

BCA Demographics Report

2020-2023

Publications and Information

Authored by: Eve Chaddock

Introduction & Aims

The purpose of this report is to accurately reflect the age and sex composition of the BCA membership of the BCA. This is a follow up report to Tim Allen and Kay Easton's reports from 2017, 2018 and 2019 and the one Rostam Namaghi wrote in 2020. This report is being published in 2025 due to the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is still the aim of the P&I group to publish a demographic report every year.

The main finding from this report is that the gender gap in caving appears to be shrinking, especially amongst members under the age of 60. The average age of female active cavers reflects the average age of the UK population. It also confirms that participation among young women is increasing relative to men. However, it is worth noting that these figures have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that there may be some groups that experienced artificial growth in the post-pandemic years.

Method

The data was collected on 16/02/2025 from the membership database, anonymised and then sent to the author. The data was transferred to an Excel spreadsheet and simple statistical tests carried out as per previous iterations of the report. The age data had to be converted from year-of-birth to age, so all ages are as at end-of-year, rather than when membership was renewed. Due to the old data collection method of club secretaries filling in non-standardised information, there were some age records that did not effectively transfer over and were lost. The data has been subcategorised by Active (caving members, students, and under-18s) and All (also including non-caving members). CIMs and DIMs were not separated in this report, as the data provided did not have these listed separately.

2021

Table 1: These statistics were generated from the combined Age-Sex dataset, showing a good set of complete records. It is interesting that there is a much larger age difference between female active cavers/all-female members compared to males. (N.B: rounded to 3 sf)

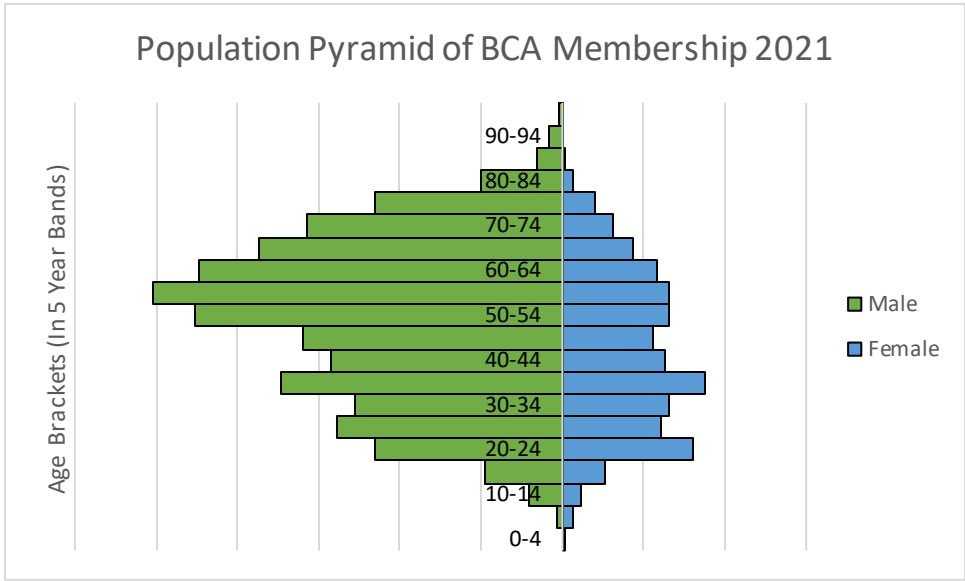
	Active Cavers ¹	All Members
Total Records	4996	5985
Complete Age-Sex Records	2533 (50.7%)	2918 (48.8%)
Female Mean Age (Years)	40.3	43.5
Male Mean Age (Years)	49.1	50.1

Table 2: taking both age, and sex as two separate datasets the average age of a caver rises, and the gender imbalance becomes more apparent.

(N.B: rounded to 3 sf)

	Active Cavers	All Members
Complete Records Age Only	2618 (52.4%)	3020 (50.5%)
Average Caver Age (Years)	47.1	49.3
Complete Records Sex Only	3905	4661
Average Male: Female Ratio	3.4:1	3:1

¹ Caving members, full time students, and under-18s



*The 100+ Demographic is omitted as it would heavily skew the graph.

2022

Table 1: These statistics were generated from the combined Age- Sex dataset, showing a low set of complete records. Female and male ages though contain a similar average.

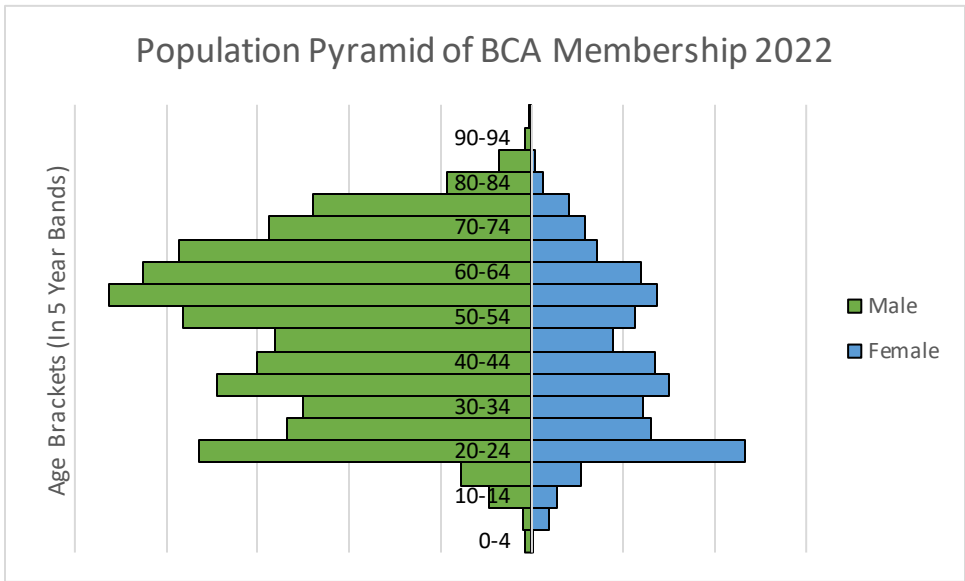
(N.B: rounded to 3 sf)

	Active Cavers	All Members
Total Records	5693	6668
Complete Age-Sex Records	2548 (44.8%)	2896 (43.4%)
Female Mean Age (Years)	39.1	40.1
Male Mean Age (Years)	48.2	49.9

Table 2: taking both age, and sex as two separate datasets the average age of a cover rises, and the gender imbalance becomes more apparent.

(N.B: rounded to 3 sf)

	Active Cavers	All Members
Complete Age Records Only	2645	3016
Average Caver Age (Years)	46.1	48.7
Complete Records Sex Only	3643	4293
Average Male: Female Ratio	3.2:1	3:1



*The 100+ Demographic is omitted as it would heavily skew the graph.

2023

Table 1: These statistics were generated from the combined Age- Sex dataset, showing a low set of complete records. Female and male ages though contain a similar average.

(N.B: rounded to 3 sf)

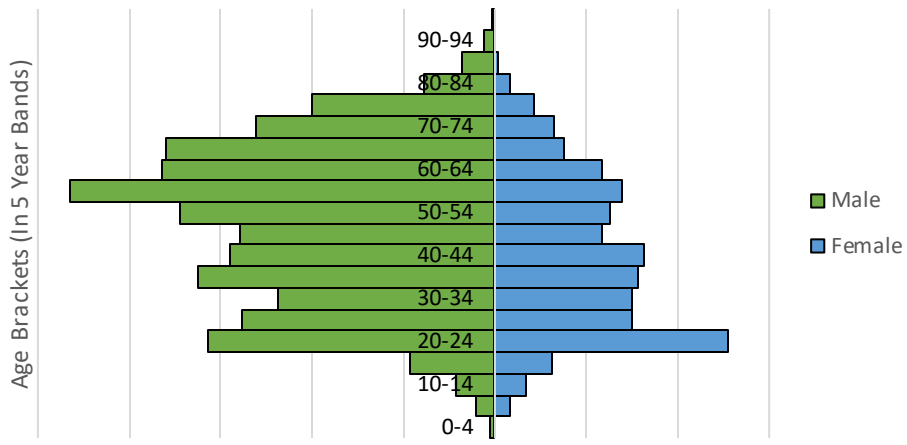
	Active Cavers	All Members
Total Records	5894	6848
Complete Age-Sex Records	2866 (48.6%)	3210 (46.9%)
Female Mean Age (Years)	39.1	41.8
Male Mean Age (Years)	47.2	48.8

Table 2: taking both age, and sex as two separate datasets the average age of a cover rises, and the gender imbalance becomes more apparent.

(N.B: rounded to 3 sf)

	Active Cavers	All Members
Complete Age Records Only	3024	3393
Average Caver Age (Years)	45.0	46.9
Complete Records Sex Only	4657	4020
Average Male: Female Ratio	3.1:1	2.9:1

Population Pyramid of BCA Membership 2023



Discussion

There were 5985 BCA members in 2021, 6668 members in 2022, and 6847 members in 2023, showing a steady increase. Between 2021 and 2022 there was an increase of 11.4%, and a 2.7% between 2022 and 2023. This is quite a large difference and it's possible that the large increase between '21 and '22 could be a post-covid surge. Whilst it's pleasing to see an increase in members, numbers have still not returned to pre-covid figures, with 7075 members in 2020.²

We may see student caving member numbers decreasing, as there are fears amongst the higher education sector that student numbers will fall over the coming years³, and university clubs have been one of the 'traditional engines of growth'⁴. However, there has not been any decline in student membership yet, with numbers rising 88% between 2021 and 2023, from 375 to 705. This is the largest increase in all the insurance categories (caving, non-caving, student, and U-18s). It is difficult to understand exactly how many students are involved in caving, as most university clubs take advantage of the '4 trip rule', where members are covered by their club's policy until they've done a certain number of trips, and then have to be a named, insured individual member.⁵ In my opinion, this extremely large surge in student numbers is due to a post-COVID rebound; 375 is an particularly low number of student cavers, and during 2021 many universities were still implementing rules around social mixing for student clubs. This may have meant that many clubs didn't need to declare individual members due to this '4 trip' policy, as many students won't have gone on more than 4 trips in the 2020-2021 or 2021-2022 academic years. It's highly likely that 375 was an abnormally low year, so rather than the 88% increase being due to caving fever in universities, it was a return to 'normal' after COVID.

We can see that the gap in representation between female and male participants is slowly closing, dropping from 3.4:1 to 3.1:1 over the three years surveyed here. In the 2023 data, the male: female ratio goes from 1.2:1 in the 20-24 category to 1.8:1 in the 40-44 category to 4.1:1 in the 70-74 category. This is probably residual, as women haven't always been welcomed in all caving spaces, and hopefully we will see these gaps closing over the coming decades.

Female member numbers increased by 3.9% (1151 in 2021 up to 1196 in 2023), whereas male member numbers decreased by 1.5% (3511 in 2021 down to 3457 in 2023) amongst those who submitted gender data. Females between the age of 20-24 (where most students sit) increased by 60%, which is unsurprising given the increase in student membership. However, females aged 35-39 saw a decrease of

² R. Namaghi, 'BCA Demographics Report 2020', accessed 20.08.2025, <https://british-caving.org.uk/about-bca/working-groups/publications-information/>

³ "The coming decline in the number of 18-year-olds makes the future 'bleak' for some universities", HEPI, accessed 12.08.2025, <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/10/24/the-coming-decline-in-the-number-of-18-year-olds-makes-the-future-bleak-for-some-universities/>

⁴ Namaghi, 'BCA Demographics Report 2020'.

⁵ "Insurance & Membership FAQs", British Caving Association, accessed 20.08.2025, <https://british-caving.org.uk/our-work/insurance/insurance-faqs/>

11.4%. It is worth considering how we can retain these members to create a more equal membership profile. Encouraging more family-friendly opportunities to cave may help us to retain people who'd like to continue caving through this period of their life but can't currently make it work.

Another notable change is the age of active cavers, dropping over two years over the space of two years, a rapid change. Potential causes include greater numbers of under-18s⁶, greater recruitment of students, better retention of graduates, or maintaining members in their 30s (a usual drop-off point)⁷. The 2020 report asks whether we will experience a large increase in members in the 70+ category. Whilst that report does not directly state how many members we had over the age of 70, in the three years studied here, the percentage of membership aged 65+ dropped from 11% in 2021 to 9.6% in 2023. The UK population aged 65+ was 19% in 2022.⁸

All the above (closing gender gap, female member numbers increasing, age of cavers dropping), could be explained by return to normal student numbers in 2023, so it would be prudent for future researchers to take these statistics with a pinch of salt. However, the fact that the 2023 40-44 gender gap is only 1.8:1, whereas the 2021 one is 2.3:1, suggests that we are making moves towards greater gender equality.

Going forward

It is hoped that with the standardisation of data collection (i.e. drop-down options) that JustGo allows, future reports will not have as many issues with data non-conformity as this one had. This should mean that there are more profiles with at least one of our demographic profiles filled in. The other advantage that JustGo may provide to these reports is that members can login to their profile and self-report on various sections, such as disability, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. This will provide a greater insight into who our members are, and perhaps who we need to work harder to invite into our sport. Of course, because one must be internet-literate to access JustGo, this may skew our statistics towards young people.

I'd like to encourage any readers of this report to complete the demographic data on JustGo and ask others in the community to do the same.

⁶ There were 109 under-18 members in 2021, compared to 133 in 2023, an increase of 22%.

⁷ There were 430 active members aged 30-39 in 2021, compared to 498 in 2023.

⁸ C. Barton, G. Sturge, R. Harker, 'The UK's changing population', accessed 29.08.2025, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/the-uks-changing-population/>