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# Look at Leisure #36:

## Desired Activities and Barriers to Participation

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Many people would like to take part in recreation activities but they encounter barriers which limit their participation. This bulletin discusses barriers and how they vary for different activities and different segments of the population. The information is based on results of the *Alberta Recreation Survey*, conducted in 1992 by the Alberta Government.

### Introduction

The study of non-participation in recreation is an important research topic in the 80's and 90's. Information about non-participants is valuable for recreation agencies since only a small proportion of community members use municipal recreation services (Howard and Crompton, 1984). This type of research is helping to define who is not participating and some of the reasons why they are not.

It is important to recognize that there are several types of non-participants. Some people may have no interest in participating. Others may have recently ceased participating in an activity. Some non-participants may wish to start an activity, but encounter various obstacles to participation (Jackson and Dunn, 1992).

There are many types of barriers which may influence the use of leisure time. These include external or environmental, internal or personal, and social barriers (Goodale and Witt, 1989). Some barriers may have a temporary effect, while others may be more permanent. Research is helping to identify barriers that agencies may be able to address and those which are likely beyond their control (e.g., Godbey, 1985).

The 1992 *Alberta Recreation Survey* asked respondents about their desire to start participating in a recreation activity. Respondents were also asked about the reasons or barriers preventing their participation. The barriers discussed in this bulletin are therefore those which may interfere between the desire for an activity and the ability to participate.

### Highlights

Highlights from the 1992 *Alberta Recreation Survey*, which are discussed in this issue, include the following:

- ⊙ Almost one-half of those answering the survey wanted to start participating in an activity. Swimming and golf were the two most desired activities.
- ⊙ The desire to start an activity was greatest for females and young adults, and declined with age.
- ⊙ Interest in starting an activity was greatest for those with a high level of current activity.
- ⊙ The most important barriers to participation were cost and lack of time.
- ⊙ The relative importance of barriers, and the types of people experiencing these barriers, has remained quite stable since 1981.

### Desire to Start an Activity

The 1992 *Alberta Recreation Survey* asked respondents if there were any leisure or recreation activities they would like to start doing regularly. Almost one-half of the survey respondents (48.4%) answered "yes". The remaining 51.6% indicated no desire to begin a new activity.

The desire to start an activity differed for various segments of the population. Some of the important patterns were as follows:

- ⊙ More females (54.6%) than males (45.4%) expressed a desire to begin an activity.
- ⊙ There was a marked decline in the desire to begin an activity as age increased, for both males and females. About two-thirds (68.2%) of the young adult group (under 25 years) desired an activity, compared to 23.9% of those 65 years of age or older.
- ⊙ The desire to begin an activity increased with level of education. Lack of desire was particularly associated with those having less than a high school education.
- ⊙ Low-income respondents (reporting household incomes under \$10,000/year) were almost as likely as those with higher incomes to show an interest in starting an activity.

There are many reasons why people may not wish to start an activity. They may simply not be interested or are content with their current range of activities. On the other hand, there may be personal and lifestyle barriers which prevent them from even forming the desire to participate in a leisure activity. The study of these latter types of barriers may be an important research direction for the future (Crawford and Godbey, 1987; Jackson, 1989).

### Types of Desired Activities

Respondents were asked to name the activity they wished to start. In total, more than 70 different pursuits were reported. The ten activities mentioned most frequently are listed in order below:

1. Golf
2. Swimming
3. Physical fitness/aerobics
4. Water sports (water skiing, diving, windsurfing, scuba diving)
5. Cross-country skiing
6. Camping
7. Downhill skiing
8. Tennis
9. Bicycling
10. Boating (sailing, motorboating)

The top two activities - golf and swimming - were by far the most frequently mentioned. It was therefore possible to treat these activities on an individual basis in the analysis.

The rest of the activities were mentioned by a small number of respondents. These individual activities were therefore grouped into six categories for the remaining analyses. The categories are identified in Table 1, along with examples of activities in each group.

**Table 1 - Important Barriers to Participation**

1. **Golf (16.7%)**  
*Main Barriers:* Overcrowding, admission fees, cost of equipment, work and family commitments.
2. **Exercise-Oriented Activities (16.4%)**  
*Examples:* bicycling, ice skating, physical fitness.  
*Main Barriers:* cost of equipment, work and family commitments, admission fees, lack of partners.
3. **Self-Propelled Outdoor Activities (15.9%)**  
*Examples:* backpacking, canoeing, cross-country skiing.  
*Main Barriers:* cost of equipment, no opportunity near home, lack of partners, family and work commitments, overcrowded facilities.
4. **Swimming (13.9%)**  
*Main Barriers:* no opportunity near home, overcrowding, work and family commitments, lack of partners, admission fees.
5. **Resource-Based Outdoor Activities (12.3%)**  
*Examples:* snowmobiling, boating, fishing, horseback riding.  
*Main Barriers:* cost of equipment, admission fees, no opportunity near home, overcrowding, work and family commitments, lack of partners, transportation cost.
6. **Racquet Sports (9.9%)**  
*Examples:* tennis, squash, badminton.  
*Main Barriers:* work and family commitments, no opportunity near home, difficulty finding partners, overcrowded facilities, admission fees, cost of supplies, poor facilities.
7. **Team Sports (6.7%)**  
*Examples:* baseball, basketball, ice hockey, soccer.  
*Main Barriers:* lack of partners, family and work commitments, admission fees, cost of equipment.
8. **Downhill Skiing (5.4%)**  
*Main Barriers:* cost of equipment, admission fees, cost of transportation, no opportunity near home, family and work commitments, overcrowding.
9. **Creative, Cultural, Social and Passive Activities (4.1%)**  
*Examples:* hobbies, attending courses, dancing.  
*Main Barriers:* work and family commitments, no opportunity near home, admission fees.

The percentages of respondents who desired each category of activity are shown in Table 1. Golf was the activity most frequently desired. Just over one-sixth of those interested in starting an activity desired this type of pursuit. Exercise-oriented activities and self-propelled outdoor activities were next in importance. Fewer respondents were interested in taking up team sports, or creative, cultural, social and passive activities.

As might be expected, the types of desired activities varied for males and females and for people of different ages.

- ⊙ Males more frequently wanted to participate in resource-based outdoor activities. Females were more likely to be interested in exercise-oriented activities, swimming, golf, racquet sports, downhill skiing and creative, cultural, social and passive activities.
- ⊙ The desire to participate in more active leisure pursuits, such as exercise-oriented activities, racquet sports, skiing, and team sports was most evident for younger respondents. Older adults were generally attracted to less strenuous forms of recreation. The desire for self-propelled and resource-based outdoor activities was similar across all age groups. The study did show, however, that there are important differences in recreation behaviour within each age group (see below).

## **Current Recreation Activities**

The 1992 *Alberta Recreation Survey* also allowed us to look at respondents' current recreation activities. It was therefore possible to see how the desire to start an activity was linked to current recreation behaviour. About one-half of respondents indicated that they had participated in six to twenty activities in the previous year. The average number of activities per person was 14.

The survey data showed an interesting pattern. The desire to start an activity was greatest for those currently enjoying a wide range of leisure pursuits. Those with fewer current activities showed less of a desire to start another activity. Over 60% of the respondents participating in 26 or more current activities wished to begin an activity. This compares with less than 30% of the respondents reporting five or fewer current activities.

The results also showed that the desired activity tended to be very similar to the respondent's current activities.

There are important differences in recreation behaviour within each age group. On the one hand, there are older respondents who have a high level of participation and a high level of interest in starting an activity. In contrast, there are young adults who have both low levels of participation and low levels of interest in starting an activity.

This type of information is very important for refining our understanding of recreation market segments. We know that age is an important influence on recreation behaviour. However, it is also important to look at the different types of people within each age group, since some may be very active and some may be quite inactive. Different programming and marketing strategies may be needed for these various segments.

## **Importance of Barriers**

What types of barriers can interfere between the desire to start an activity and actual participation?

Cost of equipment and supplies emerged as the most widely felt barrier to participation (for 50.6% of respondents). This was followed by work commitments (47.3%), admission fees, charges (44.5%), and facility overcrowding (39.7%).

It was possible to group the barriers into six categories or dimensions. These were:

- ⊙ Awareness
- ⊙ Accessibility
- ⊙ Personal reasons
- ⊙ Costs
- ⊙ Time commitments
- ⊙ Facilities

Overall, the cost dimension was the most important. This included both equipment and admission costs. This was followed by time commitments and facility reasons such as overcrowding and poor maintenance.

Some barriers may be experienced intensely by relatively few people, while others may be more widespread in their effects. Examples of barriers that are both intensely and widely felt are equipment costs, work commitments, fees and charges, and overcrowded facilities. Being physically unable is an example of a barrier that is intensely felt, but by a small proportion of the population.

## **Barriers And Activities**

The importance of the barriers varied with the type of activity desired. The main obstacles preventing participation in each type of activity are indicated in Table 1 above.

Problems associated with facilities were rated highly by those who would like to take part in swimming, racquet sports, and resource-based activities. Cost barriers were most evident for those interested in skiing, golf and resource-based outdoor activities. Would-be team sport participants were more likely to be affected by awareness problems (such as where to participate).

Overall, people who would like to participate in resource-based activities and skiing were the most severely affected by barriers to participation. Those

interested in swimming, golf, and team sports perceived fewer barriers to their involvement.

## **Who Is Affected By Barriers?**

The study showed that different types of respondents perceive barriers differently. Age and income are the two socio-economic variables most likely to account for differences in the perception of barriers.

Several patterns were observed with regard to age. Physical barriers increased in importance over the life span, while cost factors tended to decrease in importance. Lack of transportation impacted the young and the old. Work and family commitments were particularly important for adults between 25 and 44 years of age. Young adults (under 25) and older adults (65 years or over) encountered barriers of not knowing where to participate or learn the activity, and difficulty finding others with whom to participate. Inability to participate was a problem for the older age group.

The effects of admission, equipment and transportation costs were most strongly felt by those in the lower income categories. On the other hand, the effects of time commitments (associated with family and work) increased in importance as income increased.

The total impact of barriers was also considered. It was found that the overall impact of barriers was greatest for those having incomes below \$30,000/year and those from single-parent households.

## **Trends in the 1980s**

The findings from the 1992 *Alberta Recreation Survey* were compared with those of the 1981 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation* to provide information about trends in the 1980s. Highlights from this comparison include the following:

- ⊙ There was a slight decline in the proportion of respondents indicating a desire for starting an activity, from 1981 (51.1%) to 1992 (48.4%).
- ⊙ Both age and gender were important influences on the type of activity desired.
- ⊙ Exercise-oriented activities ranked highest in both surveys in terms of desired activities. There was a moderate decline in interest for racquet sports and team sports in 1992.
- ⊙ Overall, the perception of barriers was quite similar in both surveys.
- ⊙ The economic constraints of equipment costs and admission fees and charges appear to have increased since 1981.
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- ⊙ Problems of overcrowding of facilities and difficulty in finding partners have probably declined somewhat since 1981.
- ⊙ The types of people most affected by barriers were quite similar in both 1981 and 1992.

## **Implications**

The 1992 *Alberta Recreation Survey* provides information about several aspects of non-participation in recreation. The study of non-participants is important since agencies should have a good understanding of both the users and non-users of their services.

In order to meet the recreation needs of the community, it is necessary to identify the types of activities that people desire. The study has shown that swimming and golf are two activities which have a great deal of interest at the present time. Do you see an increasing demand for these activities in your community?

To attract people to facilities and programs, it is important to know why people are not using these services at present (Howard and Crompton, 1984). The *Alberta Recreation Survey* has identified some of the barriers to participation that agencies may be able to address. Some of these are equipment costs, overcrowding of facilities, and the cost of admission fees and charges. Are these important barriers in your community?

Which recreation activities are most affected by these barriers? Can you develop any innovative approaches to dealing with these types of barriers?

The study has identified that low-income households and single parent families experience the strongest barriers to recreation participation. Has your agency tried to reduce the effects of barriers for these groups? Lack of awareness of program offerings is a significant problem in many communities, particularly among low-income groups (Godbey, 1985). How effective are your promotional and marketing programs in contacting all segments of your community? Do you need to try different approaches for contacting lower income groups?

Studies of non-participation in recreation help agencies to understand the factors which may limit participation in their programs. These types of studies also help to identify groups in the community that encounter obstacles to participation. With such information, agencies providing recreation services may be able to modify their programs and information distribution to reduce the effects of barriers, and ensure that recreation opportunities are available for all segments of the community.

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