

# ReImagine RREC

**Renew, Retool, Engage, Contribute**

**Reimagining Parks, Recreation  
and Community Sport:**

**Highlights Report**

**May 2021**



ReImagine RREC is a project of the  
Canadian Parks and Recreation Association



ReImagine RREC – Renew, Retool, Engage and Contribute – is a multi-phase COVID-19 recovery initiative for recreation, parks and community sport leaders supported by the Government of Canada and delivered by the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association. The initiative is intended to help leaders working in parks, recreation and community sport to improve planning, operations and delivery of programs and services in a pandemic and post-pandemic environment, as well as to contribute to community recovery more broadly.

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#ReImagineRREC

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Canada 

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## Preamble

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Shortly thereafter, the federal government closed its southern border to all but essential travel, and provincial-territorial governments enacted stay-at-home orders and directed all but essential businesses to close. Despite these unprecedented measures, COVID-19 progressed. Despite continued public health measures and the availability of vaccines, the pandemic has continued in 2021, now in its third wave in Canada, causing everyone to redefine everyday living.

Society has moved from being highly global to hyper-local. Lockdowns and restrictions caused a significant shift in the public's perception and connection to parks, recreation and community sport: interest and demand intensified, and the pandemic illuminated and reinforced the essential role of parks, recreation and community sport for individual and community health and wellbeing.

Acknowledging that the situation differs regionally and provincially, when lockdowns were initially and gradually lifted, parks and open spaces were the first places people sought respite. From Canada's largest cities to its smallest communities, green spaces, parks, and trails became magnets for citizens young and old. Outdoor spaces, including park visits, were and are seen as critical mental health mitigators during these stressful times.

In many ways, the pandemic has also amplified the ingenuity of parks, recreation and community sport leaders. They joined in the front line of defence against COVID. They showed willingness and ability to cope with novel demands and unique challenges. They navigated through new, uncharted waters, including changing roles and responsibilities. Swiftly becoming first responders, recreation personnel stepped up and assisted in serving vulnerable populations – staffing facilities that were converted into emergency shelters, supervising community halls that had become food distribution centres, and directing foot traffic at recreation facilities that were transformed into COVID screening sites. Many of these fundamental changes remain in place today as the pandemic continues. And while the crucial role of parks, recreation and community sport in supporting social services has long been known to the sector, COVID became the catalyst to entrench their role as essential to supporting and protecting the health and wellbeing of all Canadians.

This rapidly changing environment will eventually lead to a new normal for the sector. Parks, recreation and community sport leaders must be supported to meet these unprecedented challenges and new expectations. They must position their value proposition to build back better and support community health, healing and renewal.

ReImagine RREC is positioned to do just that!

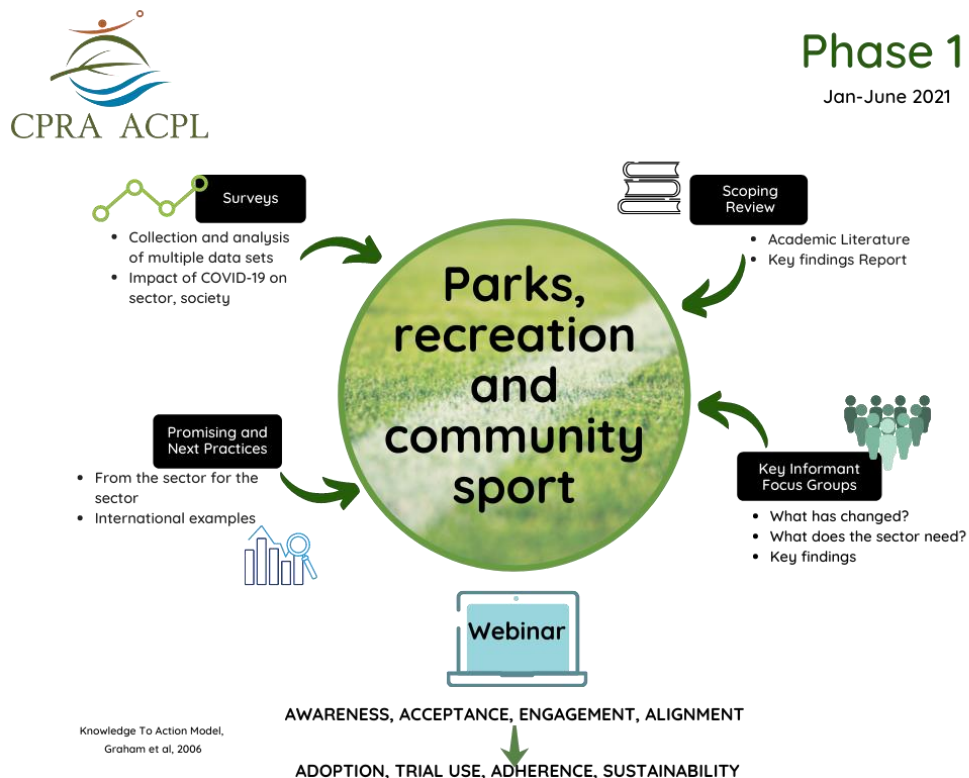
## ReImagine RREC – A COVID-19 Recovery Initiative

ReImagine RREC—Renew, Retool, Engage and Contribute—is a national COVID-19 recovery initiative for parks, recreation and community sport leaders supported by the Government of Canada and delivered by the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association. The project has been designed and implemented by a Leadership Team of dedicated specialists with decades of experience in the parks, recreation, community sport and public health sectors from across Canada.

ReImagine RREC is a multi-phase initiative that applies a knowledge-to-action model to identify, analyze, synthesize, catalogue and disseminate knowledge needed to plan, operate, and deliver parks, recreation and community sport programs in pandemic and post-pandemic environments. It will aid parks, recreation and community sport leaders to *renew* their value proposition; *retool* their programming and service delivery; safely *engage* and support their employees, clients and partners; and *contribute* to community recovery.

### ReImagine RREC is evidence-based and theory-driven

The ReImagine RREC initiative is grounded in proven theory—the knowledge-to-action model (Graham et al., 2006). In Phase 1, using the findings from the collected evidence, the project aims to raise **awareness** of the impacts and implications of COVID faced by the sector; gain **acceptance** of the need for action by the sector; seek **engagement** of the sector in identifying issues and needed actions; and achieve **alignment** of actions across the sector and with allied sectors.



Phase 1 of the project includes four integrated activities:

1. The collection and review of published and other relevant literature.
2. The collection and analysis of survey data from multiple sources.
3. The collection of input from key informants working in parks, recreation and community sport at the local, provincial and national levels.
4. The documenting of promising and “next” practices undertaken by the sector in response to lockdowns and other pandemic-related changes. See Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of Phase 1 Research Elements

Element	Scope	Purpose
<b>Scoping Review</b>	245 peer-reviewed and grey literature published between Jan. 2020-Jan. 2021	Synthesized advice to inform the reopening and longer-term operations of the parks/recreation/community sport industry.
<b>Data Analysis</b>	190 websites, reports, and survey papers from across the globe undertaken between March 2020 and February 2021	Employ evidence-based research to inform decisions about emerging from and thriving in a post-COVID environment.
<b>Key Focus Groups</b>	141 informants from all regions of Canada, four issue-specific sessions plus 25 French-language interviews	Assemble insights into how COVID-19 has changed operating models, predict what will be permanently changed, and what tools, resources or supports are needed to resume operations responsibly and safely, as well as position the sector for growth and future success.
<b>Promising Practices</b>	Strategy to crowdsource promising practices from parks, recreation and community sport professionals from across Canada	Present 50 practices showing how the sector has responded and the importance of the sector’s contribution to community renewal and recovery.

# Pillars for Action

The parks, recreation and community sport sector will play a vital role in the national COVID-19 recovery effort. The ReImagine RREC initiative offers evidence-based guidance about how the sector is critical to supporting and protecting the health and wellbeing of all Canadians. ReImagine RREC research revealed five pillars that can act as the bedrock for decisions intended to shape and influence policy and practice. All actions can be based on one or more of these foundational elements.

<p><b>1. Parks, Recreation and Community Sport are Essential</b></p> <p>Parks, recreation and community sport are viewed as essential to the health and wellbeing of all Canadians. Like never before, parks and recreation facilities and services are widely considered vital supports to achieving and maintaining community health.</p>
<p><b>2. Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Access</b></p> <p>The pandemic has exposed many inequalities throughout society, including within the parks, recreation and community sport sector. Vulnerable populations and at-risk communities have limited access to parks and fewer opportunities to participate in sport and recreation. Inclusion, diversity, equity and access should be embedded in every initiative and strategy to aid in a sustainable recovery.</p>
<p><b>3. Clarity and Consistency</b></p> <p>The sector has a key role in rebuilding the public’s confidence about the safety and security of the parks, recreation and community sport facilities and services. Leaders and decision-makers need authoritative, clear and consistent guidelines, standards, policies, and messaging from public health officials and governments to fulfill this role.</p>
<p><b>4. Sustainability</b></p> <p>Recovery from the health, social, economic and fiscal impacts of closures and other restrictions will take years. When people begin to return to parks, recreation and community sport, the needed infrastructure and organizations may not be there to support them. Sustainable funding and long-term solutions must be in place.</p>
<p><b>5. Innovation and Flexibility</b></p> <p>The pandemic created opportunities for the parks, recreation and community sport sector to innovate and collaborate across sectors and policy areas. In adapting to a new normal, the sector must harness the inherent creativity and boldly pursue inventiveness across all facets of policymaking, planning and implementation, including through collaboration and partnerships.</p>

## Scope of Findings

### Survey Data

- 103 distinct surveys were analyzed.
- 30% of all surveys analyzed were Canadian; 70% of all surveys analyzed were from international sources.
- 61% of surveys were of the general population; 38% were of input from organizations or communities at all levels.
- All surveys analyzed reflected the input and insight of 475,000 total respondents.
- All surveys were conducted between March 2020 and February 2021.

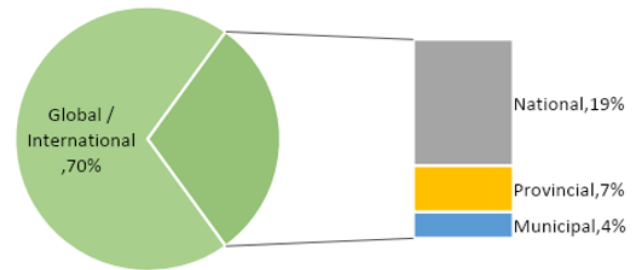


Figure 1. Survey data: national and international breakdown levels

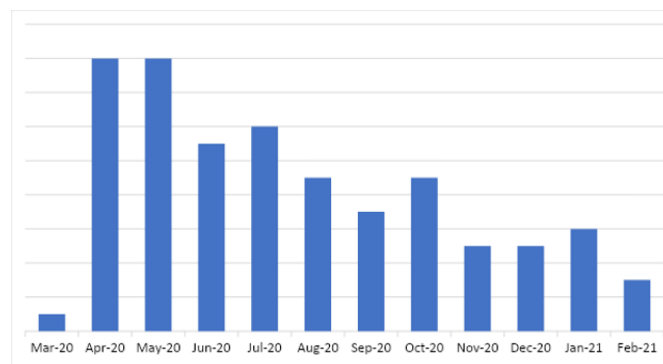


Figure 2. Survey period: March 2020-February 2021

### Scoping Review

- 20,552 articles were identified in the initial search.
- 245 articles were reviewed after screening, duplication, and exclusion criteria were applied.
- 13% of articles are from Canadian sources; 67% are from the US and other sources.
- 121 articles were reviewed for the impacts and implications of the pandemic on **People**
- 117 articles were reviewed for the impacts and implications of the pandemic on **Programs and Policy**
- 93 articles were reviewed for the impacts and implications of the pandemic on **Places and Spaces**.



Table 2: Articles by Type

Type	# of Articles	% of Total
Empirical, commentary	213	86%
Literature Review	9	4%
Case Study	4	2%
Conceptual	4	2%
Method/Other	15	6%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>100%</b>

### Key Informant Focus Groups

- Over 170 key informants, including thought leaders and front-line practitioners, were engaged.
- Twenty-five French-speaking key informants were engaged from across Canada.
- Six regional focus groups were conducted across Canada: Atlantic, Quebec French, Quebec English, Central, West and North, including remote and rural communities.
- Five special issues focus groups were conducted on 1) including diversity and inclusion, 2) gender equity, 3) Indigenous, 4) national organizations, and 5) education and school sport.
- A big cities focus group was conducted.
- Key outcomes from focus groups included insights around the needs of leaders to navigate, respond and build back from the pandemic; strategies to restart, renew and retool programs and policies; potential actions achieving sustainable operations moving forward.

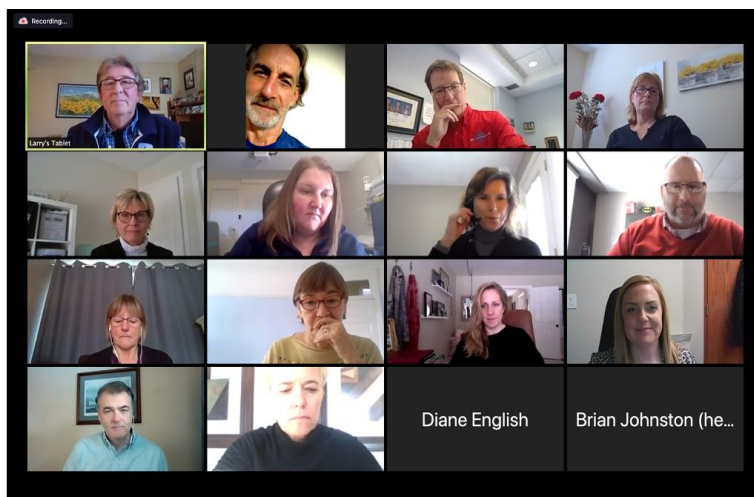


Figure 3: Online Key Informant Focus Group

### *Crowdsourcing Promising and “Next” Practices*

- Over 70 promising or “next” practices have been submitted to ReImagine RREC to date (English and French).
- Seven jurisdictions are represented to date in promising and “next” practices.
- **Accepted submissions will be published on CPRA’s [The Bench](#)**



### **Key Process Learnings**

CPRA and the ReImagine RREC Leadership Team have identified the following key process learnings to date:

- **Timely and needed.** The ReImagine RREC initiative was timely and necessary to apply an evidence-based and focused effort at a pan-Canadian level to improve planning, operations and delivery of programs and services in a pandemic and post-pandemic environment, as well as to contribute to community recovery more broadly.
- **Comprehensive data and insight.** Phase 1 of knowledge gathering represents a watershed of data and insights to inform emerging and future policy and practice in parks, recreation and community sport.
- **Consistency across Phase 1 activities.** There is consistency in the findings across knowledge collection activities completed in Phase 1; qualitative and quantitative data identified from the survey analyses are consistent with findings from the scoping review, which are consistent with needs and trends identified from the key informant focus groups.
- **Need for deeper investigation.** There is a need for deeper investigation into identified but unanalyzed data that exists across multiple sources both domestically and internationally; the breadth of impacts and implications for recreation, parks and community sport resulting from the pandemic, including ongoing impacts as the pandemic continues; and the current and future requirement to plan for incremental versus transformational change to all business and operations.

## Early Outcome Learnings

CPRA and the ReImagine RREC Leadership Team have identified the following early outcomes learnings to date:

- **There is heightened awareness of the value of parks, recreation and community sport.** Past efforts by the sector, including the *Benefits of Recreation* initiative, the *Framework for Recreation in Canada: Pathways to Wellbeing (2015)*, and policy initiatives such as *Affordable Access*, have advocated and touted the important societal role of parks, recreation and community sport. The pandemic has brought into focus the public's acceptance that access to parks and other open spaces, recreation services and community sport are a right and centrepiece of individual and community health and wellbeing.
- **Many sub-population groups continue to be disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.** COVID has exacerbated a litany of health, social and economic inequalities. The pandemic continues to have a tremendous negative impact on disadvantaged and underrepresented population groups and communities, including Indigenous and Black communities, people of colour, women and girls, persons with a disability, children and youth, essential front-line workers, low-income families, LGBTQ2+ communities and others. Ensuring equitable access to parks, recreation and community sport facilities and programs must be a critical element as the sector renews, retools and contributes to broader community recovery.
- **Public expectations, preferences and behaviours are changing.** Phase 1 findings confirm that some users are hesitant to return to organized sport and recreation programming. COVID-19 lockdowns have resulted in the widespread decrease of physical activity and increased sedentary behaviour, underscoring the importance of promoting the integration of health-enhancing physical activity into everyday living and capitalizing on heightened interest in parks and outdoor green spaces. The demand for outdoor, holistic and self-directed programming—including winter programming—is on the increase. “Animating” outdoor programming to attract existing and new users—including vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations—has been identified as a best or “next” practice by leaders.
- **Staffing and other human resource challenges will need to be addressed.** Data shows that parks, recreation and community sport administrators face mounting HR challenges as the pandemic continues. They will linger if not increase post-pandemic. There is an exodus of staff and volunteers who may not return post-pandemic. Changing roles and responsibilities, including abiding by public health measures, as well as new and oft-changing policies and guidelines, will require new and different skills.

- **The public’s desire and demand to recreate outdoors.** Increased use—sometimes overuse—of parks and green spaces during lockdowns is a global phenomenon. In Canada, the use of parks, paths and trails has increased dramatically during the pandemic. Data demonstrates that in 2020, 70% of Canadians expressed an increased appreciation for parks and green spaces; 66% reported increased levels of walking/jogging outdoors, and there was a 25% increase in cycling.
- **Transitioning to pandemic-resilient operations and program delivery.** Phase 1 findings drawn from domestic and international experiences make clear that changes will be required to meet user expectations and public safety. Some will be incremental, others permanent, costly and time-consuming. For example, facility design, redesign and retrofitting will be a priority. Retrofitted or new air handling, zonal HVAC sanitation, and other air disinfectant measures will be required.
- **Need for clear and authoritative guidance, standards and messaging.** The public’s top concern will continue to focus on personal and community safety. While there have been varying degrees of compliance with public health directives, most Canadians have respected guidelines and measures put in place by national, provincial and local public health officials. As the parks, recreation and community sport sector moves toward a new normal, it will be imperative that authoritative, clear and accurate guidance, standards and messaging be provided to guide policy, planning, operations and program delivery.

## View from the Field: Summary of Focus Groups

One hundred and seventy leaders and practitioners from the parks, recreation and community sport sectors participated in virtual focus groups in February and March 2021 to help inform what the sector needs to effectively renew, retool, engage and contribute to an active and effective recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the focus groups’ purpose was to understand how the sector has adapted, how it has been permanently changed, and how to best navigate the ongoing challenges and opportunities ahead. These opportunities, along with the results from the scoping review and other data collected as part of this project, will be used to establish future priorities for action.

The entirety of the key informants’ input is contained in a View from the Field Report that can be found on CPRA’s The Bench. Overwhelmingly, Key Informants noted we have an unparalleled opportunity to capitalize on the public’s support for parks, recreation and community sport. We should build on this momentum by demonstrating the value and benefits of parks, recreation and community sport to decision-makers through compelling stories and data. Key Informants not only cited a need for sustainability/recovery funding, but they also highlighted the benefits of collaboration across sectors, more flexible and responsive planning, and sharing of best/“next” practices that respond to changes in our environment.

The following sections summarize the major themes relating to people, places, programs, and policies. The section ends with what practitioners suggested is needed to renew, retool, engage, and contribute.

### **People Key Themes (public/clients and those working in the field)**

- Equity, inclusion and access: The need to reach those hardest hit by the pandemic.
- The changing workplace: The shift to working remotely and a need to support employees' mental health. Recruiting employees and volunteers to fill vital roles.
- Changing behaviour patterns: An increase in "household-centric," unstructured recreation and physical activity and the impact on traditionally scheduled recreation programs.

### **Places Key Themes (indoor and outdoor facilities/amenities)**

- Priority for parks, trails, and open space: Awareness of the benefits of outdoor activity for people's physical and mental wellbeing has grown dramatically. A need to increase investment in parks, trails and open space and make those spaces accessible to more people year-round.
- Non-traditional use of existing indoor spaces: Recreation centres became food banks, vaccination centres and recovery sites. Strategies to maximize use are required.
- Facility design for resilience: Recognizing that the next pandemic is just around the corner, there is a need to ensure facilities are more adaptable and pandemic resistant.

### **Programs Key Themes (online, in-person and events)**

- New modalities of programming: Online/on-demand programming is here to stay. It is time to gather those "next" practices and focus on quality and equity.
- Events and other mass gatherings: Returning to large gatherings (sporting tournaments, community events) will be gradual. Strategies for a safe return are needed.

### **Policies Key Themes (procedures and strategies)**

- Parks, recreation and community sport as essential: There is an opportunity to build on the public's increased awareness of the essential role of parks, recreation and community sport for individual and societal wellbeing.
- Partnerships: Capitalize on opportunities to leverage and enhance partnerships to accelerate recovery efforts and enhance opportunities for all in Canada to access parks, recreation, and community sport.
- Technology for business transformation: Technology will play an ever more important role in all aspects of programs and services.

### **What the sector needs**

Under each of the domains, key informants shared ideas on what the sector needs to renew and retool. The overarching ideas include:

- Tools (including data) that demonstrate the value and benefits of parks, recreation, and community sport to inform and support decision makers.

- Financial investment in recovery for the sector (both municipalities and non-profits) that targets those populations most in need and builds on the public's awareness of the benefits of parks, recreation and community sport.
- Continued opportunities to network, share knowledge and expertise locally, regionally and nationally.
- Training, supported by tools and resources, to help organizations adapt to the changing environment.
- Support to build enhanced partnerships and to advance collaboration between sectors.
- Continue collecting best/"next" practices to be part of a central repository for sharing expertise and knowledge on CPRA's the Bench.

## Where to From Here?

CPRA and the ReImagine RREC Leadership Team are proceeding with the following next steps to support policymakers, leaders and volunteers working in park, recreation and community sport:

- Planning and organizing the ReImagine RREC Webinar Series, with the first in the series to be delivered in June 2021. The primary objective of this webinar is to share topline findings from Phase 1 activities for consideration and use by policymakers, leaders and volunteers. Subsequent webinars will be delivered in the coming months.
- Synthesizing and organizing findings from Phase 1 for sharing with policymakers, leaders and volunteers on The Bench, CPRA's online community of practice.
- Steps toward deeper investigation to further inform renewal, retooling, engagement, and contribution to community recovery.