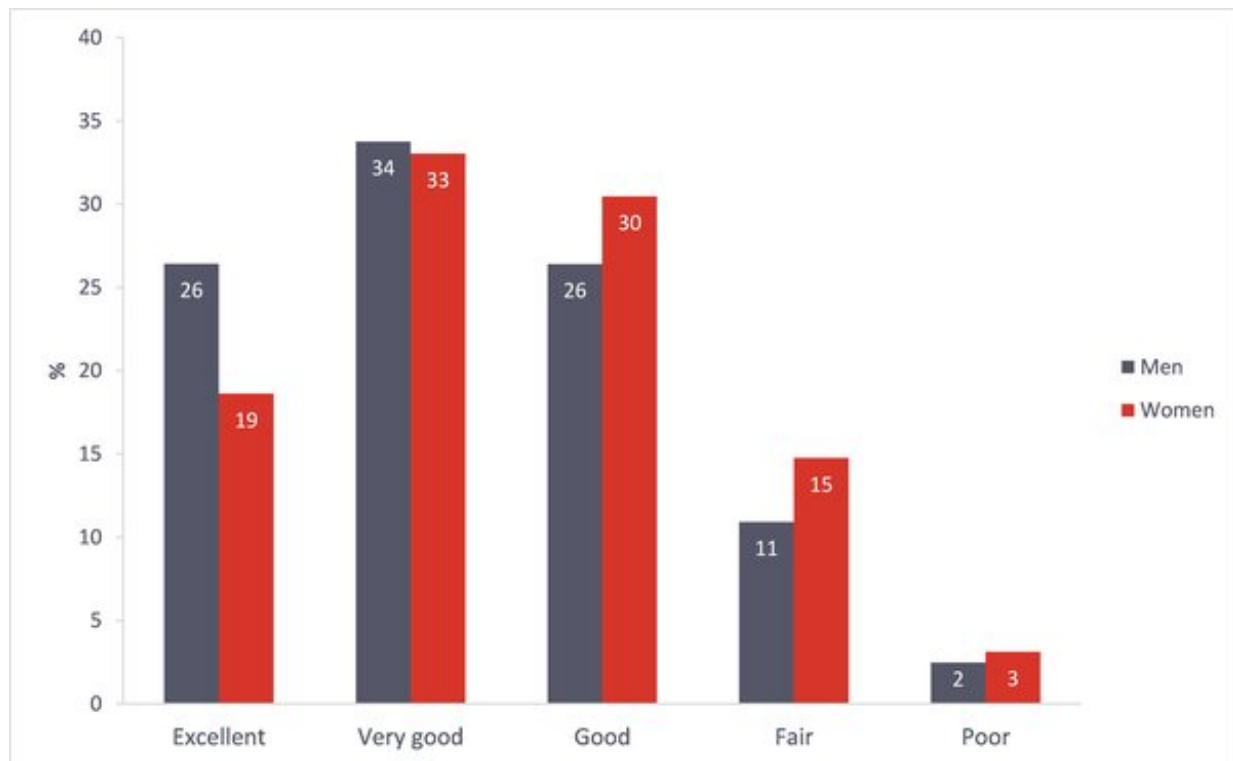
Our analysis of data from the [Understanding Coronavirus in America](#) project shows that

during the pandemic both men and women have become more physically active. However, the gap between men and women in exercise participation has also substantially widened.

From March 2020 to March 2021 a new wave of the survey was fielded every two weeks, with a total of 24 waves of data, exercise participation among men and women increased during the onset of the pandemic (waves 2-6, April to June 2020). Since then, however participating in exercise has started to decrease.

A year after the outbreak of the pandemic (Wave 24), exercise participation among men has returned close to its original level. For women however, exercise participation has notably decreased to a level that is even lower than a year ago.

There may be many reasons for this. Women are often primary caregivers and may have more responsibilities during the pandemic such as taking care of children and caring for elderly family members who are self-isolating. Many women are also essential workers (including nurses and personal service workers in long-term care homes and hospitals) who may have no time to exercise.



Perceived mental health by gender. Data source: Canadian Perspectives Survey Series. Credit:

Chloe Sher and Caroline Fusco

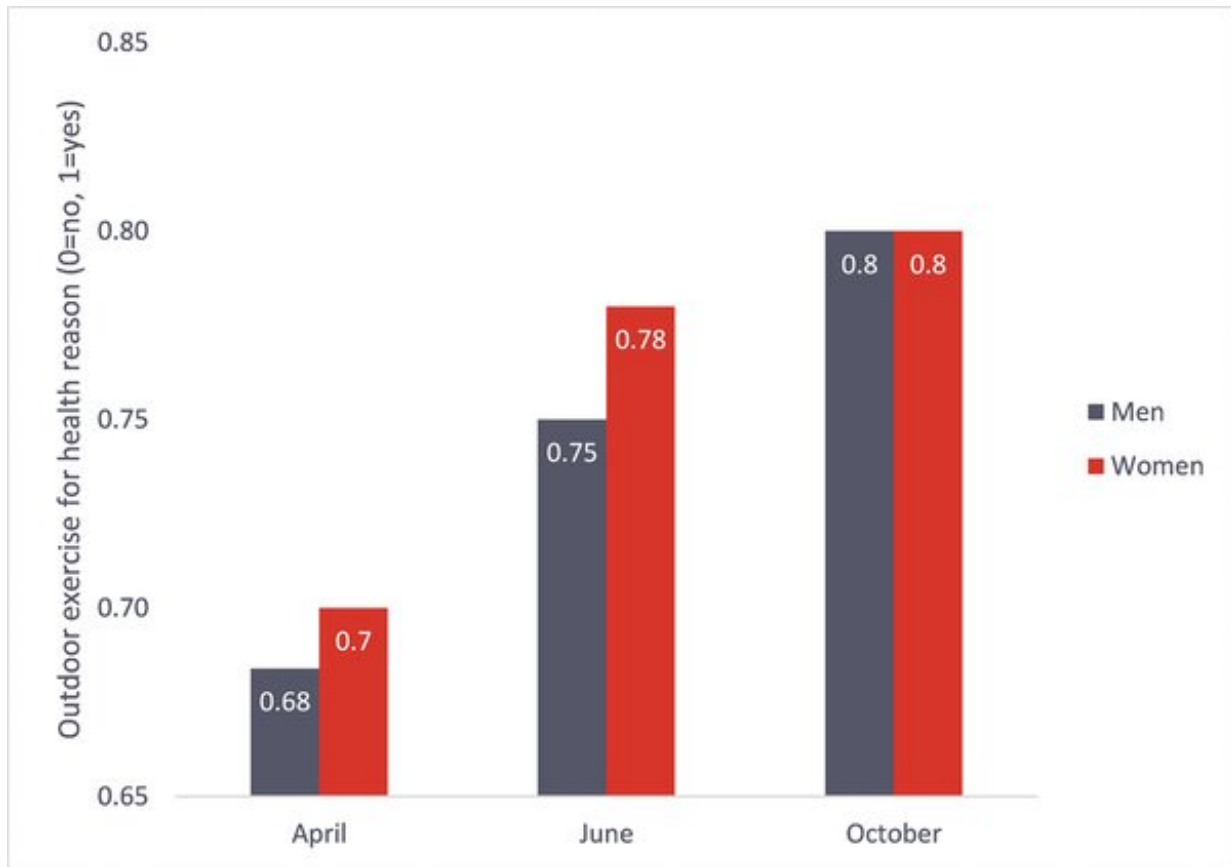
Gender, mental health and exercise

Because [women tend to report poorer mental health than men](#) in general, women's participation in exercise would help reduce the gender inequality in [health](#).

We analyzed data from the [Canadian Perspectives Survey Series](#) (CPSS). This is a set of online surveys that has been collecting information from residents across Canada since March 2020. The first three waves of the CPSS data (April, June, and October) were combined to examine peoples' mental health and physical exercise behavior.

Our analysis shows that during the pandemic women are reporting poorer mental health than men. Higher percentages of men report their mental health as "excellent" (26 percent) and "very good" (34 percent) compared to women (19 percent and 33 percent, respectively).

Both Canadian men and women have increased their outdoor exercise for health reasons between April and October 2020. In particular, exercising has played an important role in women's coping with their poorer mental health. Percentages to exercise outdoors for health reason are higher among Canadian women than men between April and June 2020.



Exercising outdoor for health reason by gender. Data source: Canadian Perspectives Survey Series Credit: Chloe Sher and Caroline Fusco

Not positioned equally

Not all women and not all men, as we have noted, are positioned equally in society.

While research shows that the gaps in [physical exercise](#) have widened substantially between men and [women](#), it has further [widened between whites and non-whites, rich and poor and educated and less educated](#), especially during the pandemic.

There are many reasons for these disparities including systemic racism, lack of opportunities and access. For instance, many low-income and racialized neighborhoods lack infrastructure investment in health care, and also do not have parks or outdoor exercise areas.

People from these neighborhoods may also lack the time to exercise because they are

the ones who have been servicing the more privileged populations during the [pandemic](#)

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In Canada and the U.S. it is imperative that policy makers develop and implement measures to ensure equality in [exercise](#) participation.

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