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Physical Activity and Sport to Fight Social Isolation Among Houseless People in "Northtown" (France)

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Abstract

This article examines the impacts of a physical activity program on individuals in extreme poverty and facing social isolation in a French city we called Northtown. The findings are based on an ethnographic approach conducted between 2022 and 2023: Forty-three session observations, twelve biographical interviews, and four structured interviews were conducted. The article first identifies the mechanisms leading to social destabilization or breakdown among the participants. Their life trajectories are analyzed to understand the construction of their social isolation, highlighting the impact of life experiences and social conditions on this situation. Due to their difficult pasts, participants are anchored in the present and find bodily engagement in physical activity sessions. These moments provide temporary escape and a form of recognition but the effects are ephemeral. After the sessions, they return to their reality marked by isolation and persistent difficulties. Physical activities offer momentary security, distraction, and relief but they cannot compensate for the lasting impacts of their life experiences as they do not address the underlying issues of their isolation and distress.

Keywords

France; houselessness; life trajectory; physical activities; precarity; social isolation; sports

1. Introduction

Physical and sports activities are known to preserve physical health, improve mental well-being (Aquatias et al., 2008), aid in self-reconstruction, and help individuals learn social roles through the learning of rules

and participation in collective life (Mignon, 2000). According to the French Ministry of Sports, they can also foster social integration and reintegration, potentially restoring broken social bonds (Paugam, 2008). This article explores how a physical activity and sports program can alleviate social isolation for houseless individuals. In France, the Foundation for Housing Disadvantaged People estimated there were around 300,000 houseless people in the early 2020s. The French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies considers people without a house in the physical sense (unlike a home). It distinguishes between unsheltered individuals, who live in places not meant for habitation (around 10% of the houseless population), and those using emergency services or temporary shelters. In this study, we use the term "houseless" to align with the majority of relevant research and our own study, as it includes individuals who frequent emergency centers but still may have a sense of home. The houseless individuals in our study belong to the most economically and culturally disadvantaged groups (Marpsat & Firdion, 1996) and are highly vulnerable to social isolation (Paugam, 2015). The risk of losing social connections increases in situations of unemployment, financial insecurity, and lower education levels (Pan Ké Shon, 2003), all of which define the individuals in our study.

Our objective is to demonstrate that the effects of physical activities on social isolation among houseless individuals are neither automatic nor straightforward but rather shaped by each person's life path, confirming the impact of precarious life trajectories on their relationship with the world (Bahr & Caplow, 1968). Using an ethnographic approach, our findings reveal the mechanisms that have led to the weakening or breakdown of social bonds among the individuals studied. By analyzing their life trajectories, we aim to understand what keeps them socially isolated. We emphasize that the effects on isolation are temporary. Their life paths and social conditions compel them to live in the present, making it difficult to look towards the future. While the activities create opportunities to form weak ties—whose significance is well-established (Granovetter, 1973)—these ties remain unused and unexploited due to their life circumstances and isolation.

2. The Development of Care for the Houseless

2.1. Characteristics of Houseless Populations

By explaining the precariousness of the least experienced, least skilled, and lowest-paid workers, Anderson (1923/2013) provided insights that will serve as the basis for discussing the French case examined in this article. He identified various profiles of houseless individuals, such as "the hobo and the tramp" or "the home guard and the bum" (pp. 393–394). Thus, houseless people do not constitute a homogeneous social group, though they do share some common characteristics (Marpsat & Firdion, 1996). In France, the most recent quantitative survey (Yaouancq & Duée, 2014) reveals that the houseless are mostly young men (62%, more than 75% under 49 years old), a group strongly represented in collective shelters but also among rough sleepers (15% of men compared to 2% of women). Nearly 50% of French-speaking houseless individuals lack formal qualifications, a critical factor influencing access to the labor market. This low level of education exacerbates professional integration difficulties, compounded by associated challenges—about one-third struggle with reading, writing, or arithmetic. Economically, one in three houseless individuals lives on less than EUR 300 per month, while 50% earn between EUR 300 and EUR 900 monthly. Although 25% are employed, they are primarily laborers or low-skilled workers (93%), with most holding temporary contracts (40%, compared to 22% with no contract).

Houselessness trajectories are diverse (Besozzi, 2020; Damon, 2003). Sociologists agree that houselessness affects no specific population category (Choppin & Gardella, 2013; Pichon, 1998), though individuals from working-class backgrounds are overrepresented. Factors such as parental absence, trauma (violence, migration, war), and foreign birth increase vulnerability. These characteristics, combined with socioeconomic factors, heighten the likelihood of becoming houseless. Anderson (1923/2013) demonstrated the impact of job insecurity on an entire life. In the 1980s, "new poor" populations emerged due to the precarization of employment and work (Castel, 1994). In a society where employment is central to social integration, its absence leads to social disqualification and impoverishment (Paugam, 2007). The erosion of the labor market, coupled with reduced social protections, amplifies the risk of transitioning from vulnerability to social disaffiliation (Castel, 1994). It should be emphasized that we are indeed talking about risks as it has been known for several decades that downward social mobility does not affect the most vulnerable uniformly, largely because life stories and their characteristics influence the disaffiliating nature of "social descent" (Bahr & Caplow, 1968). The entry into the "career of survival" (Pichon, 2010) results from accumulated difficulties leading to cumulative ruptures (Paugam, 2008), which weaken individuals.

Finally, as Anderson (1923/2013) also demonstrated, several sociologists agree that houselessness is not merely a condition. There are norms, values, and rules that socially, relationally, and morally structure the world of the street (Besozzi, 2021). Scientific studies have shown that far from being desocialized, they share public spaces, invest in certain locations, adapt to street life, organize their daily lives through resourcefulness, frequent assistance services, interact with one another, and develop a value system that regulates their interactions. Thus, while houselessness initially leads to some degree of desocialization, it is followed by resocialization into street life (Simmel, 1908/1999).

Under a single term, which has evolved over time, a variety of people, situations, experiences, and realities are grouped together. When focusing on a shelter, there are immigrants, isolated individuals temporarily experiencing houselessness, or those who are familiar with assistance networks. This heterogeneity has led to difficulties in defining this population, which is reflected today in the multitude of assistance actors and structures.

2.2. The Care of Houseless Individuals Through Social Reintegration Programs

While vagrancy and begging—to use the terms of French law—were subject to repression until the implementation of the new Penal Code in March 1994, assistance and care for the houseless have now emerged as a societal response.

Social reintegration often prioritizes housing (Damon, 2012) or employment (Lacoste, 2023), but health is equally crucial. Extreme street conditions take a heavy toll on houseless individuals, fostering a distinct relationship with their bodies, health, and suffering while heightening risks. Studies reveal precarious populations prioritize curative care over prevention (Nicaise et al., 2020), as immediate survival needs overshadow long-term health planning. Despite available support systems, houseless individuals seldom utilize them, even in times of need, worsening health challenges. Street culture, influenced by the "culture of the poor," often valorizes physical resilience over healthcare. Extreme poverty further diminishes the ability to plan for the future or adopt health-promoting behaviors (Millet & Thin, 2005). Consequently, these individuals focus on basic needs like hunger, thirst, and sleep, living in survival mode. Societal invisibility also

leads to body neglect. Identity formation, shaped by self-perception and societal attribution (Dubar, 2000), fosters a degraded self-image due to the lack of recognition from others, reinforcing physical and psychological fragility. Besozzi's (2023) study highlights the transformative potential of socio-aesthetic programs, which provide health and psychological benefits while restoring body perception and self-esteem. By fulfilling utilitarian, educational, and well-being needs, they enhance self-worth and social recognition, offering new reintegration pathways.

Aesthetic care and bodywork contribute to physical, psychological, and social recovery, but physical and sports activities also promote overall health. Their benefits for physical health—such as improved cognitive functions, chronic disease prevention, and combating obesity—and mental health—such as reducing anxiety and depression—are well-documented. Physical activities are seen as educational and social tools, frequently used in integration policies (Bloomfield, 2003; Coaffee, 2008; Gasparini, 2008; Green, 2006). They support physical revitalization, psychological reconstruction, and social connection, which explains their use in various initiatives: re-energizing the bodies of long-term unemployed individuals (Le Yondre, 2012), engaging youth from disadvantaged neighborhoods (Charrier & Jourdan, 2015), educating young people under judicial supervision (Le Yondre & Sempé, 2024), or preventing delinquency (Lessard, 2017). However, the link between sports and integration is more based on beliefs than on objective evidence (Gasparini, 2012; Koebel, 2010). Intense sports involvement can cause disengagement from school (Bertrand, 2008) or even social isolation (Forté, 2006). The positive effects of programs may fade if participants stop attending (Cohen et al., 2019). Sometimes, efforts to promote participation can backfire; for instance, neighborhood sports facilities may reinforce exclusion (Bodin et al., 2007). Participation effects are thus conditional on context, population characteristics, actions implemented, and the meanings attributed to them (McNulty Eitle & Eitle, 2002).

If the sociology of sport has explored the use of these activities for certain categories of people, there are few, if any, studies in France regarding their application to houseless individuals. However, the Anglo-Saxon literature has examined the impact of sports events, particularly football-related ones like the Homeless World Cup (HWC), highlighting its potential to foster the development of social capital (Sherry, 2010), self-esteem, and motivation (Magee, 2011). These effects are only made possible when these activities are not isolated and are connected to the surrounding society (Höglund & Bruhn, 2022; Sherry, 2010). As Weiss (1993) notes, many social interventions fail when limited to fragmented programs disconnected from individuals' lifestyles. Nevertheless, the effects of these initiatives are also ambivalent. Football does not attract all houseless individuals, and degraded physical conditions often pose a major obstacle for many participants. Furthermore, the competitive nature of the HWC can create exclusionary dynamics. Defeats or poor performances can reinforce feelings of failure in individuals who have already experienced traumatic setbacks in their life journeys (Magee & Jeanes, 2013). Thus, while sports can aid social inclusion, they can also become a negative space for participants when they contradict the latter's emotional needs (Segura et al., 2017).

Similarly, data on the conditionality of observed effects remains limited. What enables the creation of the three types of social capital—bonding, bridging, and linking—mentioned by Sherry (2010)? What about the transferability of these effects beyond sports? And those who trained but weren't selected for the HWC? These questions justify evaluating the effects of a socio-sports program on social isolation. This will show whether and how the proposed physical activities influence isolation, considering the houseless population's

characteristics, living conditions, and what is offered to them. Do they foster social bonds, meaning protection and recognition? Do they help participants integrate into cohesive, protective social groups? What are the immediate effects during and outside sessions? Addressing these questions requires close engagement with the field and its people. However, the characteristics of socially excluded individuals prevent researchers from imposing themselves without extensive time in the field. As conducting research in this social world presents a challenge, ethnographic methods allow us to gather insights from individuals in an unfamiliar environment.

3. A Story of Trust in Distrust: Methodology and Methods

Since 2021, the city of Northtown (the name of the city has been changed to protect the anonymity of individuals and structures)—a mid-sized French city with a population of about 45,000—implemented initiatives to support the reintegration of individuals in situations of extreme vulnerability. While the aim was not to replace the existing well-established social reintegration programs in the area, the goal was to contribute by offering physical and sports activities to these groups. This work was part of a broader, long-term research initiative. Jointly funded by the urban community of this city and the French Red Cross Foundation, our fieldwork was conducted in two six-month phases between January 2022 and June 2023 across various facilities for houseless individuals (a daytime shelter, a transitional housing center, and hostels for young workers). The first phase focused on understanding the underlying dynamics shaping (non)participation in physical activity sessions among different groups. The second phase aimed to examine whether, and under what conditions, the practice of physical activities could help combat social isolation.

The activities offered, supervised by a sports educator qualified in sports training, varied depending on the structures and periods. Sessions are adapted to participants based on their age and health conditions, offering either sports or adapted physical activities (Table 1). While the choice of activities is intended to reflect participants' preferences, several factors influenced this offering. First, the physical environment: Depending on the structure, sessions took place in a shared living room, which limited space and the types of activities that could be performed. Additionally, outdoor activities were contingent on weather conditions, which was why they are primarily offered during the spring. Participation in these activities was voluntary and varied significantly between structures. While most activities were conducted in groups, they could be either individual or collective, with the sports educator using certain sessions to foster teamwork and collaboration among participants.

Table 1. Activities offered and frequency.

	Phase 1		Phase 2	
Day center	Table tennis, soccer, basketball, and adapted physical activities (soft strength training, yoga)	1h30 twice a week	adapted physical activities (soft strength training, seated soccer, basketball initiation, yoga)	1h00 once a week
Transitional housing	adapted physical activities (table tennis, soft strength training, yoga); Mölkky	1h00 twice a week	—	1h00 twice a week
Youth worker's hostel	—	—	Cross-training, boxing, Soccer	1h00 once a week

An ethnographically inspired approach was prioritized to establish trust with both participants and non-participants and to capture their perceptions. It entailed immersion in the field (Céfaï, 2010) through detailed observations of physical activity sessions, focusing on the nature and intensity of practices, the configuration and use of space, the social composition of participant groups, their attendance patterns, and their interactions, including those with sports educators. In addition to numerous informal exchanges, biographical interviews (seven in the transitional housing center, three in the daytime shelter) and structured interviews (two in the daytime shelter, four in the young workers' hostels) were conducted. These interviews, recorded and sometimes secured through direct negotiation after several months of immersion or with the help of mediators from the field, lasted between eighteen minutes and nearly four hours. They explored dimensions such as social isolation and disaffiliation, while also testing several sociological hypotheses concerning our participants. This includes the relationship between sociability levels and cultural practices (Gire et al., 2007; Héran, 1988), the importance of strong ties, and the absence of weak ties as one descends the social hierarchy (Granovetter, 1973). We also examined participants' trajectories—covering their primary socialization, educational, professional, and athletic paths—to identify the mechanisms behind the weakening or severing of social bonds. These trajectories were cross-referenced with current living conditions to analyze the factors contributing to social isolation.

The implementation of this methodology faced a dual preliminary obstacle related to building trust between the researcher and the participants. The first obstacle involved gaining access to intimate spaces and discourses (Besozzi, 2022) with individuals who are socially disqualified (Paugam, 2009) and stigmatized, often bearing the marks of profound biographical ruptures (Yaouancq & Duée, 2014). Participants' mistrust could be amplified by the presence of a researcher perceived as an intrusive outsider (Pétonnet, 1968/2017). The second obstacle lay in the subjectivity of the researcher, shaped by social representations of houselessness that combine various stigmas, such as poor health, addictions, and uncertain level of hygiene (Eysermann, 2005). A preparatory reading of prior works (Declerck, 2001) likely reinforced a conflicted relationship with the field and disrupted the easier establishment of a connection, but there is more to consider. An initial interview with the social inclusion officer, exploring the causes of houselessness—such as relationship breakdowns, job loss, but also experiences of domestic or sexual violence—intensified the researcher's initial caution. This wariness, further amplified by her position as a woman navigating predominantly male environments, required the development of adaptive strategies with a dual focus: ensuring acceptance in the field and maintaining personal safety. These strategies were shaped by a context in which houseless women are particularly vulnerable to violence, especially sexual violence, affecting 2.1% of women compared to 0.2% of men (Girard et al., 2009). Consequently, the researcher adopted a posture of heightened vigilance, aiming to overcome both relational and symbolic barriers.

To avoid gender-based stigmatization, the researcher adjusted her physical appearance, particularly through her choice of clothing. As Clair's (2012) work highlighted, masculine domination often manifests in the control of female sexuality through markers such as clothing, categorizing women according to social norms ("good girls" or "whores"). Drawing on Bizeul's (1998) reflections, she adopted loose-fitting clothing and minimized markers of femininity—a strategy similar to that employed by houseless women themselves (Girard et al., 2009)—to ease her integration into the field. The researcher also organized her presence according to specific temporal and spatial criteria: She prioritized mornings to avoid the effects of problematic substance use (alcohol, psychotropics) and chose open spaces to avoid being isolated with participants. However, she had to balance maintaining the privacy of participants—essential for conducting

biographical interviews—with the need to ensure her own safety by remaining visible. An accompaniment strategy was also implemented, involving support figures such as the sports educator and the social inclusion officer, to legitimize her presence and facilitate integration, particularly at the daytime shelter. Over time, her integration deepened through regular observation of physical activity sessions and informal exchanges, particularly with Jean, a houseless person who became a key ally. His presence proved critical to the research: His trust-based relationships with other participants significantly influenced and facilitated access to several individuals.

This fieldwork experience underscores the central role of male figures, often enlisted to facilitate access to so-called "difficult" research settings. These men embodied a form of protection that aligns with the conceptual framework of the "big brother" (Clair, 2012), extending beyond fraternal bonds to encompass social control. In this sense, these male figures were not only allies but also guarantors of legitimacy and physical integrity in the field. Just as houseless women navigate hypermasculine dynamics by associating with male figures perceived as protective (Lanzarini, 2000), the researcher's trajectory in the field reveals a similar dynamic. It demonstrates how she, too, became embedded in relations of domination by adapting her behavior and appearance, and by relying on male figures to secure her access to the daytime shelter. These strategic choices, however, restricted access to certain dimensions of the research. The decision to frequent the field at specific times limited the researcher's holistic understanding of the daytime shelter. The "raw life" of this space—marked by tensions, conflicts, or unexpected acts of solidarity—remained partially out of reach. Furthermore, conducting interviews in public spaces may have constrained participants' freedom of expression, while the researcher's position as a woman interviewing men potentially influenced their narratives, limiting disclosures about intimate experiences.

The data analysis required the use of classical methodological tools (Beaud & Weber, 2003): documenting facts through writing, keeping a field journal, transcribing interviews in full, reading each document critically to decode implicit meanings and contradictions, and organizing the materials by deconstructing and reorganizing them. Observations showed that participants' involvement was influenced by various factors, and the effectiveness of the intervention varied across different structures. To understand these variations, we thematized the collected data, considering aspects such as the atmosphere, security, living conditions, physical activity sessions offered, and the modes of practice. The materials were categorized according to these themes, which helped identify interpretive pathways and better understand the underlying dynamics. Furthermore, we cross-referenced this data with the interview results, comparing lived experiences, behaviors during the sessions, and participant testimonies. The biographical interviews were analyzed in two stages: The first stage explored participants' life trajectories (school, work, sports, emotions, family, etc.) chronologically, while the second examined them thematically and transversally, to move beyond the uniqueness of each individual story. This analysis allowed us to explore the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants, their trajectories, current living situations, and housing histories. We also analyzed their living conditions by examining discourses related to income, expenses, health, potential future projects, and health status. Finally, drawing on Paugam's (2008) typology of social ties, we classified the data into four categories—kinship ties, elective participation ties, organic participation ties, and citizenship ties—and assessed the quantity and quality of social connections.

In this research, as in most qualitative studies, researchers are more often confronted with the validity of their materials than their colleagues who use quantitative techniques. There are three reasons for this: the

lack of generalizability due to the small sample size, the time constraints, and the presumed importance of researcher subjectivity in data analysis. In our case, a fourth issue emerged, related to our personal and conflicted relationship with the field, our sensitivity to the personal problems of the participants, and their characteristics. We were simultaneously embarrassed, apprehensive, and, in a way, aware that we were entering these people's lives as if by intrusion (especially since the participants were already being asked to join the physical activity sessions). This was, of course, corrected as we progressed in the study, but honestly, we cannot claim that these feelings didn't matter or that they disappeared completely.

One might therefore argue that our data holds little value because of all this, especially since we neither employed member-checking techniques nor used triangulation, precisely because of this sense of intrusion, even though we recognize the benefits of such approaches (McKim, 2023; Touraine et al., 1980). We could not systematically present our transcripts to participants or any of them, nor set up focus groups or provide feedback on the findings. Instead, we preferred to engage each newly met or revisited participant—even in a less formal way than during the initial interview—as someone capable of hearing our progress from the previous interviews. While this undoubtedly adds less value to our materials than if we had treated the participants as potential experts able to respond to McKim's (2023) four ideal questions, our approach seemed more suitable and, nonetheless, useful for controlling our data.

4. Socialized to Isolate?

4.1. Difficult Beginnings

At the transitional housing facility, Sophie and John never knew their biological parents. Sophie was adopted at three months old. She describes her adoptive family as upper-middle class: frequent vacations, a large house, multiple gardens, and cars. However, her childhood memories are marked by domestic chores—cleaning the house, the cars, tending to the gardens and animals—and the prohibition of play: "She raised me but for that [she mimics money]. I never had a mother's love." John lived in children's homes and later in shelters for young workers. He regrets never having had any information about his parents or any potential siblings:

> That's why I've always managed on my own…you know, it's not easy. I don't know how I manage to hold on…you really have to have something very solid to make it to the end. I wouldn't be here if I had fallen into alcohol or something. That's what happens when you don't have parents.

The link of parentage, whether biological or adoptive, contributes to an individual's balance by providing protection and recognition (Paugam, 2008). In both cases presented, this link has been weakened: For Sophie, it was compromised by adoptive filiation and the way she was treated, while for John, it never existed, as abandonment severed the bond. Neither grew up in a family environment conducive to their personal development, self-confidence, identity, or balance.

Even for those who knew their parents, the family environment was no better. Nadine experienced physical violence from her father, who struggled with alcohol addiction. At 14, she left home and lived on the streets for more than twenty years:

> Yeah, that's why I left. There was also….They fought with knives and all….I defended her, I stood in the middle, but it was useless to stand in the middle, my father had a knife! So, I separated them and every time I separated them, it started again. I gave up.

Suzie dropped out of school at 12 due to a pregnancy. Although she doesn't mention any violence or abuse, it is revealed that her daughter passed away at eleven months. Damien grew up in an economically favorable environment but experienced a distant and demeaning relationship with his father:

> To get a kind word from him, you have to wake up early. I was always a bit treated like a worthless person….It started when I was very young….When I was on school holidays, I tell you, even though I didn't like school, I preferred to be at school. He used to tell me: "You'll never do anything with your life, you're just a…you're going to end up in the trash." So, that really shocked me.

The results obtained from the other structures surveyed are similar. Seven out of the nine people interviewed grew up in difficult family environments marked by separations, violence or mistreatment, and addiction issues. These experiences led the majority of this population to live in one or more collective institutions.

At the time of the survey, two individuals from the youth workers' residence were in contact with a parent. Of the sixteen people surveyed, eleven have siblings, six of whom maintain more or less distant relationships. Six participants have children, but only two have regular contact, without maintaining relationships with all of their children. The ruptures or weakening of familial bonds in adulthood are related to the death of parents (especially for the older individuals), deep disagreements, or the desire not to be perceived in their current living conditions.

The majority of our sample (13/16) experienced precarious trajectories from childhood, marked by ruptures in the filial bond. These experiences have further weakened these individuals, particularly due to the lack of material and relational resources to cope with difficulties. Coming mostly from working-class backgrounds, their initial vulnerability has exacerbated the obstacles to adapting to dominant social norms and building a stable professional and social trajectory. These elements reflect what we discussed regarding the findings of Bahr and Caplow's (1968) sociology of social ties, particularly the life story characteristics that make downward social mobility or precarity even more destructive.

4.2. Deprived of Traditional Professional and Marital Lives?

4.2.1. Chaotic Career Paths

The trajectories of the respondents did not allow them to follow the "classic" path of social integration through work, starting with obtaining a diploma. School, being a key element in integration (Emmanuelli & Frémontier, 2002), plays a crucial role, and the lack of qualifications complicates access to the labor market. In 2021, 44.6% of active individuals without a diploma who had completed their education within one to four years were unemployed, compared to 8.9% of those with a two-year college degree or higher (Yaouancq & Duée, 2014). While this refers to the possession of cultural capital and its use, we also saw earlier that such a weakness impacts the acquisition of weak ties, which are so crucial.

No resident at the shelter has had a linear career (Table 2). Damien, who holds a school diploma with a vocational focus in secretarial, had a relatively stable career until health issues forced him to switch sectors and eventually stop working permanently. Danny, with a vocational certificate in agricultural mechanics (unobtained diploma), worked as a transporter for 17 years but was fired due to chronic alcohol abuse. He then went through a series of temporary contracts until he could no longer work. Sophie, a vocational certificate holder in public services, juggled several part-time and temporary jobs. Following her divorce, she alternated between unemployment and work, accumulating debt until being evicted from her home. Nadine and Suzie, who are both without diplomas and have had little or no professional experience, face difficulties in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Nadine left school at 14, while Suzie dropped out at 12 to focus on domestic and family tasks under her husband's control.

Table 2. Profile of individuals in transitional housing, day centers, and the youth worker's hostel.

Name	Age	Diploma	Employment	Professional career	Relationship status	Social background
			Transitional housing			
Danny	51	—	—	Transporter for 17 years then dismissal	Single	Mother: housewife Father: truck driver
Sophie	60	Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC): public services	—	Multiple part-time temporary cleaning jobs and unemployment	In a relationship	Mother: childminder Father: employee in a sorting center
Fanny	55	—	—	Baker for 11 years	In a relationship	Mother: secretary in a law firm Father: factory manager
John	58	CPC: painter	—	Multiple temporary jobs as a painter Unemployed since 2013	Single	—
Nadine	57	—	—	—	Single	Mother: housewife Father: garbage collector
Suzie	65	—	Retired	—	In a relationship	Mother: housewife Father: manual worker
Damien	52	CPC: hairdressing Vocational diploma: secretarial	—	Hairdresser for eight years Secretary in an association for 14 years Unemployed since 2014	Single	Parents: independent butchers

Table 2. (Cont.) Profile of individuals in transitional housing, day centers, and the youth worker's hostel.

Name	Age	Diploma	Employment	Professional career	Relationship status	Social background
			Day center			
Jean	44	Vocational diploma: masonry	—	Mason	Single	—
Lola	18	—	—	—	In a relationship	—
Amelie	45	CPC: public services	—	Chambermaid	In a relationship	Mother: housekeeper Father: municipal employee
Geoffrey	20	—	—	Cook	Single	Mother: housekeeper Father: truck driver
Serge	31	—	—	Order picker	Single	Mother: housekeeper Father: school monitor
			Youth worker's hostel			
Timeo	18	CPC: masonry	–	Interior renovation	In a relationship	Mother: care assistant Father: security officer
Yanis	26	–	Temporarily order picker	–	Single	Mother: unemployed Father: lawyer
Lana	18	–	–	–	In a relationship	Mother: hairdresser Father: truck driver
Julien	20	CPC: Engineering	–	–	Single	Mother: housekeeper Father: construction worker

At the day center and the youth worker's housing, only Yanis holds a temporary job as an order picker. In terms of diplomas, Jean has a vocational diploma in masonry and Julien, Amélie, and Timéo each have a vocational certificate, while the remaining five participants have no qualifications. All have been, and continue to be, largely disconnected from the labor market. Their professional trajectories, marked by precarious and temporary contracts, reflect unstable and uncertain integration, and in most cases, exclusion. The absence of employment for individuals in the three structures results in a lack of protection regarding both their future and present circumstances, as well as a lack of recognition, as they rely on social assistance.

The misalignment of the respondents with the dominant social integration norm through work is also reflected in their personal lives, particularly in their relationships.

4.2.2. Romantic Relationships: Violence and Separations

The residents of the transitional housing have faced one or more separations and sometimes abusive relationships. This is the case for Suzie, Damien, and John. Suzie was beaten by her second partner (she had divorced once) "with a cane, with a knife!" After this event, she fled the marital home. Damien was no luckier. When he remarried (he had been married for twenty-five years), his relationship with his wife quickly deteriorated. While "at first, when I met her, it was perfect," their relationship declined after their marriage, and he became the scapegoat of his wife:

> And it even happened that…well, I'll tell you, but I was subjected to violence by her….I didn't dare to retaliate either, already, I couldn't because of my arm and then on crutches, and then, I thought about it, I said to myself, I have to defend myself because, with knives to the throat and everything, you know…And if I had retaliated, they would have said I was the one beating my wife….I try to dodge because she would hit me where I had been operated, you had to see, she was like a boxer…she would hit from the side and then….Pah! Pah! Pah!

John was never married. Although he shared his life with two people, both relationships ended in failure. The first relationship was the one that traumatized him. He talks about the abuse suffered by his partner's son. He left after eight years of living together with this person. Each, for different reasons, had to leave or even flee the marital home. Today, they all live alone in their housing at the transitional home, although some are in relationships (4/7).

The data collected at the day center and the age of the young workers do not allow us to trace their marital relationships. However, we do know that Jean considers himself houseless today because of a marital breakup.

4.2.3. A Daily Life of Isolation

At the transitional housing, social interactions are centered around this living space and its surroundings. All participants live alone in modestly priced studio apartments. In these homes, visits are rare. Sometimes, the residents' children or their spouse visit them, but the place is not suitable for larger gatherings. While Damien owns a car and John and Danny occasionally use their bikes, the transitional housing remains the main place they frequent. Outings are limited to necessities, such as shopping or medical appointments. Residents spend a lot of time at home, sleeping, watching television, or doing household chores. Some regularly gather at the entrance, especially the smokers. However, Suzie stands out with her desire for freedom after a life of isolation: "I just want to go out." She visits cabarets and attends shows with her sisters, also enjoying the markets, always accompanied by them.

At the day center, activities are limited, and there is a sense of waiting. During an informal conversation with four young people, one of them expressed feeling trapped. Most of them spend their time watching television or checking their phones. When the weather permits, they gather outside near the day center, where they talk while smoking "soft" drugs and cigarettes. They rarely stay far from the facility. Fights are frequent, and

the atmosphere is tense. The feeling of insecurity is shared by most of those surveyed, which hinders the formation of bonds within the center. This contrasts with the youth workers' residence, where the four young people surveyed feel safe, even quite safe.

Without focusing on the causes of their current situation, we can consider that this population shares common characteristics: experiences of painful events, low education levels, dependence on social aid, lack of employment, housing, and social isolation. However, an analysis of their family, marital, and professional trajectories, as well as their daily lives, reveals a certain heterogeneity, as confirmed by the literature. Beyond sociodemographic factors such as age or gender, our results show nuances: The events they have experienced are varied and more or less traumatic, and the level of support they receive varies, confirming the explanatory weight of differences in life paths. They do not frequent the same structures, and their prior socialization experiences affected, in different ways, their ability to create or maintain social connections. Some have lost all their connections, while others experience a weakening of their social ties. This heterogeneity proves to be a challenge for interpreting the results as it prevents a straightforward answer to a simple question: What are the effects of the program on social isolation in this population? To answer this question, it was necessary to consider this heterogeneity and provide levels of precision, as the effects will depend on the social characteristics of the participants and these famous differences in life stories popularized by Bahr and Caplow (1968).

5. The Effects of Physical Activities

5.1. The Conditions of Participation in Physical Activities

As mentioned, one of the first conclusions was that individuals' participation in physical activity sessions was influenced by various factors, including the structure that accommodates these people. Participants at the transitional housing are fewer in number but more regular in their attendance compared to other survey sites. On the other hand, more people at the day center have participated, albeit very occasionally. Why? Our results revealed that many people mentioned a "time famine." The pressure of immediate needs reduces the possibility of planning for the future, thus affecting the very idea of temporal strategies. The most precarious individuals, who live with a sense of social decline, are placed, by their living conditions, in an objective inability to project into the future, both because day-to-day life prevents this projection and because the future, in light of the past and present, is worrying (Millet & Thin, 2005). This may explain why people at the day center, at the beginning of their care, prefer autonomous sports activities because they can engage in them when their primary needs are or will be met. Participation in the proposed activities can only be considered when the present is secure, particularly in terms of economic subsistence (Vieille Marchiset, 2019). Our results confirm this: The more stability the housing structures offer, the more regular the participants are.

5.2. Athletic Paths and Social Contexts

Here, we will focus on the residents of the transitional housing studied, which is the only site of the investigation where the participants demonstrate regularity. Three distinct athletic profiles emerge among the participants. Two of the seven individuals only mention physical activities related to the school environment, such as physical education classes or recess games. The majority ($n = 4$), however, engaged in physical activities outside of school, either in organized clubs ($n = 3$) or informally and independently ($n = 3$). Finally, one person reports never having participated in physical activity during their youth.

The analysis reveals that the absence of physical activity outside of school primarily affects women (Nadine, Sophie, and Suzie). The men, on the other hand, seem to have been more active in their youth, as was Fanny, from a privileged background, who practiced both organized sports (swimming) and informal activities (cross-country running). However, these gender differences do not fully explain the diversity of sports trajectories in adulthood. The narratives show that childhood sports experiences do not necessarily carry over into adulthood. These trajectories are shaped by social, cultural, personal, and sometimes biographical factors that go far beyond physical practices themselves. For example, Sophie, who was forbidden to play sports in her childhood, engaged in walking, swimming, and weightlifting in adulthood before stopping due to early-onset Parkinson's disease. In contrast, Fanny, who was socialized into sports during her childhood, gradually ceased all physical activity as she grew older, influenced by personal choices and life constraints.

The narratives also reveal the influence of the family context on sports paths. Three families stand out because they have members who participated in physical activities. Danny's father and brothers played football, although his mother and sisters did not practice any sport. Damien mentions regular weekends by the sea, where his father and brother engaged in activities like hunting and clay shooting. Fanny, on the other hand, describes parents who were professionally invested but occasionally practiced walking. These are also the families where children participated in sports activities outside of school, in organized clubs.

Finally, a correlation seems to emerge between social background and the diversity of sports practices. Fanny and Damien, from middle or upper-class backgrounds, experimented with a variety of physical activities in their childhood, reflecting the concept of sports omnivorousness typical of privileged social classes (Lefèvre & Ohl, 2007). However, their precarious professional paths and traumatic events partly explain the decline, even abandonment, of physical activities in adulthood.

Given the diversity of profiles, socializations, backgrounds, and experiences, it is difficult to determine whether these sports practices truly lead to the creation of social bonds. While these practices may sometimes encourage interactions, it remains uncertain to what extent they contribute to the formation of lasting connections, which we will now discuss.

5.3. Physical Activities—A Cathartic Moment and Their Ephemeral Social Impact

Observations and statements collected at the transitional housing reveal both positive and negative effects. The sessions occur twice a week for an hour in the communal lounge of the transitional housing. The ability to go somewhere alone is often a skill developed through past social experiences. Since residents do not face this challenge, their participation is easier. The sessions first allow physical proximity of participants in the same place. This would probably not have happened otherwise. Their trajectories have led them to live in this structure and they are forced to cohabit, sharing common spaces with people they did not choose, do not necessarily appreciate, and with whom they do not wish to interact: "Here, you have residents….I can't adapt. Some smell of alcohol, ugh, I can't" (Sophie), "I am a loner. I like being alone. Other people's lives don't interest me much, already my own…" (Danny). This leads us to consider that the physical activities sessions could be perceived as a tolerated and forced co-presence with others (Marcellini, 2021). Nevertheless, the proximity becomes inevitably social in that there are verbal exchanges between them and the educator. One hears applause, grumbling, laughter. They tease each other. Some make jokes. When activities are team-based, they encourage each other and also develop strategies to win. There is also a form of solidarity among participants.

In table tennis, the ball is picked up for Damien who cannot bend down, and when Suzie hurts herself during a session (cramp), they stop and express concern.

Participants have an instrumental perception of the sessions, which are unanimously seen as an opportunity to "not stay in their corner" and to "pass the time" to "fill" the void or solitude imposed by their living conditions, while using these moments as opportunities to escape the monotony of their daily lives. Participation in these activities can be seen as a time management strategy (Goifman, 2002). It allows them to see people, "do something" (six out of seven participants explain that, outside of the sessions, nothing is offered) and to distract themselves from their anxieties and past traumas. Like the prisoners studied by Müller (2024), the sessions offered to participants provide an opportunity to reconnect with pleasant memories from the past and mentally escape their current situation, particularly that of living in precarity. This process of mental escape, as expressed by John ("reviving childhood memories") and Damien ("my mind gets a break"), creates a temporary space for respite. However, this engagement can also reveal tensions, particularly when certain activities, such as yoga, conflict with past traumas. These traumas intensify the emotions experienced and may lead to non-participation (Fanny) or adjustments in involvement: This is the case for Nadine, for whom closing her eyes during a relaxation session is a challenge. It reminds her of her past on the streets when she faced danger during the nights spent outside.

The desire "to occupy themselves," "to fill the time" gives them the chance to belong to a group called "the sportspeople of the transitional housing." If identity is the result of a process of social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1986), participation in the sessions, for people whose positive self-appraisal has been weakened, involves identity issues: a change in how they view themselves ("even, I even heard myself say, um…well, you see, for someone who is in pain, it's okay, you're still managing somehow," "it's the mind that reacts. I want to prove to myself that I can do it") and how others view them (Dubar, 2000). This belonging appears as an opportunity to exist and be socially recognized. Thus, if one of them misses a session, other residents and the sports educator inquire. Often, specialized educators even go to find them in their studio, making them visible to others.

Given these results, is there, however, a creation of social bonds? In this article, based on our empirical materials and elements from the scientific literature, we have attempted to highlight how the life stories and singularities of the respondents impact their current social living conditions. We aimed to illustrate how tumultuous, if not injury-laden, trajectories produce their share of traumas, which undoubtedly mark the respondents' capital. Economically, culturally, and socially, these individuals are not only vulnerable or made vulnerable: They are primarily significantly and durably weakened. Thus, it is surprising to note that physical activity sessions have had effects in terms of recognition. How is this possible? How can such social careers still allow for the potential benefits of physical and sports activities? We hypothesize that these same trajectories have anchored the subjects in the present, in a course of existence fixed on physical events in which the respondents are personally involved. Physical and sports activity sessions offer this advantage. They are designed to engage the subject in a "doing" or participation that physically and concretely involves them. Thus, during a gathering, respondents experience "something" and seem to be marked by it. But this mark fades once the session is over, as the marks of life trajectories take their place again. Outside the sessions, which provide them with respite, valorize them, and offer recognition, they are again faced with their isolation and even solitude for some. Indeed, having little regard for one another, they do not interact outside the proposed activities:

Interviewer: But otherwise, coming to be with people, chatting…

Fanny: No, no, there's no point, no. I'd rather stay at home.

The distance each person has from the dominant norms of social integration does not, mechanically, lead to affinities or closeness among participants (Bordiec, 2018). Moreover, they are mostly devoid of social links, whatever they may be. If they no longer think about their problems, sadness, or anxieties during the suspended time of the session, those are not permanently forgotten. Many of them sleep little, poorly, experience regular anxiety attacks, are depressed, relapse regularly and some find comfort in a nightlight. The physical activities sessions offered, like any institution, take up a portion of the participants' time and attention, creating a specific environment that tends to envelop them (Goffman, 1968). This implies that, even though they do not fundamentally alter the social dispositions of the participants, they produce effects that would likely not occur without such activities: significant moments for the participants—such as amusement, escape, or time occupation—whose regular attendance attests to their importance. These activities also allow for the development or rediscovery of skills such as group integration, respect for rules, identity reconstruction, and emotional management. However, they remain powerless, at the time of the study, in the face of the weight of prior socializations marked by social isolation or solitude, and cannot erase the traumas of the past. Thus, a contrast persists between the pleasant moments experienced during the sessions and the difficulties encountered in the daily lives of the participants.

How can one be surprised by such a finding? Indeed, life trajectories have placed respondents in events that have profoundly affected, injured them, and especially structurally impacted their practical living conditions. One should not be surprised to find that the suspended time provided by physical activity sessions brings a range of effects. Even if ephemeral, they illustrate the cathartic function of sports (Elias & Dunning, 1986) precisely because it anchors those who practice it in the unfolding moment. Such a benefit is due to physical engagement. But it does not resist the weight of disrupted life trajectories and their conditions make them more or less destructive. At best, the sessions are an interruption of social breaks that may make their isolation more bearable (Bordiec, 2018). An ephemeral social bond will always have less strength than strong or weak ties, when they exist. And it will likely produce effects as ephemeral as itself.

We are aware that our results remain limited. Even though we have gradually worked through our personal biases, it is likely that this still depends on our initial and conflicted relationship with the participants. Why hide this, knowing that previous studies we personally conducted never triggered such discomfort (Duflos, 2021)? It is also possible that this stems from our empirical knowledge associated with the moderate benefits of physical activity programs aimed at individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (Decorte et al., 2024; Ternoy et al., 2021). Indeed, while we are convinced of the value of using physical activity to improve the social living conditions of individuals, we remain cautious when it comes to concluding that this can be sustained in the lives of individuals facing clear vulnerabilities or undeniable precarities. For the houseless participants in our study, as for other profiles, the meaning and impact of physical activities are intimately linked to the relationships individuals have with space and time—specifically, the conditions under which physical activity is offered. We might dare to compare our participants to prisoners who are offered physical activity during their incarceration as part of social reintegration efforts. In this regard, it is known that such benefits cannot be realized before these prisoners have come to terms with the loss of their freedom and life projects, and have overcome the shock of incarceration marked by deprivation and lack (Gras, 2003). The houseless individuals

in our study likely share some characteristics with prisoners in that their precarious living conditions dominate and dictate the course of events in which they seemingly participate, but perhaps not fully. The fact that they experience a relative improvement in their lifestyles does not necessarily guarantee a more profound benefit from physical activity, especially because past painful biographical experiences continue to overshadow their relationship with time and events. Just as formerly incarcerated individuals may carry a prison habitus that prevents them from fully engaging in physical activity (such as yoga) due to various mismatches (Norman, 2020), our participants bear the weight of their past and repeated precarities. So, what can be done? What does this qualitative research, conducted with a modest sample of houseless individuals and under conditions that quantitative researchers would easily criticize, reveal, even if imperceptibly? According to Norman (2020), it appears that the success of reintegration programs utilizing the benefits of leisure activities depends on the continuation, outside the walls, of the social circles formed within the prison environment. What worked for the women in the study mentioned by Norman could very well work with the houseless participants in our study: Didn't the physical activity programs they experienced even temporarily generate sociability? It is important to encourage their establishment over time, creating the conditions for them to become a moment that fosters social relationships, without which nothing is possible.

6. Conclusion

This article provides insight into the effects of a physical activity program offered to people in extreme poverty. The implementation of an extensive ethnographic approach allowed us to engage closely with those benefiting from the program and, consequently, to identify some of the effects it produced. Firstly, we highlighted the impact of the participants' life trajectories on their current circumstances and the positions they hold in the social sphere. Their difficult early lives, marked by the absence or fragility of familial ties, significantly influenced their paths. The participants experienced what Paugam (2008) describes as forms of contempt, ranging from violations of their physical integrity to social devaluation, and sometimes even legal exclusion, all while accumulating ruptures and/or vulnerabilities.

These life experiences led these individuals to varying degrees of social isolation. As a result, the effects of the program offered in this city cannot be the same for everyone. The diversity of situations made it impossible to simply answer our initial question, forcing us to generalize rather than define the effects according to each individual's trajectory. Overall, the sessions address a unanimous need for occupation and, indirectly, for social contact. They allow participants to be in the presence of others, to share a moment, to engage in social interactions, and most importantly, to belong to a group, offering them a form of recognition…at least during the session. Indeed, all of this stops once the session ends. It seems as though this "suspended time" momentarily interrupts their social isolation, only for them to return to it afterward. The effects are thus rooted in the present moment, much like the lives of those who participate.

Although housed and potentially feeling the fragile breeze of a better life on the horizon, houseless individuals may struggle to derive lasting benefits from physical activity programs due to their life trajectories. This limits the impact of the activities offered and fails to bring about structural or lasting changes in their circumstances. As a result, the act of "passing time" remains a central goal for participants, without leading to profound or enduring transformations in their social relationships or living conditions (Goifman, 2002). Previously, we dared to compare the houseless individuals in this study to incarcerated persons. Clearly, we do not believe that the lives of our participants constitute prisons, and one should not

casually label all forms of hardship as imprisonment, since prison has its own specificities and refers to a wide heterogeneity of conditions of incarceration (Moran et al., 2017). Yet, in many respects, houseless individuals bear the stigmas of the incarcerated, with lives marked by deprivation, lack, and suffering. These stigmas, deeply and durably ingrained, shape a powerful habitus that likely generates conflicted relationships even with well-intentioned initiatives.

But can we venture an interpretation (Lahire, 1996)? Could one of the effects outside the sessions, driven by their return to social isolation, be a reinforcement of their status as isolated individuals? In the end, does this program cause more harm than good outside of the sessions? While it may interrupt their isolation temporarily, the effect remains short-lived. The narratives of their daily lives reveal a stark contrast between the moments of physical activity, which foster forms of sociability and security through induced social contacts, and the loneliness and insecurity they feel in their harsh lives marked by past traumas.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The analyzed data are available from the authors on request.

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