



Breaking Barriers: Identifying and Overcoming Social Exclusion in Voluntary Sports Clubs for Older Adults Affected by Poverty

Authors' contribution:

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation
- E) obtaining funding

Lukas Oettle^{*A-D} 

Department of Sport and Sport Science, University of Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany

Received: 06.12.2024

Accepted: 24.03.2025

***Correspondence:** Lukas Oettle, Department of Sport and Sport Science, University of Freiburg, Sandfangweg 4 79102 Freiburg, Germany; email: Lukas.oettle@sport.uni-freiburg.de

Abstract

Poverty and social exclusion are intricately linked and can lead to profound health and social repercussions. Participation in voluntary sport clubs (VSCs) could help counteract these consequences, but those affected by poverty are underrepresented.

Thematic analysis of qualitative interviews with 14 participants in a targeted sports programme reveals four key barriers to participation in VSCs: financial costs, stigma, concerns about keeping up physically, and lack of social contacts in VSCs. Beyond financial constraints, participants highlighted the significant impact of stigma related to appearance, physical ability, and social identity, which discouraged participation in mainstream VSCs. These stigma concerns, coupled with fears of not meeting performance expectations, further led individuals to prefer training alongside others in similar life situations. Moreover, the absence of personal connections to VSC members limited participants' awareness of and access to suitable sports opportunities, reinforcing their exclusion from these settings.

The findings emphasise the need for VSCs to adapt their practices to address the multidimensional exclusionary processes faced by people affected by poverty. To enhance VSC access, low-cost and proactive outreach strategies that address concerns related to performance expectations are crucial. Older adults affected by poverty, in particular, seem to benefit from these tailored approaches. Addressing stigma through public awareness and inclusive practices could further enhance participation, while policy interventions supporting these changes would ensure sustainable and equitable access to sports opportunities.

Keywords: inclusion, poverty, social exclusion, sports, stigma

Introduction

Over recent decades, it has become increasingly evident that poverty extends far beyond a lack of financial resources. While poverty is commonly measured by the at-risk-of-poverty rate – referring to individuals earning less than 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income (Eurostat, 2024) – this measure captures only

one dimension of a much broader issue. Poverty extends beyond economic hardship, restricting access to education, culture, health, and sports, thereby limiting full participation in society (Rat der Europäischen Union [Council of the European Union], 2004; Sen, 1999).

This lack of access is closely linked to the concept of social exclusion, a multi-dimensional and cumulative process that systematically marginalises individuals and dis-

connects them from key aspects of social life (Kronauer, 1998; Levitas et al., 2007). Disadvantages such as limited social networks, poorer health and stigma – as well as unemployment, which is strongly connected to both poverty and social exclusion – reinforce one another, deepening social marginalisation (Apostu et al., 2024; Goffman, 1986; Mackenbach et al., 2008; Pohlan, 2019; Rözer et al. 2020). Given that employment not only provides material resources but also fosters social connections, recognition, and daily structure (Böhnke, 2006; Jahoda, 1981; Levitas, 2005), its absence further exacerbates exclusion dynamics. Over time, these reinforcing mechanisms contribute to a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty and exclusion, which can ultimately lead to a gradual decline in the living conditions of those affected (Gallie et al., 2003; Kronauer, 1998; Levitas et al. 2007).

In 2024, the at-risk-of-poverty rate in Germany stood at 15.5% (with more than 16% in the European Union overall), a stark reminder of the magnitude of these challenges across society (Eurostat, 2024; Statistisches Bundesamt [Federal Statistical Office of Germany], 2024). Despite being a longstanding priority on political agendas, poverty remains a persistent challenge with wide-ranging consequences (Bellermann et al., 1993; European Commission, 2022; Kvist, 2016; United Nations, 2015).

While sports programmes do not inherently address poverty, they can help mitigate some of its consequences through their social-integrative and health-promoting effects (e.g. Oettle & Greiner, 2025; Fernández-Gavira et al., 2017). Regular sporting activity is associated with reduced illness rates and improved life expectancy at any age (World Health Organization, 2010). Additionally, participation in sports programmes has been linked to psychological benefits, including self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem (Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al., 2023; Rebar et al., 2015). Beyond the physical and psychological advantages, VSCs are particularly well-suited to fostering social interactions and generating positive individual and community outcomes, such as the development of friendships, enhanced social cohesion, and mutual support (Coalter, 2007; Elmoose-Østerlund et al., 2019; Spaaij, 2009). Ahn et al. (2024) further highlight in their systematic review that group-based physical activity can counteract loneliness.

Enabling access to VSCs for individuals affected by poverty appears relevant from various perspectives. However, if we compare their participation rates with the general population, we observe significantly lower participation levels in VSCs both in Germany and across the European Union (Breuer et al., 2011; Breuer & Wicker, 2008; Collins, 2014; Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Haut & Emrich, 2011; Nagel, 2003; Reid, 2012; Schmiade & Mutz, 2012; Vandermeersch et al., 2015). Why is that?

It seems that poverty in the context of access to VSCs is primarily understood in financial terms, with discounted

membership fees currently representing the most common approach to improving access. In Germany, 41% of surveyed VSCs offer discounted fees (Breuer, 2017), a measure that is also widely implemented across Europe (Corthouts et al., 2020). For instance, initiatives in countries such as the Netherlands and Great Britain provide discounts of up to 50% or even enable free participation for low-income or unemployed individuals (Glyptis, 1991; Reid, 2012; Steenhuis et al., 2009). Another approach to addressing financial barriers is the use of leisure cards, which provide subsidised access to sports facilities and activities for low-income groups (Collins, 2014). This aligns with research that predominantly focuses on income levels rather than a broader conceptualisation of poverty, typically measuring participation gaps based on household income (Breuer et al., 2011; Breuer & Wicker, 2008; Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Haut & Emrich, 2011; Nagel, 2003).

Beyond financial support, relatively little is known about other measures aimed at improving access to VSCs for people affected by poverty. The Community Sports Development Program in Belgium, for example, directly reaches out to individuals through personal visits and tailored support systems to facilitate their participation in the sports programme (Marlier et al., 2014; 2020). Similarly, intersectoral collaboration, as seen in initiatives like Positive Futures in England, brings together social, health, and cultural organisations to establish broader support networks that promote participation for people affected by poverty (Collins & Haudenhuyse, 2015). However, there remains insufficient understanding of why many people still refrain from participating in VSCs despite existing measures.

As VSCs are voluntary, it is particularly important to directly ask people affected by poverty why they do not engage in existing sports opportunities, even when they express an interest in doing so. Understanding their perspectives and experiences is essential for identifying barriers more precisely and designing more effective future measures.

To gain deeper insights into these barriers, this study interviewed participants from beneFit e.V. (beneFit), a VSC based in Southern Germany that explicitly targets people affected by poverty. Since these individuals have expressed an interest in sports within a group setting and only gained access through the targeted programme, they represent a particularly relevant population for examining both facilitating and hindering factors in participation in sports programmes.

This article is structured as follows: The following section will outline the study's objectives. Subsequent segments will delve into the social exclusion experienced by individuals affected by poverty in both society and sports associations, drawing from Kronauer's (1998) framework

and considering the interactions between poverty, social exclusion and health. Since the study sample primarily consists of older and unemployed adults, the dimensions of exclusion are presented with a stronger focus on these demographic groups.

Following this, the study's methodology will be outlined, and the results will be presented and discussed. The article concludes with a discussion and practical implications and an examination of the study's limitations and future research directions.

Research Aim

This study aims to investigate how social exclusion mechanisms associated with poverty influence whether individuals affected by poverty participate in sports associations. Specifically, it explores two central questions: What factors impede the participation of individuals experiencing poverty in sports programmes offered by VSCs, despite their interest in sports within a group? Additionally, what are potential measures to overcome these barriers?

To address these questions, we conducted interviews with 14 adults who self-identify as poor and who had not participated in a sports programme for an extended period. All of them found their way (back) into sports through a targeted sports programme by beneFit, specifically designed for individuals affected by poverty.

Based on the findings, this study seeks to outline both possibilities and limitations for VSCs in engaging (older) adults affected by poverty. These insights may contribute to developing more effective strategies for improving access to VSCs.

Theoretical Frame: Poverty and Social Exclusion and the Consequences for Participation in Sport and Society

Kronauer (1998) describes six dimensions of social exclusion (economic exclusion, cultural exclusion, exclusion by social isolation, exclusion from the labour market, spatial and institutional exclusion) that can impact individuals affected by poverty in various ways. These exclusionary factors interact and cannot be viewed as rigidly separated from one another. In addition, the health status of individuals in the context of social exclusion is significant from two perspectives. On the one hand, social exclusion has a negative impact on health, and on the other hand, poor health increases the extent of social exclusion (e.g. Levitas et al., 2007; Pohlen, 2019).

Economic and institutional exclusion: For individuals living in poverty, engagement in social activities is often massively curtailed due to financial constraints, thereby restricting access to institutional settings, including sport associations (Bittman, 2002; Cantor et al., 2022; Collins, 2014; European Parliament. Directorate General for Parliamentary Research Services, 2016; Spinney & Millward, 2010; Thibaut et al., 2020). Participation in VSCs comes with expenses that extend beyond membership fees, which are relatively low in Germany, averaging around eight euro per month for adults (Breuer & Feiler, 2019). Additional costs arise, such as transportation to the sports facility, as well as expenses for sports clothing and equipment. Data from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy indicate that in 2015, private households in Germany spent approximately 56 billion euros on active sports participation. This corresponds to more than 110 euros per month per household, with over 40% of these expenses allocated to sports clothing and equipment (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie [Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy], 2018). Moreover, individuals with low incomes frequently avoid VSCs to evade potential social costs, such as those associated with socialising after training (Vandermeersch et al., 2017).

Cultural Exclusion: Poverty leads to disengagement from socially accepted patterns of behavior and exposes individuals to social sanctions such as stigma and discrimination. Stigma arises from the discrepancy between a person's actual social identity and the virtual social identity attributed to them by society (Goffman, 1986). According to Goffman (1986), who is regarded as the founder of modern stigma theory, stigma can occur under three conditions: tribal identities (such as ethnicity or gender), abominations of the body (such as physical disabilities or deformities), and blemishes of character (such as addiction, mental illness, or unemployment). More recently, Falk (2001) distinguished between two types of stigma based on their perceived cause. Existential stigma refers to conditions over which a person has little or no control, such as old age, or race. In contrast, achieved stigma applies to conditions that are socially perceived as being the result of an individual's actions, such as unemployment, imprisonment, or immigration. As already outlined in the introduction, poverty can be associated with various forms of social disadvantage, such as unemployment, homelessness, physical and mental health issues, and therefore can lead to multiple stigmas. Consequently, individuals affected by poverty often face stigma from multiple sources, compounding their exclusion and reinforcing negative societal perceptions. A crucial factor in stigma experiences is visibility (Goffman, 1986; Jones et al., 1984). When a stigma is highly visible, such as a facial disfigurement or wearing worn-out or dirty clothing, an individual is discredited – immediately

categorised and judged based on their stigma. In contrast, when a stigma is concealable, such as unemployment or mental illness, a person is discreditable – able to hide their status but constantly at risk of being exposed. Research highlights how poverty-related stigma affects self-perception. A study by Reutter et al. (2009) found that low-income individuals often internalise negative stereotypes, viewing themselves as a burden to society and perceiving themselves as lazy and irresponsible. Chase and Walker (2013) argue that stigmatised individuals often experience feelings of shame, particularly when they accept societal attributions as negative (Goffman, 1986). In response, they may seek to avoid shame at all costs by withdrawing from social interactions that could expose their hardship (Chase & Walker, 2013). Stigma does not only affect self-perception but also manifests in discriminatory behaviors. Discrimination refers to the unjustified and unequal treatment of individuals based on certain characteristics, leading to social devaluation and exclusion (Boshammer, 2008). As a consequence, those affected by poverty-related stigma may face barriers in accessing employment, healthcare, and social services, further deepening their social exclusion.

Exclusion through social isolation and spatial exclusion: Poverty often leads to spatial exclusion, as it tends to concentrate in specific urban areas. At the same time, poverty affects social networks by weakening ties with acquaintances, neighbors, and colleagues, while close relationships with family and friends remain relatively stable (Böhnke & Link, 2017; Rözer et al., 2020). This pattern is particularly evident among unemployed individuals, who lack the social interactions typically gained through employment (Jahoda et al., 2021; Krug et al., 2020). As a result, social networks become smaller and more homogeneous over time, with fewer employed persons in one's network and limited access to broader social circles (Böhnke & Link, 2017). These changes are further reinforced by health problems, which are often associated with poverty and unemployment (Böhnke & Link, 2017; Lindsay, 2009; Kunze & Suppa, 2014). Changes in social networks can lead to a situation where one's own network no longer provides access to sports clubs, as it may itself not be part of a club (Collins, 2014; Jackson, 2000). Additionally, individuals affected by poverty often rely on different information channels, resulting in inadequate awareness of low-cost sports opportunities (Fernández-Gavira et al., 2017; Gregg & Bedard, 2016; Vandermeersch et al., 2017).

The interaction of poverty, social exclusion and health: Poverty has profound psychological and physical consequences. Psychologically, it can lead to feelings of inferiority, destabilise self-esteem, and reduce confidence, motivation, and overall mental well-being (Gedikli et al., 2023; Grobe & Schwartz, 2003; Paul & Moser, 2009;

Virgolino et al., 2022). Physically, individuals living in poverty, particularly those who are affected long-term, are more susceptible to various health diseases, such as coronary, cardiovascular, and respiratory diseases, while their physical capabilities tend to decline significantly (Grobe & Schwartz, 2003; Stauder, 2019). Stigma, as a byproduct of poverty, contributes to health deterioration by reinforcing exclusion and limiting access to health-promoting environments (Major et al., 2018). As individuals age, functional decline and health deterioration become more pronounced, particularly among those affected by poverty (Stenholm et al., 2015; Zaninotto et al., 2020). This risk is especially high for those living alone, as social isolation further exacerbates health deterioration (Lelkes & Zólyomi, 2008; Robards et al., 2012). Physical ability plays a critical role in accessing sports within a group, with better performance facilitating inclusion. However, the competitive and performance-oriented nature of sports within groups often marginalise those who do not meet certain standards (Elling & Claringbould, 2005). Older adults and individuals affected by poverty face heightened exclusion risks, as they are more likely to experience physical and psychological limitations, disabilities, and poor health conditions (Gregg & Bedard, 2016; Jenkin et al., 2017; Spinney & Millward, 2010; Vandermeersch et al., 2017). Consequently, older individuals affected by poverty could face a higher degree of exclusion from sports participation, as their age-related physical decline, combined with the negative health effects of long-term poverty, makes it particularly difficult for them to meet the physical demands of sports.

Labour market exclusion: The social exclusion process also leads unemployed people to experience disadvantages when looking for a job. This can be attributed, among other things, to social network reconfiguration, as jobs are often generated through social contacts (Cingano & Rosolia, 2012; Marsden et al., 2001; Nichols et al., 2013), with active membership in, for example, a VSC being positively associated with employment probability (Krug et al., 2020), and related to physical ability and physical as well as mental health (Hollederer, 2011; Rooth, 2011). Stigma can also affect access to the job market. Visiting job centers, asking friends for job offers or attending job interviews can make it difficult to hide the status of unemployment. A reduced effort in job search can be an option to avoid stigma (Letkemann, 2002). However, beyond individual coping mechanisms, structural disadvantages for stigmatised groups in employment persist, as stigma can lead to discrimination in hiring processes and workplace exclusion (Link & Phelan, 2001).

This study builds on existing knowledge of exclusionary mechanisms in sports programmes and aims to develop a deeper understanding of how different dimensions of social exclusion manifest in VSCs and influence

the sports participation of individuals affected by poverty. At the same time, regular participation in VSCs can help mitigate some of the negative consequences of social exclusion. By analysing both barriers and potential measures to access, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the role of VSCs – both as potentially exclusionary and as inclusive structures.

Methodology – Qualitative Interviews

People affected by poverty who regularly participated in the sports programme of beneFit were interviewed within the framework of a guided interview study.

Setting

beneFit was founded in Freiburg (South Germany) to create access to sports within groups for people affected by poverty. The organisation focuses on removing participation barriers and enabling participants to develop capabilities they find meaningful, without prescribing specific outcomes. In this process, programme development incorporates the interests of the target group, ensuring that their needs and perspectives shape the offerings. beneFit is scientifically accompanied, but funding runs independently, predominantly through foundations, social lotteries and municipal grants. Since its initiation in June 2021, more than 400 people have taken part in this programme (approximately 70 people weekly), many of whom had not participated in a VSC for many years. The programme of the association is aimed explicitly at people affected by poverty from the age of 18 and the dissemination of information about it takes place especially in welfare institutions with a high proportion of people affected by poverty (e.g. housing and unemployment shelters, shelters for refugees, institutions for people with low-income). There is no separation in the courses based on gender or age. To enable the participation of as many people as possible, the courses are offered in a low-threshold manner and without competitive character.

With a wide range of offerings, many interests are covered. At the time of the study, seven different sports courses were taking place once a week (whole-body strength training, kickboxing, street soccer, swimming, Nordic walking, jogging, cycling), in which interested participants could also participate on several dates a week without obligation. The club's trainers primarily hold degrees in sports science, sports education, or social work. Before joining the club, they complete training to work with heterogeneous groups in terms of health, physical condition, age, and gender. They also receive regular feedback from the club's coordinators. Participation in all offers is free of charge and, if required, sports clothing, shoes and equipment are provided free of charge. The

sports activities are located throughout the city, especially in areas with higher proportion of people affected by poverty or directly in welfare institutions.

Participants

Participants of the study had to be at least 18 years old and had to have a sufficient understanding of the German language. To ensure that the course offer was accepted by the respondents, at least three months had to have passed since the first course participation and they had to have taken part in at least 15 training units.

A total of 14 people took part in the study. Of these, seven were female and seven were male. The mean age was 56.6 (± 11.0) years, with the youngest participant being 28 years old and the oldest being 70 years old. The study participants were individuals who take part in beneFit because they felt addressed by the offer, which is specifically designed for people affected by poverty. No direct income data was collected; instead, participation was based on self-identification as poor. This approach was chosen to better capture the subjective experience of poverty. Three key factors that are closely linked to poverty and social exclusion were considered in this study, based on German classifications. Unemployment is defined as working less than 15 hours per week and receiving state benefits. Homelessness means that the person does not have a fixed tenancy agreement and old-age poverty means that the person is retired and dependent on state benefits. It is noteworthy that individuals in old-age poverty are not per definition unemployed, yet they experience similar exclusion from the material and non-material resources provided by employment. Further information of the participating sample can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic data of study participants

Age (n=14)	
Average	56.6 (± 11.0)
Span	28 – 70
Sex (n=14)	
Female	7 (50.0%)
Male	7 (50.0%)
Poverty-associated factors	
Unemployed (n=13)	9 (69.2%)
Average duration	6.6 (± 5.7)
Homeless (n=10)	3 (30.0%)
In poverty in old age (n=14)	5 (35.7%)
Migration background (n=14)	
No	11 (78.6%)
Yes	3 (21.4%)
Marital status (n=14)	
Single living	8 (57.1%)
Divorced	6 (42.9%)

Education (n=13)	
No qualification	
Secondary School Leaving Certificate (Foundation Level)	1 (7.7%)
Secondary School Leaving Certificate (Intermediate Level)	4 (30.8%)
Advanced Level	2 (15.4%)
	6 (46.2%)
Training time in months (n=14)	
Average	5.8 (± 2.5)
Span	3 – 12
Training frequency in units (n=14)	
Average	25.9 (± 8.8)
Span	16 – 50

Notes: Values in brackets are standard deviations or percentages. The educational qualifications are translated from German (*kein Hauptschulabschluss*; *Hauptschulabschluss*; *Mittlere Reife*; *Abitur/Fach- und Hochschulreife*)

Procedure

Before the interviews were conducted, the designed interview guide underwent several rounds of testing for comprehensibility with individuals from the target group during a pilot phase and was subsequently revised. The study leader (LO) is actively involved in coordinating the association, providing the advantage of having already established trust with the participants (Helfferich, 2011). Throughout the study period, participants in the courses who met the inclusion criteria were approached to gauge their interest in participating.

Interested individuals were then informed about the study procedures and provided with an information letter containing further details. The interviews had an average duration of 58 ± 25 minutes and were recorded with participants' prior consent. A semi-structured, open-ended interview approach was used, allowing participants to share their experiences freely while ensuring key topics were covered. Participants were asked about various topics, including the meaning of sports, their points of contact with sports, experiences with VSCs, reasons for leaving VSCs or for previous physical inactivity, reasons for joining beneFit courses, experiences with beneFit and reasons for regular participation. Throughout the interview process, poverty was not explicitly mentioned by the interviewer. Instead, interviewees brought up the topic themselves, and the interviewer followed up with questions on these subjects. Subsequent to the interviews, participants were given a paper-pencil questionnaire to provide sociodemographic information and details about the courses they attended. Both the audio files and questionnaires were assigned a pseudonymisation code. To maintain pseudonymisation, the collected data were sent to a research group member for transcription using f4transcript v7.0.6.

During the transcription process, all information that could lead to the identification of the interviewee

or third-party information provided by the interviewee was anonymised and generalised. For a more descriptive presentation in the results section, pseudonyms were generated from age, gender and origin. The transcription was content-semantically done by JG¹ following Dresing and Pehl (2018) and was subsequently reviewed by LO. Quotations included in this paper for illustrative purposes were translated and grammatically corrected by the author for meaning, then rechecked by a British English native speaker.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed, ensuring that the findings were data-driven while also being interpreted through a theoretical lens. The analysis followed an inductive approach in the initial coding phase, allowing key themes to emerge directly from the data. In the later stages, a deductive alignment was applied, incorporating Kronauer's (1998) six dimensions of social exclusion and research on the interaction between poverty, social exclusion, and health. The analysis process involved two independent researchers (LO, JG). Initially, both researchers immersed themselves in the data by carefully reading and re-reading the transcripts. Following this, each researcher independently generated codes to identify key patterns, concepts, and recurring themes. Through collaborative discussions, they refined and structured these codes into broader thematic categories. These themes were then compared with existing theoretical frameworks to explore overlaps and deepen the interpretation of findings. The iterative nature of thematic analysis allowed for continuous reflection and refinement throughout the process. Finally, the results were reported collaboratively, emphasising the key themes and their significance in relation to the research question.

Results

All of the participants had not participated in any sports programme for several years. Four of the participants had never before participated in a sports programme outside of school sports, and for eight of the participants, the last participation was at least ten years ago, with five of them having last been part of a sports programme in their childhood. Only two participants have been in a sports programme in the past ten years.

During the thematic analysis, four themes were identified as being exclusionary for participants in the context of accessing VSCs, whereas in the beneFit offerings,

¹ The present work was conducted at the Department of Sports and Sport Science at the University of Freiburg and was supported in the analysis process by JG.

these themes were not perceived as exclusionary: Stigma, concerns about keeping up physically, financial costs, and the absence of social contacts in VSCs. By highlighting these topics, we can define perceived barriers in VSCs in contrast to inclusive aspects of a programme tailored for the target group. In the following sections, these topics are presented and illustrated with quotes.

Stigma

The confrontation with stigma in training groups seem to be of particular importance for the participants. In the interviews, it becomes apparent that different types of stigma can occur in sports programmes.

Six of the respondents expressed fears of stigma in VSCs, which they associated with different manifestations of poverty and named this as a central reason for not participating at all. One participant, who was affected by long-term unemployment and homeless at the time of the survey, was worried about getting into conversations about her own living conditions.

“And the other thing is, when you’re homeless, you have different priorities. And, well, it’s hard to engage in sports – it just doesn’t work. There is a bit of a mental block in it. So you really have to say (...) going from such a situation into a club and then being together with people who virtually ask you about your concerns, or you feel partly ashamed and find it difficult. I think that is really the biggest hurdle.” (Petra, 51)

She feels ashamed and insecure about her life situation and worries that others will ask her about it, which make her feel even more uncomfortable. She uses the term ‘mental block’ to describe this feeling, which suggests that it is a psychological barrier that is preventing her from participating in VSCs. To avoid these fears, she expressed as a solution: ‘... so I would rather start the job first, so that questions don’t arise in the club.’ This indicates that unless there is a change in her own life situation, the woman perceives herself as unable to participate in a VSC.

Some participants also expressed concerns about standing out visually. They feel pressured to conform to specific standards of appearance. For example, one participant, who had never been to a VSC himself, mentioned that he believed he would always be compared to others in a VSC based on who wore the best clothes. Another participant made a humorous remark about the possibility of receiving a ‘house ban’ (Thomas, 70) for wearing his usual clothes in training. This remark highlights the worries the man has about experiencing exclusion when he does not adhere to the expected norms.

The same participant had previously attempted to join a VSC but was insulted and devalued due to his life situation. He expressed that he was requested by a person

with ‘Hey, shorty, run a long.’ to fetch something for him. In this context, it is a disrespectful and discriminatory request towards an adult person due to his appearance or perceived social standing.

In addition to stigma directly linked to poverty or unemployment, some participants also reported experiencing stigma related to physical ability. Elke, for example, described VSC participants as ‘perfect people’, whereas she assumed even before registering that the participants at beneFit would not be perfect:

“I have confidence in myself because the others aren’t perfect either, and that gives me a bridge. So it’s actually positive for me that the others aren’t perfect either; it helps me. It’s better for me when not everyone is an athlete and they are all really great.” (Elke, 56)

With regard to the sports programme offered by beneFit, the majority of the participants expressed a positive opinion, as it was explicitly aimed at people affected by poverty and thus removed the participants’ inhibitions and fears. Some participants already associated an expectation of belonging to the group when they signed up via the leaflets in terms of social status and physical performance requirements

“So the keyword is ‘for poor people’, and since I’m not rich, I realised that this is a certain clientele I fit into, and that gave me the courage to sign up there.” (Stephan, 62)

This statement showcases how individuals may seek spaces or opportunities where they feel a sense of connection or understanding based on shared experiences or circumstances. It reflects the importance of environments where people can feel comfortable and supported, especially when facing financial constraints or societal judgements.

In participating in sports activities with people who share a similar background, participants also see special opportunities to share similar life experiences. In this context, the sports programme provided by beneFit is perceived as a space that can foster encounters that may not occur in the everyday lives of people affected by poverty.

“And of course, there’s also the social aspect, that I’m now with people who are in a similar situation as me and that we can share our experiences with each other. Normally, you tend to avoid each other in such situations.” (Mathias, 57)

The participants from beneFit were also supported by the trainers, who treated them respectfully and at eye level, so that they did not feel that their own life situation

played a special role. This allows them to feel safe and be themselves without the need to pretend.

“You don’t come in here and ask “what kind of people are these”, but just say, “hey, how are you?” and perceive us as just normal people You can have fun, experience criticism, or chat, just like normal. That’s what I worry about when I go to a club now in my situation.” (Petra, 51)

Concerns About Keeping up Physically

Concerns about physical performance appear to play a structurally significant role, particularly for older participants, and is a reason why they tend to avoid the regular sports programmes and opt for the offerings from beneFit. Three participants are of the opinion that their physical performance and mental condition is not sufficient to keep up with other groups in VSCs. Notably, all of these participants had never previously been part of a VSC.

“(…) I would not have dared to do it because I was just in very bad physical condition, and I wouldn’t have had the courage to do it,” said Elke, 56. She further explained, ‘I wouldn’t have been mentally able to go to a regular club. That would have put me under too much stress, (…).’ (Elke, 56)

Svenja (38) expressed a similar view, highlighting the competitive nature of VSCs: ‘That was always the main focus – winning.’

Especially for older participants like Elke, the combination of age-related physical limitations and the psychological strain of trying to meet performance expectations in a sports programme can feel overwhelming. Many of the participants at beneFit are older or have health issues and have often experienced long periods of physical inactivity, which amplifies their concerns. beneFit provides them with a space where they can participate without the pressure to perform, allowing them to focus on their well-being at their own pace.

“Well, I find it to be a nice framework for myself because I trust myself to listen to my own body within that framework. So, if it becomes too much for me, I allow myself to take a step back.” (Elke, 56)

This positive attitude towards beneFit’s offerings is largely due to the fact that participants do not feel they need to meet strict performance expectations. The individual needs of participants are respected, enabling them to participate at a level that feels manageable.

“There’s no pressure to perform that’s imposed on everyone. Instead, everyone just does what they can,

and I think that’s actually a good thing. It’s great that everyone can just do their own thing.” (Dieter, 65)

beneFit emphasises during recruitment that everyone can participate according to their own abilities, a message consistently reinforced by the trainers. This inclusive approach fosters an environment where participants feel comfortable engaging in sports within a group without fear of judgment or pressure to meet high-performance standards.

Financial Costs

Six of the participants said that they did not have the confidence to cope with the costs that arise, especially when starting a sports programme, but also the continuous costs. Most of the participants had hardly been active in sports in the past years and thus did not have the necessary sports clothing and shoes. Expenses can be high, especially at the beginning when equipment and clothing need to be purchased. The participants also see the regular membership fees as challenging and not to be managed without saving money in other areas of life. One participant also added that it is difficult to build up social contacts in VSCs without incurring additional expenses.

“If you want to make connections, you have to spend money and sit around drinking and doing all sort of things. Plus, you have to pay the new membership fees again and again. And in the end, you also have to pay for the clothes.” (Thomas, 70)

Accordingly, beneFit’s offering is also described as accessible as there are no financial costs incurred for participation. The participants appreciate the opportunity to participate for free and also the provision of sportswear. One participant saw herself additionally motivated to participate in the sports programme by the provision of sportswear:

“... , I can hardly afford to spend money because I earn so little right now, so I try to avoid any expense. When I got something like that, it was a great thing. It gave me even more motivation.” (Beate, 64)

Absence of Social Contacts in VSCs

When asked why the participants had not previously participated in other sports activities, two participants stated that the absence of social contacts who are already members of VSCs hindered their access to such clubs.

“In my case, the housing situation has contributed to the fact that I haven’t made any connections. Maybe if I had always lived in the same district or lived there now, then I would have been able to make some connections, but that’s not the case.” (Thomas, 70)

In contrast, for five participants, the notice in a facility they regularly visit, which supports unemployed and homeless individuals, seems to have been a relevant factor that made their participation in the course programme possible. Some of the participants were not explicitly looking for a sports programme, but were rather confronted with it by chance and became interested. '... there were some notes lying here and I read through them. Then I said, spontaneously, 'That's nice!' (Inge, 67) These more incidental accesses to the sports programme are based on the fact that the leaflet were displayed in the facilities visited by the participants. Information about other sports programmes is less likely to be available in welfare institutions.

Discussions and Practical Implications

The objective of this study was to examine how social exclusion mechanisms associated with poverty affect the participation of individuals experiencing poverty in VSCs. Based on the findings, this discussion reflects on the key barriers identified and explores potential pathways to enhance access to sports programs for this target group.

The results of the study indicate that the study participants perceive various exclusionary factors in participating in VSCs, which, from their perspective, do not occur in the beneFit programme. It became clear that exclusion in VSCs is closely tied to broader dimensions of social exclusion in everyday life, as described by Kronauer (1998).

Stigma emerged as a particularly pervasive barrier, aligning with Kronauer's dimension of cultural exclusion. Participants often faced stigma in their everyday lives, leading to coping mechanisms such as social isolation to avoid judgement (Goffman, 1986; Reutter et al., 2009). This cultural exclusion extends into sports within groups, where fears of judgement or exposure discourage participation. In addition to stigma associated with poverty and unemployment, specific stigma related to physical ability appears to be present in sports settings. Participants expected the training group at beneFit to consist of individuals with physical limitations, despite the fact that the programme leaflet exclusively addressed poverty rather than physical condition. This suggests that participants may have internalised stereotypical ideas about who engages in poverty-focused sports programmes. Interestingly, athletes were described as 'perfect people', reinforcing a perceived difference between themselves and physically active individuals. This separation between 'us' and 'them' is also reflected in the findings of Chase and Walker (2013), who highlight how individuals affected by poverty often construct a social divide. This distinction suggests that participants may have internalised an idealised image of people who engage in sports programmes. In line with Goffman's (1986) types of stigma, it becomes evident that participants not only fear stigma due to blemishes of

character (e.g., unemployment) but also due to abominations of the body (e.g., physical limitations). The visibility of stigma plays a crucial role in this process (Goffman, 1986; Jones et al., 1984). Some aspects of poverty are immediately visible in VSCs – such as worn-out clothing – while others, like unemployment, remain concealed unless disclosed. This distinction reflects different risks of exposure, which may shape participation decisions. Taken together, the findings suggest that individuals affected by poverty perceive multiple risks of stigma in VSCs, leading them to avoid these spaces altogether. While targeted sports programmes may unintentionally reinforce social exclusion by isolating participants within familiar circles, their benefits should not be underestimated. Beyond providing access to sports within groups, such initiatives create opportunities for social interactions, for example, between trainers and participants, which can contribute to reducing stigma. Studies show that direct contact with stigmatised groups can lead to attitude changes among those who hold stigmatising views (e.g., Brown et al., 2003). Given the broad societal reach of sports, VSCs could serve as valuable settings for stigma reduction, provided they actively foster an inclusive and diverse environment. In this context, public sports events such as the Homeless World Cup and national street football tournaments deserve greater attention. These events provide marginalised groups with public visibility, challenge prevailing stereotypes, and contribute to shifting societal perceptions. Moreover, participation in sports programmes can counteract common stigma against people affected by poverty – such as laziness or lack of willpower – by contrasting these with the characteristics typically attributed to athletes, such as motivation, resilience, and physical activity. From a policy perspective, tackling stigma in sports requires integrated strategies that challenge deeply rooted societal attitudes. Public awareness campaigns, similar to those in anti-discrimination efforts, could help normalise the participation of marginalised groups in sports programmes. Funding bodies should prioritise programmes that not only facilitate access to sports but also actively challenge stereotypes, encouraging VSCs to develop targeted strategies to promote diversity and inclusion. Additionally, regulatory measures, such as sensitivity training for staff and inclusive policies within VSCs, could help foster a culture of respect and belonging.

The present study suggests that physical performance is exclusionary not only as a category of stigma but also in relation to *concerns about keeping up physically*. Participants, many of whom face physical limitations and psychological challenges, expressed concerns about meeting the physical demands in VSCs. Although the programme at beneFit is open to all people affected by poverty, the data revealed that older adults were particularly drawn to it, as it likely addresses, in a special way, the barriers faced

by older individuals or those with physical and mental health challenges. This is likely due to its low-threshold and non-competitive nature, which contrasts with the performance pressures often encountered in VSCs. While this issue also affects younger people with health impairments or lower performance levels, it is particularly significant for older adults affected by poverty, as this group is especially prone to health problems (Jenkin et al., 2017; Stenholm et al., 2015; Zaninotto et al., 2020). The results of this study give reason to consider the performance requirement here as relative to the external conditions. Even though sport has undergone a change in recent decades and the role of competitive sport, which is particularly performance-oriented, has diminished due to the political objective of 'Sport for All' (Ibsen et al., 2016), physical performance in sports programmes is still considered as both an inclusive and exclusionary factor (Elling & Claringbould, 2005). In order for everyone to be able to participate, it is recommended that inclusive offers be expanded with regard to performance requirements. During the recruitment process, fears regarding high performance expectations should already be addressed. In training, coaches play a significant role in shaping the content, making it crucial to provide training for coaches on inclusive training content. *Financial costs* represent a significant barrier to participation in VSCs, aligning with Kronauer's dimension of economic exclusion. As highlighted in previous research, the expenses associated with sports programmes extend far beyond membership fees and include costs for equipment, transportation, and social participation – such as post-training gatherings (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie [Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy], 2018; Vandermeersch et al., 2017). In this study, for the participants, a pressing financial challenge appeared to be the lack of basic sports equipment, such as suitable sportswear or shoes, which significantly hindered their access to sports. Many participants had little to no prior experience in sports and therefore did not own the necessary gear, making initial participation financially burdensome. Even when sports programmes were offered free of charge, the inability to afford appropriate clothing and footwear often became a decisive entry barrier. At beneFit, it became evident that, in addition to providing free access to sports courses, the availability of secondhand sports equipment plays a crucial role in reducing financial barriers. By offering sports clothes and shoes, upfront costs for participants can be significantly minimised, making engagement in sports more feasible. While this approach is not yet widely implemented, it represents a practical strategy to enhance accessibility. However, its success depends on organisational capacities, as the collection, management, and distribution of secondhand sports equipment require structured implementation. Furthermore, some municipalities and job

centers in Germany provide financial assistance to cover membership fees, partially alleviating costs for individuals with low incomes. However, it can be assumed that many people do not know about this or the bureaucratic effort is too high. By actively advertising this by VSCs, the utilisation rate of these cost transfers could be increased. At the same time, beneFit's experience shows that participants who have been involved for a longer period often express interest in becoming official club members and are willing to pay a membership fee (typically 10–50€ per year). These experiences support the notion that membership fees are only one aspect of financial accessibility, with the overall financial burden of sports participation – particularly the cost of sports equipment – playing a more significant role in exclusion from VSCs.

At least in the present study, it became evident, that in some cases access to VSCs is lacking due to the *absence of social contacts in VSCs*. This aligns with the concepts of exclusion through social isolation and spatial exclusion. Whereas in the context of jobs, one's own social network is often a supporting factor, especially when they themselves are employed (Cingano & Rosolia, 2012; Marsden et al., 2001; Nichols et al., 2013), a similar effect can be found for VSCs in this study, which is partly not available for the participants. If, in addition to this, the information channel of sports programmes is not sufficient, it can have an exclusionary effect (Gregg & Bedard, 2016; Vandermeersch et al., 2017). To counteract these dynamics, it could be beneficial to ensure that information about sports programmes reaches potential participants through targeted outreach. For example, placing information in welfare institutions or other spaces frequently visited by individuals living in poverty might help bridge this gap. Such approaches could particularly support people with smaller social networks, potentially enabling them to access opportunities independently of personal contacts. This strategy could address both spatial and social dimensions of exclusion, contributing to more equitable access to sports programmes.

The findings of this study emphasise the need for multi-layered policy approaches to address barriers in sports participation for individuals affected by poverty. Stigma and performance expectations represent deeply entrenched challenges that require targeted interventions at both organisational and systemic levels. By prioritising funding, training, and inclusive outreach strategies, policymakers can ensure that VSCs become a genuinely accessible avenue for promoting health, social inclusion, and well-being among marginalised populations.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

One limitation of this study pertains to the researcher's involvement in the beneFit programme. While the established relationship with participants may have facilitated

more open disclosures of personal feelings and perceptions due to familiarity (Helfferich, 2011), this closeness might also have influenced participants to present a more favorable view of the programme, potentially introducing bias into the results.

Furthermore, limitations arise from the sample size and socio-demographic composition of participants. While a larger sample size would have been preferable, practical constraints such as frequent language barriers, particularly among individuals with a refugee background, and a fundamental lack of interest in participating in the study made this unattainable.

Consequently, the study's findings cannot be generalised to the broader population affected by poverty. Furthermore, the sample reflects a trend also observed in beneFit's offerings, as older adults tend to participate more frequently. Therefore, the findings provide insights into a specific subgroup and cannot be generalised to the broader population affected by poverty. However, the study offers unique insights into a particularly underrepresented group in poverty research—namely older, unemployed adults and individuals with health-related challenges.

The diversity within poverty-affected populations – including variations in age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic conditions – remains insufficiently explored. Further investigations could examine how these factors intersect with barriers to sports participation. Comparative studies across different demographics and settings would enhance the broader applicability of these findings. For instance, analysing similar programmes in different regions or among younger populations could reveal both universal and context-specific exclusionary factors. While this study focused on VSCs, examining other organisational settings, such as public institutions or commercial providers, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of accessible sports opportunities for individuals affected by poverty. To deepen insights into non-participation, upcoming studies should also consider individuals who have not yet engaged in any sports programmes but express an interest in doing so. Understanding their perceptions and motivations could help design more inclusive and appealing initiatives. Given that stigma emerged as a central barrier, future inquiries could assess practical solutions to mitigate judgment fears, such as sensitivity training for VSC staff or public awareness campaigns.

By addressing these gaps, future studies can provide a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between poverty, social exclusion, and participation in VSCs, informing policies and practices that support equitable access to sports for all.

Ethics approval and informed consent

The study was ethically approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Freiburg in March 2022 with

the number 22–1024. Informed consent was obtained from the participants before the start of the study. The participants did not receive any compensation or incentives for participating in the study. Furthermore, there were no disadvantages in the context of the sports program if someone did not want to participate in the study. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the study leader, actively involved in coordinating the association, maintained transparency regarding the dual role to uphold research integrity.

Competing interests

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Funding

This work was supported only by the author.

Acknowledgments

I deeply appreciate the contributions of all participants of the study and would also like to thank Jörg Greiner for his invaluable support in data analysis.

References

- Ahn, J., Falk, E. B., & Kang, Y. (2024). Relationships between physical activity and loneliness: A systematic review of intervention studies. *Current Research in Behavioral Sciences*, 6, article 100141. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crbeha.2023.100141>
- Apostu, S.-A., Dimian, G.-C., & Vasilescu, M. (2024). An in-depth analysis of the relation of health and poverty in Europe. *Panoeconomicus*, 71(2), 215–242. <https://doi.org/10.2298/PAN.210622006A>
- Appelqvist-Schmidlechner, K., Haavanlammi, M., & Kekkonen, M. (2023). 'Benefits and Underlying Mechanisms of Organized Sport Participation on Mental Health among Socially Vulnerable Boys. A Qualitative Study on Parents' Perspective in the Sport-Based Icehearts Programme'. *Sport in Society*, 26(2), 245–262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2021.1996348>
- Bellermann, M., Hanesch, W., Huster, E.-U., & Krummacker, M. (1993). *Observatory on national policies to combat social exclusion: Social exclusion in the Federal Republic of Germany. Consolidated report 1990–1992*. European Commission.
- Bittman, M. (2002). Social participation and family welfare: The money and time costs of leisure in Australia. *Social Policy & Administration*, 36(4), 408–425. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9515.t01-1-00262>
- Böhnke, P. (2006). *Am Rande der Gesellschaft: Risiken sozialer Ausgrenzung*. Edition Recherche. B. Budrich.
- Böhnke, P., & Link, S. (2017). Poverty and the dynamics of social networks: An analysis of German panel data. *European Sociological Review*, 33(4), 615–632. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcx063>

- Boshhammer, S. (2008). Diskriminierung. In S. Gosepath, B. Rössler, & W. Hinsch (Eds), *W. Handbuch der politischen philosophie und sozialphilosophie* (2 bände, pp. 232–238). De Gruyter.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Breuer, C., & Wicker, P. (2008). Demographic and economic factors influencing inclusion in the German sport system – a microanalysis of the years 1985 to 2005. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 5(1), 33–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2008.11687807>
- Breuer, C., Hallmann, K., & Wicker, P. (2011). Determinants of sport participation in different sports. *Managing Leisure*, 16(4), 269–286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13606719.2011.613625>
- Breuer, C. (Ed.). (2017). *Analyse zur Situation der Sportvereine in Deutschland*. Sportverlag Strauß.
- Breuer, C., & Feiler, S. (with Deutsche Sporthochschule Köln, Institut für Sportökonomie und Sportmanagement). (2019). *Sportvereine in Deutschland: Organisationen und personen: sportentwicklungsbericht für Deutschland 2017/2018 – Teil 1*. Bundesinstitut für Sportwissenschaft.
- Brown, L., Macintyre, K., & Trujillo, L. (2003). Interventions to reduce HIV/AIDS stigma: What have we learned? *AIDS Education and Prevention*, 15(1), 49–69. <https://doi.org/10.1521/aeap.15.1.49.23844>
- Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie (2018). *Sportwirtschaft – Fakten & Zahlen*. Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie.
- Cantor, P., Polakowska, M., Proietti, A., Tran, V., Lebire, J., & Roy, L. (2022). Leisure possibilities of adults experiencing poverty: A community-based participatory study. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 89(2), 103–114. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00084174211073266>
- Chase, E., & Walker, R. (2013). The co-construction of shame in the context of poverty: Beyond a threat to the social bond. *Sociology*, 47(4), 739–754. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038512453796>
- Cingano, F., & Rosolia, A. (2012). People I know: Job search and social networks. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 30(2), 291–332. <https://doi.org/10.1086/663357>
- Coalter, F. (2007). Sports clubs, social capital and social regeneration: ‘Ill-defined interventions with hard to follow outcomes’? *Sport in Society*, 10(4), 537–559. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430430701388723>
- Collins, M. F. (2014). *Sport and social exclusion* (second edition). Routledge.
- Collins, M. F., & Haudenhuyse, R. (2015). Social exclusion and austerity policies in England: The role of sports in a new area of social polarisation and inequality? *Social Inclusion*, 3(3), 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v3i3.54>
- Corthouts, J., Thibaut, E., Breuer, C., Feiler, S., James, M., Goig, R. L., Perényi, S., & Scheerder, J. (2020). Social inclusion in sports clubs across Europe: Determinants of social innovation. *Innovation*, 33(1), 21–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2019.1637247>
- Dresing, T., & Pehl, T. (2018). *Praxisbuch interview, transkription & analyse: Anleitungen und regelsysteme für qualitativ forschende* (8. auflage). Eigenverlag.
- Elling, A., & Claringbould, I. (2005). Mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in the Dutch sports landscape: Who can and wants to belong? *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 22(4), 498–515. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.22.4.498>
- Elmose-Østerlund, K., Seippel, Ø., Llopis-Goig, R., Van Der Roest, J.-W., Adler Zwahlen, J., & Nagel, S. (2019). Social integration in sports clubs: Individual and organisational factors in a European context. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 16(3), 268–290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2019.1652382>
- European Commission (2022). *Commission welcomes Member States' targets for a more social Europe by 2030*. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/ip_22_3782/IP_22_3782_EN.pdf
- European Parliament. Directorate General for Parliamentary Research Services (2016). *Armut in der Europäischen Union: die Krise und ihre Folgen: eingehende Analyse*. Publications Office. <https://doi.org/10.2861/73307>
- Eurostat (2024). Living conditions in Europe – poverty and social exclusion. Statistics Explained. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion&oldid=584082#Poverty_and_social_exclusion
- Falk, G. (2001). *Stigma: How we treat outsiders*. Prometheus Books.
- Fernández Gavira, J., Huete García, Á., & Velez-Colon, L. (2017). Vulnerable groups at risk for sport and social exclusion. *Journal of Physical Education and Sport*, 17(1), 312–326. <https://doi.org/DOI:10.7752/jpes.2017.01047>
- Gallie, D., Paugam, S., & Jacobs, S. (2003). Unemployment, poverty and social isolation: Is there a vicious circle of social exclusion? *European Societies*, 5(1), 1–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461669032000057668>
- Gedikli, C., Miraglia, M., Connolly, S., Bryan, M., & Watson, D. (2023). The Relationship between Unemployment and Well-being: An Updated Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Evidence. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 32(1), 128–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2022.2106855>
- Glyptis, S. (1991). Local authority sports provision for the unemployed: The UK experience. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 26(2), 101–115.
- Goffman, E. (1986). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity* (1. Touchstone ed.). Simon & Schuster.
- Gregg, M., & Bedard, A. (2016). Mission impossible? Physical activity programming for individuals experiencing homelessness. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 87(4), 376–381. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2016.1233314>
- Grobe, T. G., & Schwartz, F. W. (2003). *Arbeitslosigkeit und Gesundheit*. Gesundheitsberichterstattung des Bundes, Issue 13. Robert Koch-Inst.
- Haut, J., & Emrich, E. (2011). Sport für alle, sport für manche: Soziale Ungleichheiten im pluralisierten sport. *Sportwissenschaft*, 41(4), 315–326. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12662-011-0214-8>

- Helfferrich, C. (2011). *Die qualität qualitativer daten*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-92076-4>
- Holleder, A. (2011). Resümee. In A. Holleder, *Erwerbslosigkeit, gesundheit und präventionspotenziale* (pp. 246–250). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-92636-0_7
- Ibsen, B., Nichols, G., & Elmoose-Østerlund, K. (2016). *Sports club policies in Europe: A comparison of the public policy context and historical origins of sports clubs across ten European countries*. University of Southern Denmark.
- Jackson, E. (2000). Will research on leisure constraints still be relevant in the twenty-first century? *Journal of Leisure Research*, 32(1), 62–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2000.11949887>
- Jahoda, M., Lazarsfeld, P. F., & Zeisel, H. (2021). *Die arbeitslosen von Marienthal: Ein soziographischer versuch über die wirkungen langandauernder arbeitslosigkeit: mit einem anhang zur geschichte der soziographie* (28. auflage). Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Jenkin, C. R., Eime, R. M., Westerbeek, H., O'Sullivan, G., & Van Uffelen, J. G. Z. (2017). Sport and ageing: A systematic review of the determinants and trends of participation in sport for older adults. *BMC Public Health*, 17(1), 976. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-017-4970-8>
- Jones, E. E. (Ed.). (1984). *Social stigma: The psychology of marked relationships*. Freeman.
- Kronauer, M. (1998). 'Social exclusion' and 'underclass': New concepts for the analysis of poverty. In H. J. Andress (Ed.), *Empirical poverty research in a comparative perspective* (pp. 51–75). Ashgate.
- Krug, G., Wolf, C., & Trappmann, M. (2020). Soziale netzwerke langzeitarbeitsloser und die aufnahme einer erwerbstätigkeit. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 48(5–6), 349–365. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfsoz-2019-0025>
- Kunze, L., & Suppa, N. (2014). *Bowling alone or bowling at all? The effect of unemployment on social participation*. SOEP-papers on Multidisciplinary Panel Data Research, 703. DIW. <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/103969>
- Kvist, J. (2016). *Fighting poverty and exclusion through social investment: A European research perspective: A policy review*. Publications Office of the European Union.
- Lelkes, O., & Zólyomi, E. (2008). *Poverty across Europe: The latest evidence using the EU-SILC survey*. European Centre.
- Letskemann, P. (2002). Unemployed professionals, stigma management and derivative stigmata. *Work, Employment and Society*, 16(3), 511–522. <https://doi.org/10.1177/095001702762217461>
- Levitas, R. (2005). *The inclusive society?: Social exclusion and new labour* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Levitas, R., Pantazis, C., Fahmy, E., Gordon, D., Lloyd, E., & Pattison, D. (2007). *The Multi-Dimensional Analysis of Social Exclusion*. University of Bristol.
- Lindsay, C. (2010). In a lonely place? Social networks, job seeking and the experience of long-term unemployment. *Social Policy and Society*, 9(1), 25–37. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746409990170>
- Link, B. G., & Phelan, J. C. (2001). Conceptualizing stigma. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27(1), 363–385. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.363>
- Mackenbach, J. P., Stirbu, I., Roskam, A.-J. R., Schaap, M. M., Menvielle, G., Leinsalu, M., & Kunst, A. E. (2008). Socioeconomic inequalities in health in 22 European countries. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 358(23), 2468–2481. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMsa0707519>
- Major, B., Dovidio, J. F., Link, B. G., & Calabrese, S. (2018). Stigma and its implications for health: Introduction and overview. In B. Major, J. F. Dovidio, & B. G. Link, *The Oxford Handbook of Stigma, Discrimination, and Health* (pp. 3–28). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190243470.001.0001>
- Marlier, M., Cardon, G., De Bourdeaudhuij, I., & Willem, A. (2014). A capacity building approach to increase sports participation in disadvantaged urban communities: A multilevel analysis. *Journal Of Urban Health*, 91(6), 1114–1128. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-014-9879-2>
- Marlier, M., Constandt, B., Schyvinck, C., De Bock, T., Winand, M., & Willem, A. (2020). Bridge over troubled water: Linking capacities of sport and non-sport organizations. *Social Inclusion*, 8(3), 139–151. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v8i3.2465>
- Marsden, P., & Gorman, E. (2001). Social networks, job changes, and recruitment. In I. Berg, & A. L. Kalleberg (eds), *Sourcebook of Labor Markets* (pp. 467–502). Springer US. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-1225-7_19
- Nagel, M. (2003). *Soziale Ungleichheiten im Sport*. Meyer & Meyer.
- Nichols, A., Mitchell, J., & Lindner, S. (2013). *Consequences of long-term unemployment*. Urban Institute.
- Oettle, L., & Greiner, J. (2025). Coping with poverty and social exclusion: Promoting capabilities through long-term sports participation. *Social Inclusion*, 13, 8341. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8341>
- Paul, K., & Moser, K. (2009). Unemployment impairs mental health: Meta-analyses. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 74(3), 264–282. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2009.01.001>
- Pohlan, L. (2019). Unemployment and social exclusion. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 164, 273–299. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2019.06.006>
- Rat der Europäischen Union (2004). *Gemeinsamer Bericht der Kommission und des Rates über die soziale Eingliederung*.
- Rebar, A. L., Stanton, R., Geard, D., Short, C., Duncan, M. J., & Vandelandotte, C. (2015). A meta-meta-analysis of the effect of physical activity on depression and anxiety in non-clinical adult populations. *Health Psychology Review*, 9(3), 366–378. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2015.1022901>
- Reid, F. (2012). Increasing sports participation in Scotland: Are voluntary sports clubs the answer? *International Journal Of Sport Policy*, 4(2), 221–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2012.662691>
- Reutter, L. I., Stewart, M., Veenstra, G., Love, R., Raphael, D., & Makwarimba, E. (2009). 'Who do they think we are, anyway?': Perceptions of and responses to poverty stigma.

- Qualitative Health Research*, 19(3), 297–311. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732308330246>
- Robards, J., Evandrou, M., Falkingham, J., & Vlachantoni, A. (2012). Marital status, health and mortality. *Maturitas*, 73(4), 295–299. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.maturitas.2012.08.007>
- Rözer, J. J., Hofstra, B., Brashears, M. E., & Volker, B. (2020). Does unemployment lead to isolation? The consequences of unemployment for social networks. *Social Networks*, 63, 100–111. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2020.06.002>
- Rooth, D. (2011). Work out or out of work – the labor market return to physical fitness and leisure sports activities. *Labour Economics*, 18(3), 399–409. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2010.11.006>
- Schmiade, N., & Michael, M. (2012). Sportliche eltern, sportliche kinder: Die sportbeteiligung von vorschulkindern im kontext sozialer ungleichheit. *Sportwissenschaft*, 42(2), 115–125. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12662-012-0239-7>
- Scottish Government (2015). *Public attitudes to poverty, inequality and welfare in Scotland and Britain*. Scottish Government Social Research.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Knopf.
- Spaaij, R. (2009). The glue that holds the community together? Sport and Sustainability in rural Australia. *Sport in Society*, 12(9), 1132–1146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430430903137787>
- Spinney, J., & Hugh, M. (2010). Time and money: A new look at poverty and the barriers to physical activity in Canada. *Social Indicators Research*, 99(2), 341–356. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-010-9585-8>
- Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis). (2024). *Armutsgefährdungsquoten (monetäre Armut) nach soziodemografischen Merkmalen*. <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Einkommen-Konsum-Lebensbedingungen/Lebensbedingungen-Armutsgefahr/Tabellen/armutsgef-sozdem-zvgl.html>
- Stauder, J. (2019). Unemployment, unemployment duration, and health: Selection or causation? *The European Journal of Health Economics*, 20(1), 59–73. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10198-018-0982-2>
- Steenhuis, I., Nooy, S. B. C., Moes, M. J. G., & Schuit, A. J. (2009). Financial barriers and pricing strategies related to participation in sports activities: The perceptions of people of low income. *Journal Of Physical Activity & Health*, 6(6), 716–721. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jpah.6.6.716>
- Stenholm, S., Westerlund, H., Head, J., Hyde, M., Kawachi, I., Pentti, J., Kivimäki, M., & Vahtera, J. (2015). Comorbidity and functional trajectories from midlife to old age: The health and retirement study. *The Journals of Gerontology Series A: Biological Sciences and Medical Sciences*, 70(3), 332–338. <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerona/glu113>
- Thibaut, E., Eakins, J., Willem, A., & Scheerder, J. (2020). Financial barriers for sports consumption: The dynamics of the income–expenditure relation. *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, 10(3), 245–261. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SBM-04-2019-0026>
- United Nations (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>
- Vandermeersch, H., Vos, S., & Scheerder, J. (2015). Who's joining the club? Participation of socially vulnerable children and adolescents in club-organised sports. *Sport, Education and Society*, 20(8), 941–958. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2013.856293>
- Vandermeersch, H., Van Regenmortel, T., & Scheerder, J. (2017). 'There are alternatives, but your social life is curtailed': Poverty and sports participation from an insider perspective. *Social Indicators Research*, 133(1), 119–138. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-016-1360-z>
- Virgolino, A., Costa, J., Santos, O., Pereira, M. E., Antunes, R., Ambrósio, S., Heitor, M. J., & Vaz Carneiro, A. (2022). Lost in transition: A systematic review of the association between unemployment and mental health. *Journal of Mental Health*, 31(3), 432–444.
- World Health Organization (2010). Global recommendations on physical activity for health. *Recommandations mondiales sur l'activité physique pour la santé*, 58.
- Zaninotto, P., Batty, G. D., Stenholm, S., Kawachi, I., Hyde, M., Goldberg, M., Westerlund, H., Vahtera, J., & Head, J. (2020). Socioeconomic inequalities in disability-free life expectancy in older people from England and the United States: A cross-national population-based study. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series A*, 75(5), 906–913. <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerona/glz266>



This is Open Access article distributed under the terms of CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 International License.