

A Comparison of Demographic Profiles of Casual and Serious Ice Hockey Participants in the United States

Elaina Grenz, Sayde Blanchette, Ronan Walsh, and Zach Hahn
Sport Management & Leadership, Kinesiology Department, University of New Hampshire

Advisors: Dr. Wonjun Choi and Dr. Sophia Min

Introduction

- U.S. ice hockey participation shows key trends:
 - Increase in overall participation as household income increases
 - Increase in women's hockey participation
 - Decrease in participation with casual vs. serious after age 17
- Significant female growth in overall hockey participation, especially with the rise of the Professional Women's Hockey League. According to *USA Hockey Membership Report*.. "The 2024-25 season saw 4,784 more girls and women register, a 5.1% increase" (Barr, 2025).
- Notable increase in youth participation, but it decreases with age. According to *USA Hockey Membership Report*.. "USA Hockey added 6,705 new youth members, bringing the total to 396,525 – a new all-time high" (Barr, 2025).
- Hockey organizations need to recognize and understand these shifting demographics in order to appeal to their audience and create programs that can increase involvement.
- The purpose of this study is to compare the demographic profiles of casual and core ice hockey participants in the United States.

Methods

Data Source

- Sport Business Research Network

Sample

- Participant counts were obtained from annual records spanning from 2014 to 2022, distinguishing casual participants (<49 times per year) from core participants (>50 times per year).

Analysis

- Using Microsoft Excel and Claude, we conducted a visual comparison of player types based on their demographic profiles.

Results

Gender

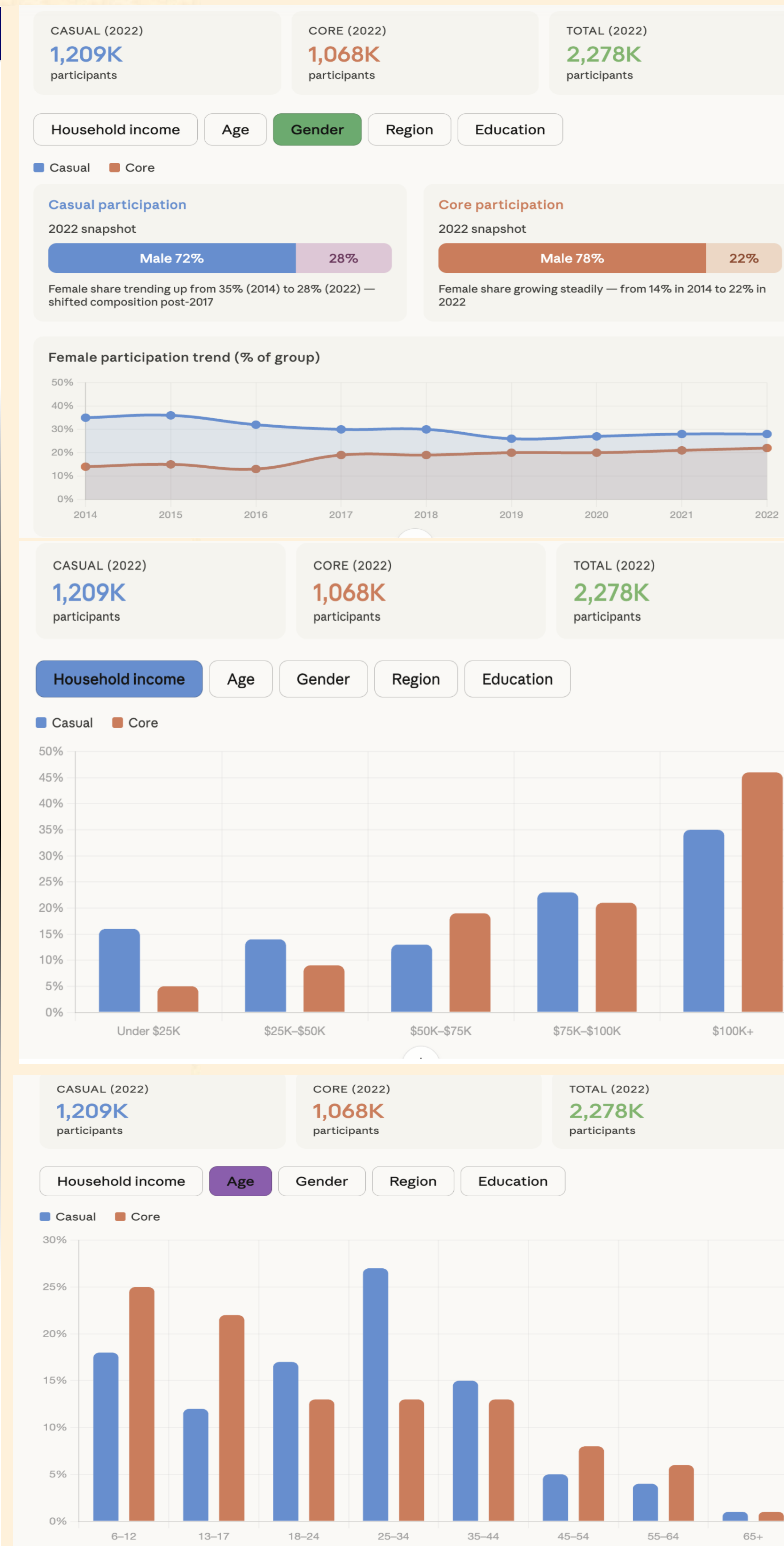
- Core and casual participation in ice hockey are both male dominated.
- Female involvement is growing in core participation, while decreasing in casual participation between 2014 and 2022.

Income

- Core participation is dominated by households with the highest level of income.
- Generally, both casual and core participation increase as household income increases.
- Casual participation is more common than core participation in lower income families.

Age

- Younger age groups (ages 6 to 17) have higher core participation.
- There is a decline in core participation beginning at age 13, which significantly drops off after age 17.
- Casual participation is most common among participants aged 25 to 34.
- Seniors have a low level of both casual and core participation.



Discussion

- Findings revealed that core ice hockey participation is largely concentrated among higher-income, male, and younger demographics.
- There is an increase in core participation for women's hockey aligned with the rise of the PWHL and growing emphasis on women's participation in sports.
- Participation in hockey, especially competitive youth leagues, is becoming increasingly expensive and inaccessible for lower income households.
- Core participation begins decreasing at age 13 and drops after the age of 17. The decrease on the core participant side, is likely due to youth hockey levels ending at U-18 with limited college and professional opportunities. There is also a decline in involvement for seniors due to declining physical ability.

Implications

- Sports organizations should continue to promote programs for women.
- Organizations should seek to make ice hockey participation, especially core participation, more accessible to lower income households. This can be achieved through free try-hockey programs, including partnerships with equipment manufacturers to reduce financial commitment.
- Organizations could seek to promote adult leagues that encourage staying active and continuing to enjoy the sport, rather than prioritizing physical ability.

Future Research

- Future research should identify specific barriers for lower-income households, such as costs and access to programs. It should also examine how the growth of the PWHL affects female registration over time.

References

Barr, John. "USA Hockey Membership Report – 2024-25 Season." *Sound Of Hockey*, 11 June 2025,