

# Understanding Barriers to Participation in Snowsports

## Insights from NSAA's 2025 National Panel Study

|| BY JIMMY HOWE & SARAH LEVIN, RRC ASSOCIATES

In snowsports, generating new cohorts of committed skiers and riders remains one of the industry's persistent challenges. Getting a new participant to take the leap and try the sport for the first time is a success, but long-term growth is dependent on repeat visitation, and more importantly, creating a lifelong commitment. Industry research often treats new participants as converted after multiple visits, but the journey from first timer to enthusiast isn't always linear.

Barriers block the way. Even long-time skiers and riders step away from time to time. For some, snowsports become a way of life, while for others, participation gradually becomes harder to sustain. Life circumstances shift. Time tightens. Costs feel heavier. The logistics required to ski or ride begin to outweigh the reward.

Between securing equipment, purchasing lift access, traveling to ski areas, and developing the skills needed to navigate the mountain environment, snowsports require a level of time, financial investment and commitment that exceeds many other recreational activities. The industry often relies on anecdotal and operational experience to explain why participants drop off, but decades of recreation research offer a broader framework for understanding these decisions.

NSAA's 2025 national panel study also sought answers directly from lapsed skiers and snowboarders as to why they stopped participating, asking them to describe the barriers they faced. Read on for those findings, the nuances of which might come as a surprise.

### Behind the Barrier

Before turning to the survey results, historic research on recreation participation offers useful explanations on why people step away or never start an activity in the first place. Two approaches are especially relevant to snowsports: leisure constraints theory and spatial or environmental justice and access research. Together, these frameworks help explain where participation breaks down and how the industry can better support entry and reentry into the sport.

Leisure constraints theory is a widely used model that conceptualizes constraints across three categories in a hierarchy:

- 1. Intrapersonal constraints** refer to a person's own willingness to participate. This could include discomfort with cold weather, perceived lack of skill or fear of injury.
- 2. Interpersonal constraints** arise in one's social environment, such as not having friends or family that participate or difficulty coordinating schedules with others.

- 3. Structural constraints** are the external barriers that make it difficult to participate, such as cost of gear or lift tickets, travel distance to a ski area or the time required to participate.

In practice, these categories can overlap and reinforce one another, creating a cumulative effect that increases the likelihood of drop off. Even if the person is motivated to participate and has friends or family to go with, they may run into a structural issue, such as cost of a season pass, that ends up being the dealbreaker.

Spatial, environmental justice and access research examine how socioeconomic conditions and the proximity to outdoor amenities shape an individual's ability to recreate. This work shows that participation is often influenced less by motivation and more by structural factors, such as geography, transportation, the quality and availability of recreation infrastructure, and the practical effort required to participate. Studies have shown that historic patterns of housing, transportation investment and public land development have influenced which populations live near recreation amenities and which face greater travel burdens.

Snowsports differ from many other outdoor activities in that they almost always require travel and even lodging in some cases. These requirements create barriers that are unrelated to interest or ability and affect some communities more than others. Spatial and access research helps explain how these structural barriers intersect with household resources, family structure and community context in shaping decisions to try, continue or step away from an activity.

Access challenges also vary widely by region. Some communities have nearby ski areas and established transportation options, while others face long drives and limited lodging options. Because of this, participation strategies need to reflect local conditions rather than relying on a single, national approach.

NSAA's 2025 national panel study was designed to examine participation barriers in the current snowsports landscape. The panel audience included adults aged 18 and older who reported having skied or snowboarded at some point in their lives or who had previously indicated interest in participating in snowsports. As such, the sample reflects individuals with prior exposure to or interest in snowsports, rather than the general U.S. population.

During the survey, respondents selected barriers that prevented their own participation in the 2024–25 season or within the previous five years, and that of their children's

(younger than 18 years old) participation. Respondents could select multiple barriers, allowing for a nuanced view of overlapping constraints. RRC dug deeper into responses by ability level, income and geography to better understand how barriers differ across life stage and demographic context.

## Barriers for Adults: Life in the Way

For adults, the biggest hurdle to snowsports participation isn't cost, distance or even skill. It's life.

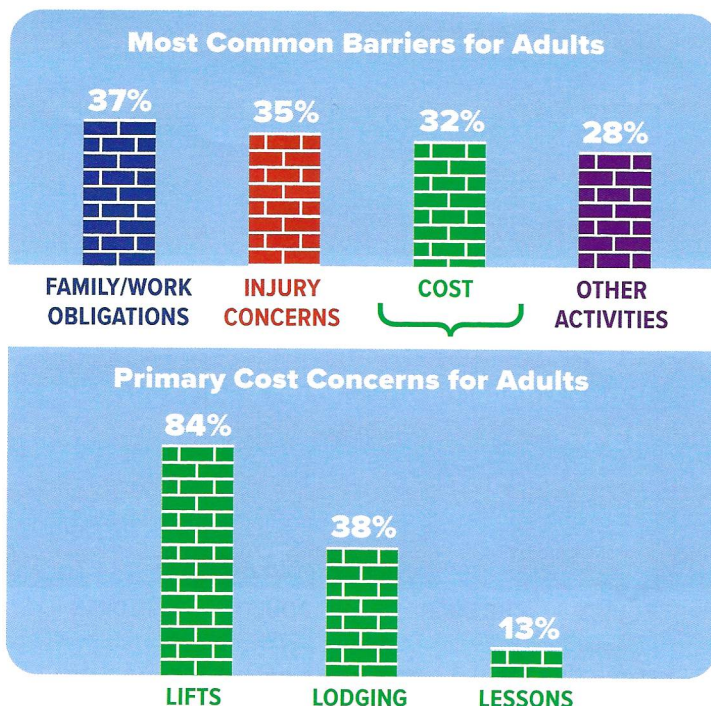
- + More than one-third of adults (37%) cited family circumstances and personal obligations as the primary reason they stepped away from the sport. Work schedules, caregiving responsibilities, and competing household demands continue to crowd out the time and flexibility snowsports require. Even for those who remain interested, participation often becomes harder to justify as life gets busier.
- + Injury or fear of injury followed closely behind, cited by 35% of adults. Physical risk remains a major consideration, particularly as participants age or accumulate injuries. While snowsports are often framed as a lifestyle activity, these findings reinforce that for many adults, concerns about health and long-term physical consequences can outweigh the enjoyment of another day on the mountain.
- + Cost ranked third overall (32%), trailing both life obligations and injury concerns. This challenges a common industry assumption that price is always the first barrier adults encounter.
- + Snowsports are also competing more directly with other leisure options. Nearly three in 10 adults (28%) said they simply prioritized other recreational activities instead. With limited free time, respondents are making tradeoffs and therefore, snowsports must compete not just on price, but on perceived value relative to alternative ways to spend a weekend.

## Geography & Travel Friction

Geography adds another layer of complexity. About one-fifth of adults noted distance to ski areas, including 16% of respondents living in states with skiing. For those relatively close to ski areas, the challenge is often less about miles and more about the perceived effort. Traffic, parking, weather and trip planning contribute to a travel burden that can make participation feel too hard to overcome. In other words, proximity alone doesn't guarantee access. The cumulative hassle of getting to the mountain is deterring otherwise interested participants.

## Income Shapes How Barriers Are Experienced

While cost was not the top barrier overall, it played a larger role among lower-income households. For those households earning less than \$100,000 annually, perceptions that aspects



of snowsports were too expensive emerged as the most frequently cited challenge. When broader household financial constraints were considered alongside specific participation costs, nearly two-thirds of lower-income respondents reported being affected by at least one financial barrier.

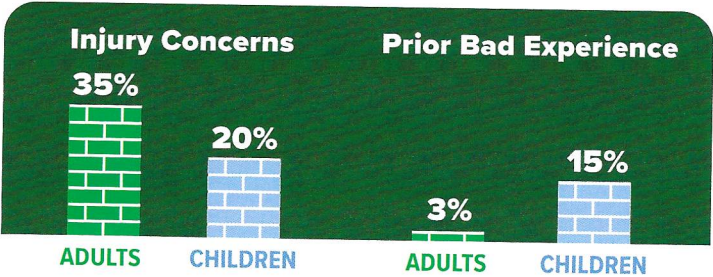
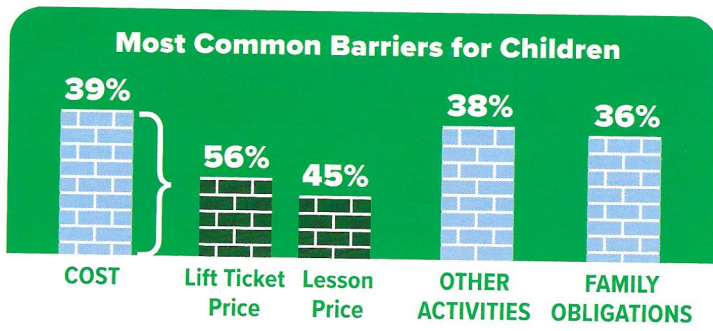
Transportation further amplified these differences. Adults in lower-income households were significantly more likely to report lack of transportation as an obstacle, highlighting that affordability and access are often intertwined.

Where cost came up, lift ticket prices dominated the conversation. Among those with any pricing concern, the vast majority (84%) pointed to lift access, followed by lodging expenses (38%). Lesson costs played a minor role for adults (13%), suggesting that for this group, the financial barrier is driven primarily by access to the mountain.

## Differences by Gender & Ability

Men were more likely to cite family obligations and competing recreational priorities, while women more frequently reported injury or fear thereof. Given well-documented gender differences in knee injury patterns — research published in *Current Issues in Sport Science* found that female skiers experience knee injuries at roughly twice the rate of male skiers, with ACL injury risk nearly three times higher for women — perceived physical risk appears to weigh more heavily in women's participation decisions.

Ability level also shaped how barriers were experienced. Beginners were more likely to view snowsports as competing with other activities, while advanced and expert participants less so, suggesting that prioritization increases as skill and confidence grow. ▶



### Barriers for Children: Competing Demands

Children rarely stop skiing or riding because of interest or motivation. Rather, household circumstances tend to influence their ability to participate. All child-related barriers discussed here reflect parent-reported reasons for their child stepping away from the sport.

Across both lapsed children and those who had taken breaks in the past, the most common barriers were structural. Cost-related concerns ranked highest (39%), followed closely by competing recreational activities (38%) and then life obligations (36%). Broader household financial pressures also played a significant role, selected by about one-quarter of respondents. These patterns point to a consistent theme: Children are not leaving snowsports because they no longer want to ski or ride but because participation becomes difficult for families to sustain alongside other demands.

### Cost Pressures Look Different for Kids

Among families who cited any cost-related barrier for their child, lift ticket prices were mentioned most often (56%). Lesson expenses followed closely behind, cited by 45% of these parents. For many families, instruction is not viewed as optional. Lessons provide structure, supervision and a clear path for skill development, which makes them feel necessary rather than discretionary. Lesson pricing directly affects whether families feel they can keep their child involved.

### Differences by Gender

Slight differences occurred by gender, with boys more commonly citing other recreational activities (41%) and expenses (40%) than girls (35% and 37% respectively). Girls tended to lack the right equipment, clothing or gear more often (23%) than boys (17%).

### Interest Is Not the Barrier

Across all child segments, intrapersonal barriers ranked near the bottom. Very few parents said their child didn't like snowsports, felt like an outsider, disliked winter in general or lacked the skills/knowledge to participate (each 11% or less). These responses reinforce a simple point: Children with exposure to snowsports generally enjoy them. Participation breaks down when external pressures outweigh the family's ability to stay committed.

### Key Differences Between Adults & Children

Many participation barriers overlap between adults and children, but their relative importance differs. Expense-related aspects, for example, ranked as the primary barrier for children while it ranked third behind family obligations and injury-related concerns for adults.

Where differences between age groups become pronounced is in risk and experience. Adults were far more likely to cite injury or fear thereof as a constraint on participation (35%) compared to children (20%). Children, by contrast, appear far more affected by experience, with 15% naming a bad prior experience, unrelated to injury, as their reason for giving up skiing compared to just 3% in adults. While adults fear a future compromised by injury, children are more likely to recall a previous negative experience as a reason to walk away or take time off.

Another major point of divergence between adults and children lies in the role of ski and snowboard lessons. Among respondents who indicated cost as a barrier, 45% of parents reported that the cost of lessons prevented their child from skiing or snowboarding, compared to just 13% of adults citing the same. It is important to note that while lesson cost emerges as a greater barrier for children than for adults, child lessons also make up the majority of all lessons taught nationally, representing a 58% share on average in 2024–25.

### Turning Insights into Action

The results show that people with some level of exposure to snowsports rarely drop out because they lose interest. Participation breaks down when time, cost, risk and logistics start to outweigh the reward of the experience. The opportunity for the industry lies in not convincing people to want to ski but making it easier for them to begin or continue when life gets complicated.

### Cost as a Barrier & a Perception Problem

Cost undeniably shapes participation decisions, but it operates in two ways. For some households, price is a real constraint tied to limited budgets. For others, cost functions more as a perception problem, driven by uncertainty and the industry's

reputation for being expensive, even when lower-cost options exist. In many cases, people disengage before fully understanding what participation would actually cost them. Some operators have responded by reducing uncertainty rather than simply lowering prices. Bundled beginner products, family access packages, and programs that link lessons to future access help make costs predictable and reduce the perceived risk of trying the sport. These approaches do not eliminate cost, but they make participation feel more manageable for first timers and returning participants.

### Access Is More Than Price

Access barriers extend beyond ticket prices. Transportation, travel time and effort emerged as meaningful constraints, particularly for lower-income households and families farther from ski areas. Even when participation is technically affordable, the effort required to plan and execute a ski day can become the deciding factor. Reducing logistical friction can be as impactful as reducing cost. Shared transportation, parking predictability, and bundling gear with access all lower the mental and practical burden of participation. For families balancing work, school and competing activities, feasibility often matters as much or more than price alone.

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### Lessons are a Retention Lever

Few respondents cited lack of skill as a reason for dropping out, yet instruction remains central to retention. For children, lessons function as a gateway. While parents rarely question their child's ability, lesson costs often determine whether participation continues, making instruction less about progression and more about access. Early experiences matter: Children were more likely to step away after a negative experience, suggesting that poorly paced lessons or chaotic ski school logistics can interrupt participation before it becomes routine. Programs that are organized, welcoming and focused on enjoyment help reduce the risk of a bad first impression and increase the likelihood a child wants to return.

For adults, lessons serve a different role. Fear of injury emerged as a major barrier for women. Instruction that emphasizes control, terrain selection, and confidence can reduce perceived risk and support reentry. In some cases, engagement begins before guests even reach the snow, with

guidance on gear, clothing, rentals and what to expect. When done well, lessons influence how risk and overall experience are perceived, making them a practical retention tool even when skill itself is not the stated blocker.

### Participation as a Household

Participation decisions are closely linked within households. Children of adults who have skied or snowboarded are more than four times as likely to participate themselves, reinforcing that adult and youth engagement move together. Reengaging adults may strengthen youth participation, and youth-focused programs can pull parents back into the sport. Treating participants as isolated individuals misses how decisions are actually made. Strategies that accommodate family schedules, reduce parental risk concerns or lower household-level friction are likely to have broader impacts than age-specific efforts alone.

### From Evidence to Practice

Many operators are already testing ways to simplify access, improve beginner experiences and support reentry. The most effective approaches tend to address multiple barriers at once, reflecting how people actually decide whether a ski day feels worth repeating. Rather than asking how to make snowsports cheaper or more appealing in isolation, a more useful question is whether participation feels feasible to sustain. When pricing is predictable, logistics are manageable and early experiences build confidence instead of frustration, people are more likely to come back. Retention depends less on convincing people they should ski and more on making it doable visit after visit, season after season.

### Further Research

NSAA is continuing this work by shifting the focus from attrition to loyalty. While the results in this article help explain why people step away from snowsports, a complete picture of participation also requires understanding what drives people to return. Ongoing research is examining how participant attitudes connect to key behavioral indicators, including intent to return each season, prioritization of snowsports relative to other activities and willingness to recommend the sport to others.

Building on the panel findings, RRC has developed a model

centered on three constructs: involvement, commitment and loyalty. The model explores how these constructs interact and factor into long-term participation. For a deeper dive into the framework and methodology, readers can access the full Loyalty Model white paper by scanning the QR



code or visiting [nsaa.org/WebResources](https://nsaa.org/WebResources).