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Physical Activity and Sport as a Tool for Connection in a Prison Context: Ethnographic Evidence

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse the social benefits of sports practice for prison inmates. With this objective, and thanks to the collaboration of practitioners and academics, a two-and-a-half-year ethnographic study was conducted in a Catalonian prison. The main findings show that through physical activity and sports it is possible to establish bonds, foster cohesion, break prejudices among inmates, and even promote solidarity with other groups. Thus, inmates consider physical activity and sports essential in a prison. However, data also reflect that sports practice can create a hostile environment. The conclusions emphasize the potential of physical activity and sports as a tool for resocialization among inmates, though it is crucial for these practices to have a pedagogical intent.

Keywords: ethnography, resocialization, well-being, social climate, cohesion, prejudice

Introduction

Internationally, Physical Activity and Sport (PAS) are present in most prisons and constitute one of the most common activities (Devís-Devís et al., 2017; Meek & Lewis, 2014). However, the implementation and accessibility of sports programs in prisons remain inconsistent (Hilpisch et al., 2023; Murray et al., 2024). In Catalonia, 43% of the prison population engages in some form of sports activity, promoted by the Framework Program for Physical Activity and Sports (Subdirecció General de Programes de Rehabilitació i Sanitat, 2007). This Framework Program aims to ensure appropriate physical and sports practices tailored to the needs of the incarcerated population and to provide specific action plans for sports practices in each Catalonian penitentiary center (PC). According to the basic principles of intervention, PAS in correctional facilities should facilitate improvements in the cognitive, motor, emotional, and social dimensions of inmates, thereby enhancing their overall development and mitigating the negative effects of imprisonment (Subdirecció General de Programes de Rehabilitació i Sanitat, 2007).

The possibilities and limitations of sports as a tool for socialization have been widely described by sociology and sports pedagogy (Maza, 2004), as well as in the penitentiary context (Morgan et al., 2019). Within the prison system, socialization activities are particularly essential for the well-being and rehabilitation efforts (Murray et al., 2024).

As described in Gresham Sykes' study (1958), prison life entails 'pains of imprisonment' that go beyond the loss of physical freedom. Prison is a 'total institution' defined by physical and social barriers that isolate it from

the outside world, significantly disrupting inmates' lives (Goffman, 1961). Socially, imprisonment results in the disruption of ties with family, friends, and the external community. Erving Goffman referred to this as 'civil death,' characterized by a loss of emotional and social support. This disconnection often leads to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and alienation, intensifying a sense of abandonment and depersonalization among inmates.

Within this environment, inmates must establish new social relationships under very different conditions than in the outside world. These social relationships help individuals adapt to the prison setting, where survival often depends on learning new modes of interaction (Newbold et al., 2014). The difficulty of maintaining or creating positive relationships in prison is further exacerbated by the lack of trust and constant suspicion among inmates and toward prison staff (Martos-Garcia et al., 2009b; 2022). This dynamic can lead to a focus on competition and social survival over collaboration and solidarity (Jewkes, 2005). According to Haney (2002), aggression and antisocial behaviour are common responses to this reality. Waldram (2009) highlights that rule violations and defiance can be forms of rebellion, minimizing the perceived power imposed on inmates. To assert themselves within the prison hierarchy, inmates often feel the need to display physical strength, emotional impermeability, dominance, and even violence (Martos-Garcia et al., 2009b).

In more advanced welfare states, social policies have incorporated sports as a tool for intervention and for reinforcing social cohesion in disadvantaged contexts, including prisons (Whitley et al., 2018). As a result, governments legislate such activities, which are considered an integral part of correctional treatment in various countries (van Zyl & Sancken, 2009). Within this context, the 'Rehabilitation Model of Catalonian Prisons' views PAS as:

> *"a tool for fostering positive social relationships; enhancing individuals' holistic development; counteracting the negative effects of imprisonment through improvements in quality of life; providing a healthy use of leisure time; and strengthening values such as self-esteem, perseverance, and collaboration."* (Direcció General de Serveis Penitenciaris, 2011, p. 77).

Scientific literature has extensively described the physical, psychological, and social benefits that PAS can bring to inmates (Contreras-Osorio et al., 2021; Hilpisch et al., 2023). For example, studies have found that higher levels of physical activity are associated with improved social connectedness and mental health among incarcerated individuals (Hilpisch et al., 2023), who often experience social disconnection and loneliness (Schliehe et al., 2022).

In this context, sports participation can contribute to better social health (Lochbaum et al., 2024) and promote well-being among inmates (Woods et al., 2017). According to Nerian Martín et al. (2020), practicing PAS during incarceration provides evident benefits for the prison population. Moscoso-Sánchez et al. (2012) demonstrate that through PAS inmates can develop new social skills. Similarly, Castillo-Algarra et al. (2019) highlight that PAS fosters habits of human coexistence and solidarity, making it a powerful tool for promoting prosocial behaviors (Devís-Devís et al., 2017). Sports participation can support resocialization among both male and female inmates (Moscoso-Sánchez et al., 2017; Martín-González et al., 2019). De Graaf (2013) notes that PAS can make the prison experience more tolerable while providing strength to endure incarceration (Harner et al., 2010). Without PAS, the prison environment would likely be worse (Martos-Garcia et al., 2009a).

According to Martín-González et al. (2019), the group empathy generated through sports participation makes it possible to establish healthier relationships and reduce prejudices among group members (Martínez-Merino, 2018). The sense of belonging it fosters promotes the social inclusion of inmates (Martín-González et al., 2019). According to Llorach-Segalà (2023), "Sports practice can contribute to relational well-being by breaking the isolation caused by incarceration, enhancing the pursuit of common goals and challenges, and fostering cooperation and teamwork" (p. 112).

However, all studies confirm that for this to be possible, physical activity and sports (PAS) must be conducted within organized sports programs with an appropriate and tailored approach (Müller et al., 2023; Murray et al., 2024; Roe, 2021). Programs designed to integrate sports into rehabilitation processes have been linked to reductions in reoffending rates and improvements in prisoner behaviour and attitudes, particularly when tailored to meet individual needs (Meek & Lewis, 2014; Llorach-Segalà, 2021; Llorach-Segalà, 2023).

Moreover, while sports activities in prison environments can serve as a tool of control (Martos-Garcia et al., 2009a; Norman, 2017), they can also act as a form of resistance against institutional control, providing inmates with a sense of autonomy and agency in otherwise restrictive settings (Norman, 2017). The relationship between PAS and reintegration is not exempt from complexity, criticism, and tensions (Castillo-Algara et al., 2019; Martos-Garcia et al., 2009a, 2009b; Moscoso-Sánchez et al., 2017; Roe, 2021). Despite the potential benefits of sports practice for the prison population, without an adequate approach, PAS may end up becoming yet another space of conflict and reproduction of the prison culture described in penitentiary literature (Meek, 2014; Vaiciulis et al., 2011).

This theoretical and practical framework forms the foundation for the current study, which aims to examine the potential social benefits of sports activities for

inmates, emphasizing the possibilities and limitations of these practices in building interpersonal relationships among inmates and with their surroundings. To achieve this, the data from a two-and-a-half-year ethnographic study conducted in a Catalonian high-security prison were analysed. This dataset includes perspectives from inmates, treatment team members, sports personnel, prison guards, the prison management, and technical staff from the Department of Justice. Building on these insights, this article responds to a need for scientific evidence to guide policymakers in promoting PAS focused on the resocialization of inmates. The analysis sheds light on how participation in PAS shapes social interactions and contributes to the everyday social dynamics inside the penitentiary setting.

Methodology

Study Design and Context

Prisons represent challenging environments for research (Waldram, 2009), with many events occurring within them often escaping academic focus. However, this study was made possible due to the first author, a doctoral student supervised by the other two researchers, also working as a tutor and teacher at the prison's adult education center. This dual role facilitated access to a research environment that is typically difficult to penetrate (Martos-Garcia et al., 2022), as the trust and relationships established with inmates and staff encouraged participant involvement.

The research is based on two and a half years of ethnographic research conducted by the first author in a high-security prison in Spain, between January 2017 and July 2019, specifically in Residential Module 11 (RM11) of Brians 2, Catalonia. RM11 is designated for inmates imprisoned for violent offenses and accommodates 80 prisoners with impulsive and aggressive behavior.

In Catalan prisons, the inmates can go to the sports area (outside the module) to take part in different sports activities led by a sports technician. They can play futsal and do weight training three times a week, and can also sign up for basketball, volleyball, athletics or racket sports activities that take place twice a week. The time slots for the activities are two hours. Admission to the monthly activity lists must be requested in advance.

Data Collection

The fieldwork, authorized by the Department of Justice and the prison director, included 340 hours of participant observation at sporting events within RM11 and the prison's sports facilities. The activities observed were large group meetings in the module, others with fewer people in different offices, and sports activities in the courtyard, but also in the gym or the pool. Regarding the type of observation and its intensity, this was initially a total observation, but over time it became a participant observation in which the first author was kind enough to become involved in conversations at meetings or during sports practice.

During participant observation, notes were taken in a field diary. First, the diary was compiled in secret, as the prisoners were unaware of the research. Following the recommendations of Martos-Garcia et al. (2022), once the prisoners began to be interviewed, the research became completely public, so note-taking was no longer likely to raise suspicion. Therefore, it was decided to take notes openly. The only criterion for writing the field notes was that they should be chronologically organized. However, with the passage of time and after the analysis, they were sorted into emerging themes.

The first author conducted a total of 30 semi-structured interviews with key institutional actors. These interviews included 13 inmates, 6 treatment team members, 2 sports professionals, 4 prison guards, 2 former prison directors, and 3 technical staff from the Department of Justice. The people interviewed represent all groups in the context and the number was limited when the information obtained reached saturation (Llorach-Segalà, 2021).

The interviews were conducted using a conceptual map, one for the inmates, another for the sports technicians, and the last for the other professionals, from which the questions were constructed. These questions addressed the reasons for participating in PAS, the benefits and barriers, but also thoughts about life in freedom or daily life in the module. In this way, the conversations were guided by flexible scripts, which allowed the interviewer to modify the script and the participants to express themselves freely. Obviously, depending on the interviewee, some topics were focused on more than others. The interviews lasted an average of one hour.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved classifying observations from the field diary and conducting content analysis of the interviews to identify key emerging themes. Thematic analysis was performed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, with support from Atlas.ti 7 software for organizing and analysing codes. Throughout the process, my co-authors acted as "critical friends," providing reflections and critiques on the relationship between the data and emerging themes (Sparkes & Partington, 2003).

Aligned with the article's objectives, the data were analysed to focus on the most socially relevant aspects of prison life. Once data saturation was achieved, reliability and authenticity were ensured through verification strategies (Gaudreault et al., 2023): (1) triangulation, with the use of different instruments for data collection such as observation, interviews, and the analysis of official

documentation (2) member checking, with confirmation of the data by the people interviewed (3) prolonged engagement in the field, with more than 300 hours of participant observation (4) rich and detailed descriptions with participant quotes, as is usually done in ethnographies and (5) review and debate among the research team on emerging codes from the interviews. This approach ensures that the findings are representative and faithful to participants' experiences, with a transparent and ethically rigorous research process.

Data analysis began with the first two interviews and was refined with the remaining data collected. The following table shows the codes emerging from the analysis, organized into categories.

Table 1. Categories and codes

Categories	Codes
Emotional aspects	Escape, freedom, self-esteem, self-improvement
Physical health	Weight, tobacco, habits, values, image
Socially aspects	Respect, coexistence, collective responsibility, friendships, social climate, dialogue
Perspective	Space, time
Context	Facilities, difficulties

The software was used based on 5 hermeneutic units, each of which referred to one of the groups of people in the module. Thus, the process consisted of labelling portions of text based on categories and codes. From the program, it was possible to associate codes with segments, search for texts associated with a certain code, and identify relationships between codes, search for words, phrases or text segments.

Ethical Commitments

This research followed the "Culturally responsive relational reflexive ethics" (CRRRE) proposed by Lahman et al. (2011). These authors consider that cultural ethical responsibility, ethical relationships, and reflective ethics should all be taken into account. To achieve these goals, this research has been based on an informed consent signed by the participants, a detailed explanation of the objectives of the project, the delivery of the interview transcript to be confirmed, and the guarantee of anonymity through pseudonyms. This procedure was validated by both the prison director and the research committee of the Center for Legal Studies and Specialized Training (CEJFE). CEJFE depends on the Department of Justice, which supervises Catalan prisons and, therefore, is the entity that authorized this investigation.

Results and Discussion

The data analysis identified five particularly relevant themes concerning the role of PAS in social relationships among inmates and their surroundings, as we have indicated in Table 1. From these categories, the results have been organized into five groups, which have been annotated using some verbatim quotations.

Establishing New Bonds: 'In sports, on the street or here, you make friendships'

As Goffman (1961) pointed out regarding total institutions, entering a penitentiary center disrupts the inmate's daily environment, severing ties with close contacts and reference points. Javier, an inmate, clearly expressed this: "Prison takes you away from your circle of friends, from your contacts."

In a hostile environment that complicates social relationships, participation in PAS can be an opportunity to establish new connections. Claudio, another inmate, reflected on how sports counteract the social isolation inherent in prison life:

> *In prison, you get used to not socializing, and then you start playing football, and well, you begin making friends here and there. I think it helps you socialize.* (Claudio, Inmate).

This statement highlights how, despite the tendency towards detachment and disconnection in prison, participation in sports like football creates spaces that promote interpersonal relationships. In a context marked by social disconnection, football facilitates the progressive creation of meaningful social bonds, transitioning from simple interactions to deeper friendships.

Similarly, the gym becomes a space facilitating interactions between inmates with shared interests. It is an environment where new relationships based on collaboration and mutual assistance can be formed, fostering a sense of community and solidarity.

> *When you're at the gym, sometimes you're alone. Then someone passes by, and you say: 'Hey, can you*

help me for a moment?' And they help you. And that's how you start: 'Do you do sports often? Yes. Will you come another day? Yes. Well, then I'll help you if you need it." And that's how relationships form. Yes, in sports, on the street or here, you make friendships. (Tomás, Inmate)

In this case, it is also observed how Tomás, when he says "on the street or here," connects the sports practice he engages in within the prison with that outside, making it an element of connection and continuity with activities he performed before entering the correctional facility (CF) and that he could continue afterward. In this way, sports can act as a reminder of prior identity, helping inmates feel more connected to who they were before incarceration and reducing the loss of identity experienced upon entering the CF.

Thus, although weightlifting might seem like a solitary activity at first glance, Tomás affirms that relationships with peers are essential for the motivation and competitiveness involved in training with others, fostering friendships among them:

Support is very important because, during the last repetitions, that's when you need someone to encourage you, to say 'Come on, come on!' And you think, 'Now I can do it, now I can do it!' And if you're alone, you do it, but with less weight; but if someone is next to you, you push yourself harder. You're getting stronger, and that person drives you to give everything you've got. (Tomás, Inmate)

In addition to classic activities like football and weightlifting, other activities, such as dance, also foster the creation of bonds and a more welcoming environment:

It brings me happiness, truly. [...] We are Caribbean, and music is joy for us. But it also brings joy to the yard; maybe a bored friend in the yard comes over and says, 'Oh, let's see what these guys are doing,' and they join us. [...] That happiness, that joy, we transmit it to each other. (Norberto, Inmate)

In this testimony, it is evident how dance can generate a positive atmosphere that breaks the routine and boredom characteristic of CFs. The environment transforms, fostering interaction and coexistence. Additionally, his reference to "we are Caribbean" shows how dance allows him to reaffirm his identity in an environment where one can often lose self-awareness, establishing cultural connections through this shared element.

The sports technical staff also observe that PAS promotes the creation of bonds: "There will be more social cooperation simply by sharing sports with someone. An emotional bond is created, and I believe it is an easy way to achieve this within these facilities." (Sergi, Sports technician)

These findings align with studies by Martín-González et al. (2019) and Moscoso-Sánchez et al. (2017), which highlight the significant role of sports in creating bonds and how PAS offers an opportunity for resocialisation within the penitentiary environment. The research also demonstrates inmates' high motivation to participate in team sports or cooperative activities, such as football, weightlifting, or dance. This study reveals that various types of PAS allow for the initiation of positive interactions. PAS facilitates the construction of individual and collective identities through its emotional component, fostering coexistence (Soler et al., 2017). As observed in the study, participating in PAS serves to build identities based on shared experiences (Martos-Garcia et al., 2009a; Martín-González et al., 2019), breaking the solitude and anxiety caused by imprisonment (Ruiz-García & Castillo-Algara, 2014). It serves as a true antidote to boredom (Morgan et al., 2019).

Shared Challenges: "We Became a Cohesive Group"

Participation in sports practice is closely linked to the feeling of belonging, as initial bonds can grow stronger when shared goals pose a challenge for inmates. When activities are framed as shared challenges, camaraderie becomes even more significant. In this sense, the data collected regarding the weekend obstacle course activity reinforces this argument. Baltasar (Inmate) highlighted the group effort to achieve collective goals:

With Diana in the obstacle course, you could participate, and we tried to go military style, all together. If one person did a push-up, we all did one. (Baltasar, Inmate)

Running, despite the architectural constraints of a penitentiary center (PC), is also a very popular activity among the prison population. With the group of inmates interested in athletics, the sports technician, Diana, proposed participating in a marathon. For them, it was a real challenge, as they initially considered it impossible, as she herself explains:

I remember when we proposed it to them: [...] 'Look, we've thought of you for the marathon project.' 'What? 42 km? We can't do it.' I said, 'Yes, of course you can! It just takes training.' These guys were running, at most, 8–10 km at the time. [...] Then, as they say: 'You start seeing that yes, you finally reach 25, and yes, you get to 30.' And wow, tomorrow we have to do 32, and we do it. (Diana, Sports technician)

The proposal was a complete success in terms of collaboration among the inmates, as evidenced by the testimonies of Salvador and Daniel:

We became a cohesive group. Some even sacrificed or reduced their training so we could improve. (Salvador, Inmate)

In a race in Sants, a guy about 20 or 30 years old said, 'I won't finish.' And I said, 'Yes, you will finish the race, and we'll do it together.' And there were moments when I stopped or slowed down to keep him company. (Daniel, Inmate)

Although races are based on individual results, the social relationships established among runners are vital to enduring the kilometers and the suffering. Salvador (Inmate) emphasized the importance of the positive working environment to endure the spatial limitations of a PC and the emotional support from teammates during endurance races:

I was running 10 kilometers every day, in a 400 m² space, on bare concrete [indicating how tough it was due to the limited space and the type of terrain]. But that energy, that 'feeling' in the air... [referring to how the group's energy made the spatial limitations bearable]. (Salvador, Inmate)

This experience demonstrates how social support and a sense of community help overcome both the difficulties of sports practice (the effort it requires) and the spatial restrictions inherent to a PC. In this regard, although the physical limitation of space is oppressive and restrictive, the positive atmosphere generated within the group transforms the perception of the place, making it one with a positive meaning. It is also an example of resilience, showing how, despite unfavorable conditions, mutual support allows sports practice to continue (Martín-González et al., 2020).

A key factor in this success was the process followed, as establishing shared challenges allowed for the development of attitudes such as empathy, commitment, support, humility, and acceptance. In this context, PAS offers inmates the opportunity to be part of a team, collaborate cooperatively, and foster respect and responsibility. For this purpose, in all cases, whether on the obstacle course or participating in a marathon, all inmates referenced Diana, the sports technician. She explained how she approaches the activities she proposes:

Our goal is for everyone to finish as a team, to arrive together. [...] This is achieved through lots of training together, no matter what happens. Even if someone gets hurt, we stick to their pace and try to train the mind a lot. (Diana, Sports technician)

This research aligns with the findings of Willox et al. (2023), who also confirm that participating in group activities fosters interpersonal skills, collaboration, and conflict resolution. As the study highlights, even if the activity is individual, when performed in a group, it can break the individualism experienced in prison through teamwork, fostering camaraderie (Leberman, 2007), and enhancing cooperation and individual and collective responsibility (Moscoso-Sánchez et al., 2012).

As observed, and in line with Moscoso-Sánchez et al. (2017), PAS can help develop a spirit of personal and group improvement, counteracting the selfishness and introversion that can arise within the PC. As reflected in the study, PAS can foster inmates' capacity for empathy, as affirmed by Hajek & König (2022).

Breaking Down Prejudices Among Inmates: "It has helped me interact with people you would never get along with"

In penitentiary centres, it is common for internal divisions to arise among inmates, who classify and judge each other based on their criminal records, reinforcing stigma and hindering social cohesion. Participation in sports activities can act as a mechanism to break down these barriers.

An example of this potential in sports is the process of change described by Baltasar (Inmate):

So, all these activities, these meetings, these interactions, these debates that we held, I learned, and they (referring to the rest of the group) also learned to be with me. [...] I was the most reluctant to do any activity with someone from another residential module (RM) because of the types of crimes. Diana made me swallow my pride, [...] here you come for what you come, and if you want to do sports, you come, and if you don't like it, you leave. She pushed me a bit, and in the end, I kept going, and I gained a lot of trust. (Baltasar, Inmate)

His account is an example of how he learned to connect with others, break down prejudices, and work and trust his peers through sports. However, for this to happen, two factors were key: on the one hand, the design of an appropriate pedagogical process, creating spaces for dialogue and mutual understanding, and on the other, the role of the sports technician, acting as a mediator. Thus, it is evident that breaking down prejudices does not happen on its own. As previously noted and as demanded by Devís-Devís et al. (2017), intentional work and qualified technical staff are required to accompany the transformation process, fostering collaboration, acceptance of others, and commitment.

The account also highlights that this process was not unilateral. Baltasar (Inmate) states: "I learned, and they also learned to be with me," indicating mutual learning

where all parties adapted and built a relationship of respect. This, in turn, promotes greater social cohesion and a sense of community among people who might otherwise remain distant.

In this study, it was also observed how PAS can bring together individuals who previously seemed irreconcilable. A group of inmates proposed organizing dance sessions, an activity that is also a universal language and can become a meeting space. In this context, a previously unthinkable situation occurred, as explained by Norberto (Inmate):

> *There were six of us, and we belonged to street gangs, different gangs, four different gangs. [...] The desire to dance gave us the opportunity to come together. [...] It has helped me interact with people you would never get along with. I didn't get along with Ecuadorians or Colombians*. (Norberto, Inmate)

Despite past rivalries, the common interest in dancing allowed inmates who did not previously interact to break down prejudices and open up to new relationships. Transcending identity differences, the dance activity created a context of collaboration and mutual respect, leading to a significant change in their social relationships. The roles associated with the gangs and their conflicting dynamics were set aside in favor of the collective goal of dancing, enabling a reconstruction of more positive and collaborative identities.

Norberto also mentions that this experience taught him to "interact with people you would never get along with," indicating a process of developing social skills such as tolerance, communication, and respect. These skills are not only beneficial within the prison but are also fundamental for reintegration into society.

From this, the study shows how PAS helps create a social network free from prejudice and improves social relationships (Martínez-Merino, 2018). As the results demonstrate, and in line with Gallant et al. (2015), sports provide the opportunity to interact and communicate with inmates from other units and foster camaraderie. The research shows, as highlighted by the works of Lleixà & Ríos (2015) and Mukiza (2014), that communication skills are developed through interaction during PAS.

Solidarity with charitable causes: "Now my family feels proud of me again"

The participation of inmates in PAS often involves situations where they have the opportunity to go outside the prison and demonstrate solidarity with various causes.

A clear example of this potential is the "Corre en Gran" project, in which some of the inmates from this study participated. This project began in 2017 at Brians 2 PC through a group of 7 inmates and 2 professionals under the name "GambadersEvents." Its purpose was to put into practice all the knowledge gained through PAS within the PC by organizing a race with a social value. The objectives were both social and sporting: on the one hand, raising awareness about the need for social and economic support for causes such as childhood cancer (2018), ALS (2019), and Rett Syndrome (2021); on the other hand, promoting PAS and the work done at Brians 2 PC, as highlighted on their website (Corre en Gran: http://www.correengran.cat/gambadersevents).

The "Corre en Gran" project fosters a different kind of social relationship, one that connects with the outside world:

> *We have sports, but what do we do with it? Let it serve a purpose. [...] I could enjoy it for myself, [...] but I have to be in prison. You allow me to give it to someone else*. (Baltasar, Inmate)

Typically, the success of a charity race depends on its organization and the amount of money raised. In the case of "Corre en Gran," both aspects are excellent year after year, but for Diana (Sports technician), the true success lies in its impact on the organizing inmates and the change in how their families perceive them. PAS, as defined by Diana, shifts from being a goal to becoming a means:

> *The 'Corre en Gran' race—when we discussed the results, I said, these aren't the results... for me, €8,800, 900 participants, those aren't the results. For me, the result is a comment from an inmate who told me, 'My mother said she's proud of me again; for me, that's my result.' Look, I still get goose bumps when I say it*. [...]
>
> *That someone comes to me and says, after this project, 'Now my family feels proud of me again. I had disappointed them, and now they've told me they feel proud of me again.' That's incredible! Or others who say, 'I didn't think I was capable of this, and I've realised I can, and I can do anything I set my mind to!' Wow!! That's what sports can give you in the end—working as a goal or as a means, which is super interesting. [...] Now we don't work with sports as a goal; now, sports will be the vehicle that allows us to work*. (Diana, Sports technician)

As a result of this experience, the races organized outside by a group of 30 inmates included the participation of a girl with Rett Syndrome to raise awareness about the condition and to fund its research. Diana comments that this initiative not only united the group but also passed on this sense of solidarity to their families:

> Some of them told me, 'I told my family about it, and they want to run with the girl.' [...] In the end, you're

doing a running activity here at the PC, which, at first glance, seems like nothing special. But they're even improving their relationships with their families, and their families are doing things they wouldn't normally do. (Diana, Sports technician)

This experience has shown inmates the challenges faced by others, encouraging them to stop complaining about their own situations and focus on helping others. The same technician notes that this makes them feel useful and valued:

They made a really cool reflection: 'We can help too! And now we see it. Maybe it's through running or organising a race, but we're helping. Look how simple that is, but here inside, we become so selfish, always playing the victim and waiting for someone to help us, to pay for our races.' I think it makes them feel good – it's human nature. You see that girl, and honestly, I just want to hug her, and they feel the same way. They want to help her, and I get it. It even boosts their self-esteem, realising, 'I can do something for others too, not just wait for others to do something for me.' (Diana, Sports technician)

It is evident that through PAS goals can be achieved that go far beyond physical or sports practice, enabling the application of values such as solidarity, empathy, and collaboration. Diana states that with the right approach PAS can lead to countless learnings:

I knew that sports could bring many values, that you could do many things, that you could work with them in a thousand ways, but I swear I never thought it would be this many. The learning opportunities here are incredible. (Diana, Sports technician)

This research aligns with the findings of Martín-González et al. (2019) and Moscoso-Sánchez et al. (2017), which suggest that PAS provides opportunities for inmates to interact with people they share spaces, activities, and sports interests with. This study demonstrates that PAS can contribute to social inclusion if it generates prosocial attitudes and provides opportunities for active citizenship as Cameron & MacDougall (2000) described.

As highlighted in this study and in line with Pedersen et al. (2021), the motivation to participate in a sports activity is driven by social reasons and enjoyment. Sports in prison, as confirmed by this study's results, can be an opportunity for volunteering and integration into the community (Murray et al., 2022). The findings show that sports are a vehicle for new opportunities for social interaction, but their effectiveness depends on how the activities are planned, managed, and implemented (Conley, 2004).

All the benefits mentioned in these sections complement the social inclusion process highlighted by the research of Meek et al. (2012) and Williams et al. (2015). However, PAS practice can also generate situations of conflict and reproduce harmful relationships, as described in the following section.

The dark side: "When they played football, it was like they were fighting"

The data suggest that without professional guidance and a specific context, sports can become an outlet for contained aggression and, therefore, a battleground and site of disputes. In this sense, inmates also report that PAS does not always foster positive bonds but can sometimes achieve the opposite.

In the gym, for example, where we have seen bonds can be initiated based on shared interests, it can also be a hostile environment if not properly managed:

In this residential module (RM), there's a group that goes to strength training in the afternoon who've started calling themselves the 'Killers.' When they left, two or three of us would say, 'Great, they're gone; now we can train in peace.' (Daniel, Inmate)

This quote highlights how power dynamics and intimidation can arise within sports spaces. The self-proclaimed "Killers" seem to have established a dominant presence during strength training sessions, creating an atmosphere of tension for other inmates, like Daniel, who feel they lack the tranquillity to train. This dynamic demonstrates how PAS, which could serve as a space for cohesion and collaboration, can also become a setting for reproducing internal hierarchies and attitudes of superiority.

Similarly, Marcelo expresses a related sentiment about football matches:

When they played football, it was like they were fighting, but through football. It's always, 'I want to be better than the other,' 'Who is stronger here,' 'Who earns more respect.' But that doesn't lead you anywhere. (Marcelo, Inmate)

In the case of football, Marcelo describes how the game becomes a symbolic form of confrontation, where inmates seek to establish who is "stronger" or "deserves more respect." His testimony again illustrates how PAS within the prison context can become a stage for extreme competition and displays of power. This heightened competitiveness, far from fostering social cohesion or teamwork, reinforces hierarchies and generates tensions that may hinder the rehabilitative purpose of sports activities. Marcelo's final observation ("that doesn't lead you anywhere") reflects an awareness of the limited or negative outcomes of such dynamics.

Faced with this situation, the staff responsible for sports activities are clear that PAS does not automatically provide benefits. The transmission of values through PAS and the development of its full potential rely heavily on the individuals responsible for it:

> *Values are something all people have through their actions.... [...] So I'm dispelling the myth that sports inherently have many values. No, that's not true; we, the people, have those values.* (Víctor, Justice technical staff)

However, from the perspective of inmates, while they recognize that PAS can also be a space where tensions arise, they consider the opportunity to engage in PAS within the PC indispensable. Norberto's words are unequivocal:

> *A prison without sports activities would be a disaster.* (Norberto, Inmate)

This research aligns with the literature (Meek & Lewis, 2012; Meek, 2014; Vaiciulis et al., 2011), which has established that PAS can have unhealthy effects and even promote antisocial behaviours and increase inequalities.

Víctor's arguments, as a Justice Technical, aim to demystify the belief that sports are automatically beneficial. Sports do not inherently rehabilitate or socialize individuals (Ionescu et al., 2010). His testimony emphasizes the importance of pedagogical planning and the preparation of technical staff to promote behaviors that reinforce positive values, particularly in complex environments like prisons.

The study, as reflected in the literature, shows that for PAS to be an effective rehabilitation tool, the focus must be on the socio-pedagogical process rather than mere participation (Meek, 2014; Müller et al., 2023; Roe, 2021). As revealed in this study's results, intentional and organized interventions have the potential to foster greater social connectivity (Hilpisch et al., 2023).

Conclusions

Physical Activity and Sports (PAS) has established itself as one of the best strategies to alleviate the pains of imprisonment described by Sykes (1958). This is essential to being able to set more educational goals, such as the resocialization and reintegration of inmates. In this process, sports practice allows for the maintenance of positive social relationships with other inmates, which becomes significant in the lives of incarcerated individuals. Thus, physical and sports activities offer inmates an opportunity to establish new social relationships that have been distorted due to their incarceration. In this study, the opportunity to establish positive social relationships through lived experiences in various activities—ranging from football, strength training in the gym, the obstacle course, and running, to dancing—allows inmates to reconnect with their identity and culture. This social network and the associated bonds can counteract isolation and distrust, generating social capital.

It is evident that, despite breaking away from one's entire social environment, PAS is a good opportunity to share training sessions, races, and routines that can help create a valuable social network. Additionally, the importance of collaboration, empathy, and mutual support in PAS within the PC is clear. Training sessions, without the help and motivation of peers, are much more difficult to overcome both mentally and physically. Friendships become key to continuing to learn in the world of PAS, and in PCs, PAS can become a healthy and active way to relate to others.

The sense of belonging enables the achievement of collective and individual goals through the acquisition of values such as commitment, respect, tolerance, and responsibility. In an appropriate context with proper support, social and communication skills are developed, which help break down prejudices and modify behaviour. Interpersonal relationships and support contribute to increasing well-being, not only physically but also psychologically and socially, through teamwork, cooperation, and dialogue. Similarly, sports practice offers inmates an opportunity to experience new values such as solidarity and generating prosocial attitudes. The social commitment that can be generated through a charity race may contribute to social inclusion.

PAS is perceived as an essential tool for channeling accumulated energy, reducing tensions, and promoting coexistence and well-being among inmates. As described by Herold et al. (2023), the findings suggest that sport can be a way to improve prisoners' lives, ultimately facilitating their rehabilitation process.

However, it is evident that for resocialization to be considered, PAS must take place in an educational environment (Łapiński, 2012), where the role of sports professionals is crucial. Therefore, PAS must be framed within specific pedagogical programs since positive behaviors through sports need to be explicitly pursued. Without this framework, although it may help reduce aggression and antisocial behaviour, the limitations in achieving educational objectives are evident.

The role of PAS in a PC can be a facilitating mechanism in a penitentiary context, transforming it from a total institution into a social institution. Nonetheless, if sports activities were not practiced in prison, the environment would be worse.

Although the study encompasses different perspectives of the penitentiary community, its limitation lies in the fact that the research was conducted in a single PC, so

future research lines propose expanding the number of PCs. Based on the study, sports policies are proposed in PCs that involve pedagogical approaches to ensure that PAS plays a significant role in the social well-being of the prison population.

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