

The 2020 Lockdown and the Missing Japanese Women Runners

The media reported a global running boom during the lockdowns of 2020. ^(1, 2, 3, 4) However, recently released data for Japan show a decline in women's participation 2020 versus 2018. ⁽⁵⁾ The survey has been conducted every two years since 1998.

Japan's running participation rate data

On a variety of measures Japan's running participation rate, 2020 versus, 2018, has risen, Fig.1.

Fig.1 Participation rate (%), Running, Men and Women combined, Three frequency measurements

	Once a week or more	At least twice a month	Once a year or more
1998	3.7	4.5	6.9
2000	3.4	4.3	7.7
2002	2.1	2.7	4.8
2004	3.3	3.9	6.6
2006	2.9	3.5	5.9
2008	3.4	4.9	7.3
2010	4.2	5.0	8.5
2012	5.5	6.8	9.7
2014	5.3	6.2	9.5
2016	4.5	5.7	8.6
2018	5.3	6.4	9.3
2020	5.6	7.0	10.2

Source: Sasakawa Sports Foundation, ⁽⁵⁾ Conceptasia, November 2021

However, the increasing participation rate, 2020 versus 2018, is entirely driven by men, Fig.2.

Fig.2 Participation rate (%), Running, by Gender, Two available frequency measurements

	Once a week or more		Once a year or more	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1998	4.4	3.0	8.7	5.2
2000	5.6	1.2	10.5	4.9
2002	3.2	1.1	6.2	3.4
2004	5.2	1.4	9.7	3.5
2006	3.9	2.0	8.1	4.0
2008	4.9	2.0	10.0	4.6
2010	6.5	2.0	12.2	4.8
2012	8.3	2.7	14.0	5.3
2014	7.4	3.2	12.9	6.1
2016	6.3	2.7	11.8	5.4
2018	7.8	2.8	12.9	5.8
2020	8.7	2.6	14.9	5.6

Source: Sasakawa Sports Foundation, ⁽⁵⁾ Conceptasia, November 2021

Data by gender and age is available for the “Once a year or more” measure, Fig.3 and Fig.4.

Fig.3 Participation rate (%), Running, Once a year or more, Women, by Age bracket						
	20+	30+	40+	50+	60+	70+
1998	6.1	5.5	6.4	7.3	1.7	1.0
2000	7.6	7.4	6.5	4.1	1.6	0.0
2002	7.7	4.8	4.5	2.3	1.0	0.0
2004	5.2	5.0	4.7	3.1	1.5	1.8
2006	7.9	6.1	4.0	2.3	4.4	0.6
2008	8.8	5.7	8.8	2.5	1.2	1.4
2010	10.5	6.3	7.8	2.2	1.1	2.1
2012	12.1	8.2	6.4	4.2	2.0	0.0
2014	20.1	6.4	7.0	2.4	3.1	0.6
2016	13.5	7.4	6.4	3.0	3.2	0.8
2018	16.0	9.4	4.1	5.0	1.7	1.7
2020	15.8	5.8	5.5	6.0	1.5	1.9

Note: Many more women in their twenties and thirties run than in their sixties and seventies.
Source: Sasakawa Sports Foundation, ⁽⁵⁾ Conceptasia, November 2021

Being survey based, the data will have estimation fluctuations from survey to survey. Nonetheless the decline in participation of women in their thirties, 2020 versus 2018, is notably pronounced (pale orange highlights in Fig.3).

Compared to the rise in the participation rate of men in their thirties, 2020 versus 2018, there were stronger participation rate rises for men in their twenties, forties, and fifties.

Fig.4 Participation rate (%), Running, Once a year or more, Men, by Age bracket						
	20+	30+	40+	50+	60+	70+
1998	14.7	9.3	8.2	6.6	6.6	3.9
2000	14.7	10.1	10.1	14.6	5.8	3.0
2002	12.4	7.4	5.6	6.3	2.8	2.0
2004	13.4	12.4	14.6	9.4	4.6	3.4
2006	13.6	11.2	11.0	5.3	6.6	2.2
2008	17.1	12.4	7.4	8.7	8.8	3.6
2010	16.0	16.7	19.3	8.9	5.6	4.4
2012	17.8	18.8	21.2	14.4	6.5	2.5
2014	19.1	19.0	15.2	12.7	6.4	4.0
2016	16.4	15.7	12.1	9.7	10.3	6.6
2018	14.4	20.8	14.5	13.6	8.7	4.1
2020	19.7	22.1	19.3	17.0	7.0	3.7

Source: Sasakawa Sports Foundation, ⁽⁵⁾ Conceptasia, November 2021

An obvious observation is that with kindergartens and schools closed, those with young children would be forced to provide continuous care at home. This is likely to be most prevalent amongst parents in their thirties.

A research study ⁽⁶⁾ (into exercise broadly) conducted during Belgium’s first lockdown in 2020, found:

A general increase in exercise frequencies, except for people aged 55+, with previously low active adults self-reporting exercising more during the lockdown. Among the people who were already highly active before COVID-19, those above 55 years old, those with low education, those used to exercise with friends or in a sport club, and those who were not using online tools to exercise, self-reported exercising less during the lockdown.

Fig.5 Reported Exercise Obstacles, in percent			
	Total Sample	Highly Active People	Less Active People
None	33.6	30.2	65.4
Fear for Covid-19	13.1	11.5	29.0
Closed infrastructure	47.7	49.6	27.0
No friends	29.5	24.5	21.4
No interest (anymore)	4.3	2.8	20.0
No good environment	18.1	18.2	17.1
No sport club activities	36.6	38.4	16.2
No/little time	4.8	4.0	13.7
Illness	2.7	2.4	7.1
Cancelled sport event	29.9	31.6	9.5
Other (not specified)	6.8	6.2	12.9

Source: *Exercising in Times of Lockdown*, ⁽⁶⁾ Conceptasia, November 2021

The Belgium lockdown was “light” with restrictions similar to those implemented during Japan’s first lockdown: schools were closed, along with all fitness and sports clubs, and work was conducted from home.

In the study, childcare did not rate a separate category; and the “Other” category does not appear to be very important.

Time and more data will enable stronger conclusions.

Running is regarded as one of the best exercises for easing stress. ⁽²⁾ This reflects its rhythmic nature enabling experienced runners to get “into the zone.”

Unexpected childcare responsibilities and a loss of a stress-reduction technique could result in mental wellness issues for some Japanese women in their thirties.

The 2020 media reported global running boom

Insights from the Asics survey include:

- 1) 59% globally (Japan 47%) say they will combine their pre-Covid routine with new exercises they have started during the pandemic
- 2) Among those who only took up running after the Covid-19 crisis started, 62% globally say they plan on sticking with it in future
- 3) 65% globally (67% in Japan) say that the mental benefits of running outweigh any other form of physical exercise

References

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- 4) Run Repeat: *Exercise is Up 88% During COVID-19 [12,913 Person Study]*, August 2021. <https://runrepeat.com/exercise-covid-19-study>
- 5) Sasakawa Sports Foundation, October 2021: *Jogging / running estimated population, record high of 10.55 million* <https://re-how.net/all/1435656/>
- 6) *Exercising in Times of Lockdown: An Analysis of the Impact of COVID-19 on Levels and Patterns of Exercise among Adults in Belgium*, by Bram Constandt, Erik Thibaut, Veerle De Bosscher, Jeroen Scheerder, Margot Ricour, and Annick Willem, June 2020