FAMILY

What We Lose When We're Priced Out of Our Hobbies

For a lot of people, it's getting too expensive to knit or fish.

By Tyler Austin Harper

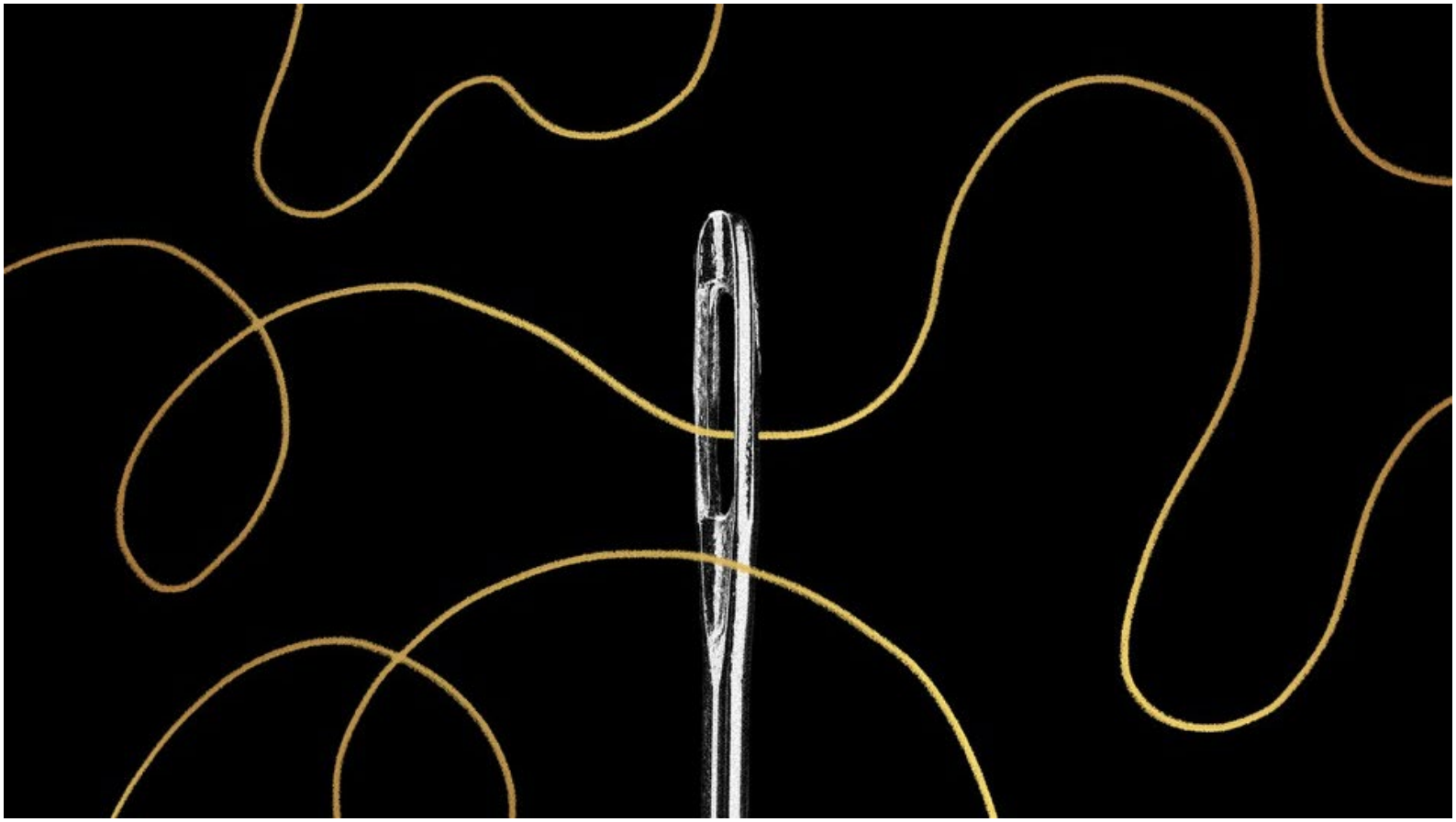

Illustration by Akshita Chandra / The Atlantic. Source: Getty.

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The first time I shot a clay pigeon, it disappeared. I was 12 years old, at a local gun club, where my mother had driven me so I could try my hand at "sporting clays." Meant to simulate hunting, the sport takes place in forests and fields and involves walking from one station to another to shoot—imagine golf, but with guns. That afternoon, I called "Pull" at the first station, and a disc flashed bright orange across the Pennsylvania sky. Tracking the clay clumsily with the barrel of my 12-gauge, I squeezed the trigger, felt the recoil dig sharply into my shoulder, and then watched as the pigeon up and vanished. I lowered the Remington in embarrassment, cheeks aglow, thinking I'd missed. But to my surprise, the man who'd launched the target exclaimed, "Damn, you smoked it!" To smoke a clay, I came to learn, meant to hit it so squarely that it turned to dust.

That day was the start of an obsession, and for the next five years, I spent nearly every weekend shooting sporting clays at that gun club. There, an eclectic crew of regulars took me under their wing: a gruff and heavily scarred but charming former Navy SEAL, a wealthy couple who wore English tweeds and navigated the course in a tricked-out golf cart, an amateur snake handler who kept hibernating copperheads in his beer fridge. I soon found myself deeply immersed in the sport, drawn in as much by the people as by the activity itself.

From roughly 2005 to 2010, I burned through a case of shotgun ammo (250 shells) every week. Target loads then cost about $5 per box of 25, and could be had for less than $40 a case on sale, which meant that, with shooting fees tacked on, this hobby cost me something like $60 a week, or $240 a month, an amount I afforded by

working weekends, with occasional parental subsidies. In the past decade and a half, though, the cost of a sporting-clays habit has more than doubled in many places, far outpacing regular inflation. The hobby will almost certainly get even more expensive once Donald Trump's new tariffs kick in, driving up the cost of raw materials and throwing new kinks in supply chains.

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Shooting is not the only sport that's facing the problem of steep price increases. I think of this dynamic as "hobby inflation," and it has affected quite literally every single one of my favorite recreational activities, including bourbon collecting (where the niche-but-attainable bottles I used to hoard on a meager Ph.D.-student budget have exploded in price) and fishing. And I'm not uniquely unlucky with my choice of pursuits. Hobby inflation can be seen in golf, skiing, indoor climbing, mountain biking, photography, knitting, tabletop games, and theatergoing. Articles and forum posts with titles such as "Why Is [Insert Hobby] So Expensive Now?" have become a genre of writing unto themselves.

This growing exclusivity of leisure pursuits has ramifications that aren't just economic. Gary Alan Fine, a Northwestern University sociologist who has studied a variety of recreational activities, wrote in his book *Players and Pawns: How Chess Builds Community and Culture* that hobbies create "social worlds" that have "an ideology of openness, and a supportive infrastructure." In other words, hobbies can produce communities where, because the hobby itself takes top priority, the participants' social or cultural differences become less important. Surveying my phone's contact list recently, I realized that most of my friends and acquaintances who are not like me—who are much older or much younger, who are richer or poorer, who toil in other lines of work, or who cast their ballots for other kinds of candidates—are people I know from hobbies. Hobby inflation, understood in this light, is about much more than price hikes: It's about the shrinking and possible disappearance of opportunities

for people from different backgrounds to get to know one another.

There is no single explanation for the rising cost of shooting and other hobbies. The causes are various and many of them case-specific, including supply-chain issues, increased popularity as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, rising raw-material costs, and maddening surge pricing. I'm already seeing the impact that new tariffs will have on my fishing habit: Almost immediately after they were announced, Trump's policies began hitting the recreational fishing industry, which relies heavily on Chinese manufacturing for reels, lures, and terminal tackle. The price of the specialized waterproof reels I use to fish for striped bass in New England has already increased by more than $100 at some shops. The effect in the aggregate is that many hobbies that were once accessible to the working and middle classes are effectively out of reach for all but the rich. At the turn of the previous century, the sociologist Robert D. Putnam observed that more and more Americans were bowling alone in our atomized, high-tech culture. Today, when an afternoon of bowling can stretch to hundreds of dollars in some places, many Americans can hardly afford to bowl at all.

Hobby inflation is likely to register (and may already be registering) real social, political, and economic consequences—because not only are hobbies good for the well-being of those who take them up; they also connect people to their communities, help them make new friends, and bring them into contact with people whom, whether by virtue of age, race, or socioeconomic circumstance, they might otherwise have no occasion to know. If we are indeed living in "the anti-social century," as The Atlantic's Derek Thompson has suggested, then the rising cost of hobbies could be part of the story of how many of us became more isolated.

Derek Thompson: The anti-social century

In expectation of an expensive fishing season, I'm dialing down on shooting, just as I

all but gave up bourbon collecting years ago, when pricing became prohibitive. My decisions about what pastimes to pursue as a result of hobby inflation aren't just choices about how to use my time and money. They're choices about whom I spend time with, what communities I invest in or extract myself from, what friendship networks to maintain and which to let wither. Were it not for my hobbies, nearly all of my friends would be highly educated liberal professionals living in the suburbs of a coastal city with cool restaurants. That's far from ideal. But hobby austerity forces people to make hard social decisions and, often, to shrink their circles.

If people like me—a writer-professor with a stable upper-middle-class income—have to make these kinds of compromises, you can rest assured that they hit the middle and working classes much harder. As high costs make hobbies more exclusionary, I worry about how my social world, and our country, will change. A society where communal leisure is more and more unattainable is one that will also likely become lonelier and more intolerant of difference.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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