



Comparison of Demographic Profiles of Casual and Core Flag Football Participants in the United States

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Introduction

Football dominance and the rise of flag football participation in the U.S.:

- National Football League is the most-watched sport in America, with the Super Bowl 2026 among the second most-streamed events ever.
- Social media growth has increased fan engagement across team and leagues.
- Sports gambling expansion has attracted more casual fans and boosted interest.

Trends in Youth Football Participation:

- Organized participation (55%) is lower than casual (65%), showing growth in non-committed players.
- Tackle football participation has declined (17% since 2006), while flag football is rapidly increasing.
- Safety concerns, cost, and flexibility are shifting youth toward casual over core participation.

Importance for sports organizations:

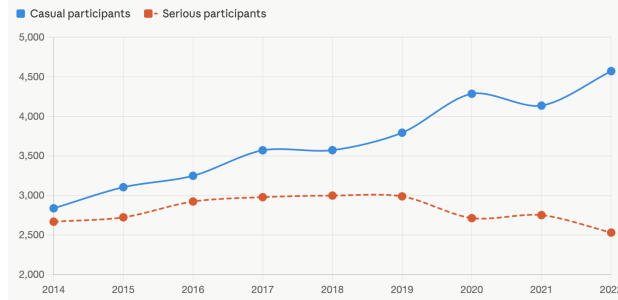
- Helps tailor programs, marketing, and fan engagement to casual vs. serious participants
- Informs resource allocation for leagues, schools, and clubs
- Predicts athlete retention, development, and future participation trends
- Promotes safety, partnerships, and overall industry success

The purpose of this study is to examine the demographic profiles of casual versus core flag football participants in the United States.

Method

- The secondary data were drawn from the Sport Business Research Network and include Participation estimates from 2014 to 2022.
- Across this nine-year period, the dataset represents million of participants annually, with casual participants (ranging from 2.8 to 4.6 million individuals per year) and core participants (ranging from 2.5 to 3 million individuals per year).
- The total sample size for the most recent year (2022) is approx. 7.1 million participants (casual: 4.57m; core: 2.53m).
 - Casual participants** were defined as individuals who play flag football fewer than 49 times per year.
 - Core participants** were defined as individuals who play flag football 50 or more times per year.
- Using Microsoft Excel and Claude, a visual comparison was conducted to examine differences between casual and core participants based on their demographic characteristics, including: (a) age & (b) household income.
 - Age distribution was categorized into seven groups (6–12, 13–17, 18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, & 55–64).
 - Household income was categorized into five brackets (under \$25,000; \$25,000–\$49,999; \$50,000–\$74,999; \$75,000–\$99,999; and \$100,000+).

Core Vs Casual



Discussion

Overall trend: Growth in casual participation reflects a shift toward more flexible, low-commitment sport engagement in the U.S.

This is due to:

- The rise of flexible low commitment in sport
- Cost of core participation vs casual participation
- Low-commitment sports options (like flag football)
- Where individuals can participate without the time demands
- Physical intensity required for more competitive play
- This trend reflects a shift toward more flexible and low-commitment sports participation, where individuals can play without long-term time or financial demands (Sports & Fitness Industry Association [SFIA], 2024).

Age differences: Participation is highest in younger groups, with a sharp drop in core participation at ages 13–17.

This is due to:

- Increased academic pressure
- Specialization in other sports
- Burnout, leading many teens to shift away from consistent participation and toward more casual or no involvement.

Income Differences: Higher-income individuals are more likely to participate consistently, indicating that cost remains a barrier to core participation.

Implications

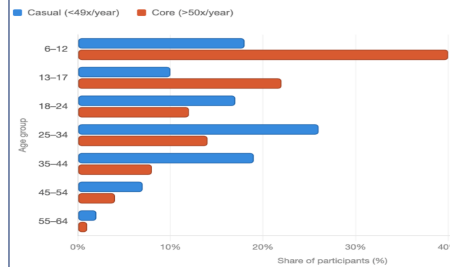
- Youth organizations:** Offer flexible, low-cost programs to retain participants
- Schools:** Expand intramural/recreation flag football opportunities
- NFL & governing bodies:** Invest in flag football as a growth pathway
- Sponsors:** Target casual players with accessibility- focused messaging

Future Research

- Examine barriers preventing lower-income athletes from core participation
- Assess whether flag football growth offsets declines in tackle football

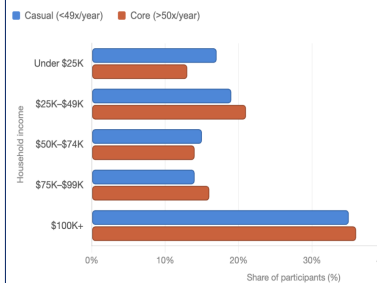
Evidence Charts

Chart #1 Age Demographics



Age distribution of core vs. casual participants

Chart #2 Household Income Chart



Household income distribution of core vs. casual participants

Results

- The largest group for both **casual** and **core** players consists of individuals earning over **\$100,000** annually, indicating that a substantial proportion of flag football participants come from **higher-income** households. **Core** players show a slightly higher representation in this highest income group compared to **casual** players.
- In the **lower income** ranges (under \$25,000 and \$25,000–\$49,999), **casual** players tend to have a slightly higher share than **core** players, suggesting that individuals with lower incomes are somewhat more likely to participate casually rather than frequently.
- For **middle-income** groups (\$50,000–\$99,999), differences between **casual** and **core** players are minimal, indicating relatively similar participation patterns within this range.
- Football participation exists across all income levels, Core participants tend to have slightly higher incomes and more consistent engagement, Casual participants are more evenly distributed and participate less frequently, Income has some influence, but is not a primary driver of participation
- These findings can help organizations better segment and target participants.

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