

New Zealand scored C+ for physical activity in children and teens—what's driving this and what can be done?

November 15 2022, by Melody Smith



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C+—that's Aotearoa New Zealand's overall grade in the most comprehensive global assessment of [physical activity in children and](#)

[adolescents](#). Even more worryingly, the 57 participating countries scored a D average overall.

The Active Healthy Kids Global Alliance's [Global Matrix 4.0](#) used ten indicators related to [physical activity](#) to score countries' performance. The findings are [consistent with earlier assessments](#) and show children and adolescents around the world are not moving enough to promote healthy growth and development.

The report's authors say [young people](#) worldwide have formed new habits "in response to the new normal, provoked by a socially accepted screen-centric indoor living society, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, global conflicts and severe weather associated with [climate change](#)".

Aotearoa's grade was better than the global average because of our high rates of participation in organized sports and physical activity, where we tied for fifth place (B-), compared with a C- overall.

An indicator that scores government initiatives related to physical activity placed Aotearoa at the top of all countries, in part thanks to Ihi Aotearoa/Sport NZ's development of a [national outcomes framework](#) and Waka Kotahi's program to [make streets safer for people](#), rolled out in early 2020.

A dismal D for active transport

Despite these investments, Aotearoa had one of the lowest grades for active transport (D), with only five countries performing more poorly. This is in keeping with a trend of [low and declining active transport](#) over the last decade.

Denmark and Japan topped the table for active transportation with an

A-, compared with a C- average overall. Denmark noted their comprehensive networks of cycle lanes and their government's persistent efforts to implement safe routes to [school](#) as key contributors to their success.

Research in Aotearoa with [children](#), [schools](#) and [whānau/families](#) consistently shows we need improved traffic safety to facilitate active transport. There is a dearth of connected and safe cycling infrastructure across the country, resulting in [extremely low rates of biking](#).

In earlier [research](#) we also identified safe road crossings as a priority and called for more signalized crossings and raised zebra crossings to slow traffic down. Initiatives to improve driver behavior are also essential—speeding, inattentive driving, red-light running and failing to stop at pedestrian crossings are all common.

Other factors also come into play. [School leadership](#) and [partnerships with community groups and agencies](#) can both play an integral role in the success of initiatives that promote active transport. Ultimately, getting to and from school actively needs to be a safe and easy option.

It is worth noting that transformative changes have happened since we collated evidence for our [report card](#), including the government's NZ\$350 million [transport choices program](#). But even when better active transport options are in place, it takes time for people to [change how they travel](#). We can expect an increase in [active transport](#) to lag behind the completion of infrastructure.

Addressing inequities for adolescents

We have identified several [inequities for young people](#) in Aotearoa across all indicators.

We found striking differences for sedentary time across [age groups](#), with the worst outcomes for rangatahi/adolescents in school years 11-13 (aged about 15-17 years). In this group, only 12% met the threshold of no more than two hours per day of recreational screen time, compared with 36% of those in school years 7-10 and 61% in years 0-6.

This teenage group was also less likely to report being active in physical education at school or to participate in organized sport (31% and 44% respectively), compared with [younger children](#) (years 0-10) whose rates were between 64%-74% for these indicators.

Active [transport](#) was also lower, at 22%, compared with 30% of children in school years 0-6 and 34% in years 7-10. Unsurprisingly, overall physical activity was also lower for those in [school years](#) 11-13, at 47% (C-), compared with around 60% for their younger counterparts.

Considering physical inactivity [tracks from adolescence into adulthood](#), we urgently need effective mechanisms to facilitate activity in ways that work for adolescents.

It is likely the shift away from compulsory [physical education](#) from year 11 has a significant impact on school-based activity. Physical education and organized sports can also be unwelcoming and unsafe spaces for many young people, particularly if they don't fit the norm, for example around [athleticism](#) and [gender](#), [\(dis\)ability](#) and [body size](#).

Adolescents are a diverse group with numerous competing priorities, notwithstanding the significant impact of transitioning through this life stage in the context of climate change and a global pandemic. Providing a range of safe and welcoming opportunities for physical activity that meet young peoples' needs is essential.

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