

Empowering Lives through Football: A Narrative Review of the Homeless World Cup as a Sport-Based Intervention for Social Inclusion

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Abstract

Homelessness is a multidimensional form of social exclusion rooted in trauma, stigma, and structural inequality, requiring interventions that extend beyond housing provision alone. Sport-based initiatives have emerged as complementary approaches to psychosocial engagement, yet their mechanisms and sustainability remain underexplored. This review offers a mechanism-oriented synthesis of the Homeless World Cup (HWC) as a global sport-based intervention for social inclusion, advancing a novel conceptual framing that positions the HWC as a psychosocial catalyst rather than a standalone solution. Using a narrative systematic review approach, peer-reviewed studies on the HWC, street soccer, homelessness, trauma-informed care, and public health were analyzed thematically. Findings indicate that participation fosters psychosocial empowerment, social capital development, identity reconstruction, and service engagement, primarily through recognition, belonging, and relational connection. However, outcomes are highly conditional upon institutional scaffolding, housing stability, and integrated health and social services. The discussion highlights the necessity of trauma-informed delivery and structural support, contributing a critical lens to sport-for-development scholarship and informing policy and practice for sustainable social inclusion.

Keywords: Homelessness; Sport for Development; Social Inclusion; Homeless World Cup; Football

Introduction

Homelessness and social exclusion remain among the most complex and persistent social challenges worldwide. Beyond the absence of stable housing, homelessness is frequently associated with cumulative experiences of trauma, disrupted social relationships, stigma, and long-term disengagement from social institutions (Côté et al., 2022; Fitzpatrick, 2017). These conditions often create a cycle of marginalization in which individuals face barriers to accessing employment, healthcare, and social support systems, further reinforcing their exclusion over time. Globally, approximately 100 million individuals experience homelessness, while over 1.6 billion lack adequate housing, underscoring the urgency of comprehensive and multidimensional responses (Donnelly et al., 2024). Traditional policy interventions, including emergency shelters and permanent supportive housing, have demonstrated effectiveness in improving residential stability but often fall short in addressing psychosocial recovery, identity reconstruction, and sustained social inclusion (Greenwood et al., 2020; Hwang & Burns, 2014). In particular, these interventions tend to prioritize material stability over relational and psychological dimensions, leaving critical aspects of reintegration insufficiently addressed.

In response to these limitations, sport-based interventions have gained increasing attention as complementary, low-threshold approaches to engaging socially excluded populations. Such interventions are often designed to reduce entry barriers by emphasizing participation rather than performance, thereby creating inclusive environments that are accessible to individuals with diverse backgrounds and capabilities. Sport offers embodied, relational, and symbolic experiences that may foster belonging, self-worth, and social connection, particularly for individuals who have experienced prolonged marginalization (Cowan & Taylor, 2016; Whitley et al., 2019). Through repeated participation, individuals may rebuild routines, develop trust, and experience positive social recognition, which are essential components of psychosocial recovery. However, scholars caution against uncritical claims regarding the transformative power of sport, emphasizing that outcomes depend on trauma-informed delivery, organizational capacity, and broader structural conditions (Magee, 2011; Whitley, 2022). Without appropriate support systems, sport programs risk producing only temporary engagement rather than long-term social change.

Among sport-for-development initiatives addressing homelessness, the Homeless World Cup (HWC) has emerged as one of the most prominent global interventions. Established in 2003, the HWC is an annual international football tournament designed to empower individuals experiencing homelessness while simultaneously challenging public perceptions and stigma. Research has documented psychosocial benefits for participants, including increased confidence, social capital, and renewed future orientations (Donnelly et al., 2024; Sherry, 2010). At the same time, critical evaluations highlight uneven outcomes across national contexts and question the sustainability of change without long-term institutional support (Magee & Jeanes, 2013).

Despite a growing evidence base, existing HWC literature remains fragmented and largely outcome-focused. Less attention has been paid to the mechanisms through which participation facilitates psychosocial change and the conditions under which such change can be sustained. Specifically, there is a need to examine how trauma-informed practices, the development of social capital, and the role of institutional ecosystems interact to shape participant outcomes. Accordingly, this review synthesizes interdisciplinary literature to examine the Homeless World Cup as a sport-based intervention for social inclusion, with particular emphasis on trauma, social capital, and institutional context. By shifting the focus from outcomes to underlying processes, this study aims to contribute a more nuanced understanding of how and when sport-based interventions can generate meaningful and lasting social inclusion.

Materials and Methods

Reporting and Registration

This study employed a narrative systematic review approach suitable for synthesizing qualitative, mixed-methods, and conceptual research. Given the heterogeneity of study designs and outcomes, meta-analysis was not appropriate. The review was not preregistered.

Eligibility Criteria

Studies were included if they:

1. Examined the Homeless World Cup or affiliated street soccer programs
2. Addressed homelessness, social exclusion, trauma, or social inclusion

3. Employed qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, or conceptual designs

4. Were published in peer-reviewed journals in English.

Information Sources and Search Strategy

Primary sources consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles provided by the user, supplemented by foundational literature on homelessness, trauma-informed care, and sport-for-development. Journals included *Sport in Society*, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *Health & Social Care in the Community*, and *BMC Public Health*. Key terms included Homeless World Cup, street soccer, sport-based intervention, social capital, trauma, and homelessness.

Data Extraction

Extracted data included study context, methodology, participant characteristics, theoretical frameworks, reported outcomes, and identified limitations. Particular attention was paid to mechanisms of change and contextual factors influencing outcomes.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

An inductive thematic synthesis was conducted. Findings were organized into overarching themes: psychosocial outcomes, social capital development, identity reconstruction, service engagement, and structural constraints. Interpretation was guided by social exclusion theory and trauma-informed perspectives.

Results

The synthesized literature demonstrates that the Homeless World Cup and affiliated street soccer programs generate consistent psychosocial and social benefits for participants, though outcomes are highly context-dependent and contingent upon post-event support structures.

Psychosocial Outcomes

Across studies, participation in HWC-related programs was associated with increased self-esteem, confidence, emotional regulation, and hope for the future (Donnelly et al., 2024; Sherry, 2010). Narrative and qualitative research revealed that representing

one’s country and being publicly recognized as an athlete fostered dignity and a sense of worth, particularly for individuals accustomed to invisibility and stigma.

However, longitudinal evidence indicates that these gains are often non-linear. Participants frequently experienced a “post-event crash,” characterized by emotional withdrawal or maladaptive coping behaviors upon returning to structurally constrained environments (Donnelly et al., 2024). This underscores the fragility of psychosocial change in the absence of sustained support.

Social Capital and Relational Change

A central mechanism identified across studies was the development of social capital. Bonding social capital emerged through peer relationships among players with shared lived experiences, fostering trust and mutual support (Sherry & O’May, 2013). Bridging and linking social capital were facilitated through interactions with coaches, volunteers, and spectators, expanding participants’ access to information, resources, and services (Sherry et al., 2011).

Identity Reconstruction

Participation enabled temporary identity transformation, allowing individuals to move from stigmatized identities associated with homelessness to valued roles as athletes and team representatives. Narrative studies illustrated how storytelling and embodied participation supported positive self-narratives and future-oriented identities (Donnelly et al., 2024; Whitley et al., 2022).

Service Engagement and Health Pathways

Sport-based participation functioned as a low-threshold entry point to health, housing, and employment services. This aligns with evidence from patient-centred care research demonstrating that trust-based, respectful relationships mediate access to care and improve subjective health outcomes among people experiencing homelessness (Flike et al., 2022).

Structural Constraints and Contextual Variation

Outcomes varied significantly across national contexts. High housing costs, limited welfare systems, and persistent stigma constrained participants’ ability to translate psychosocial gains into stable life outcomes (Okada, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further

highlighted structural vulnerability, disproportionately affecting homeless populations and disrupting community-based interventions (Barocas et al., 2021).

Discussion

This review set out to critically examine the Homeless World Cup (HWC) as a sport-based intervention for social inclusion by synthesizing interdisciplinary literature across sport sociology, psychology, public health, and homelessness studies. Rather than assessing the HWC solely through outcome-based metrics, this discussion advances a mechanism-oriented and context-sensitive interpretation of how, why, and under what conditions football-based participation may contribute to psychosocial empowerment and pathways toward inclusion among individuals experiencing homelessness.

The Homeless World Cup as a Psychosocial and Relational Catalyst

Across the reviewed literature, the most consistent contribution of the Homeless World Cup lies in its capacity to function as a psychosocial and relational catalyst. Participation in football-based programs associated with the HWC repeatedly facilitates improvements in self-esteem, confidence, emotional regulation, and future orientation (Donnelly et al., 2024; Magee, 2011; Sherry, 2010). These outcomes are not incidental but emerge from specific experiential mechanisms embedded in the HWC model, including public recognition, collective identity, and embodied participation.

For individuals whose lives have been shaped by trauma, stigma, and prolonged social exclusion, the experience of being recognized as an athlete and national representative constitutes a meaningful disruption of dominant deficit-based identities. Narrative-based studies demonstrate how storytelling and symbolic representation allow participants to re-author personal narratives, shifting from identities defined by homelessness toward those associated with competence, resilience, and belonging (Donnelly et al., 2024; Whitley et al., 2022). This process aligns with trauma-informed perspectives emphasizing dignity, agency, and relational safety as foundational to recovery (Greenwood et al., 2020).

Importantly, the psychosocial benefits observed in HWC participation mirror findings from broader sport-based and youth development literature. Systematic reviews of sport-based interventions indicate that structured sport environments can foster

emotional regulation, social skills, and self-worth, particularly when programs are intentionally designed and supported by trained facilitators (D’Andrea et al., 2013; Whitley et al., 2019). However, the HWC literature also cautions that such benefits are fragile and may fluctuate over time, especially once participants return to environments characterized by housing instability, poverty, and stigma (Donnelly et al., 2024).

Thus, the HWC’s primary contribution should be understood not as producing immediate structural change, but as initiating psychosocial processes that may support engagement with broader systems of care. This catalytic framing avoids romanticizing sport while acknowledging its potential role in trauma recovery and re-engagement.

Conditional Effectiveness: Structural, Health, and Policy Constraints

A central finding of this review is that the effectiveness of the Homeless World Cup is fundamentally conditional. Psychosocial empowerment generated through sport does not automatically translate into stable housing, employment, or long-term wellbeing. Instead, outcomes are mediated by structural conditions, welfare regimes, and access to integrated health and housing services.

Public health and homelessness literature consistently demonstrates that stable housing is the most robust predictor of improved health and social outcomes among homeless populations. Evidence from Housing First and permanent supportive housing models shows significant reductions in homelessness and improvements in health and service utilization when housing is provided without preconditions (Greenwood et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2020). In contrast, interventions that prioritize behavioral change without addressing housing insecurity tend to yield limited and unsustainable outcomes.

Within this context, the HWC functions most effectively when embedded within ecosystems that include housing, mental health care, substance use treatment, and case management. Research on patient-centred care among people experiencing homelessness further underscores the importance of trust-based, respectful relationships in mediating access to care and improving subjective health outcomes (Flike et al., 2022). Sport-based programs may facilitate such trust, but cannot substitute for systemic service provision.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers a stark illustration of these structural vulnerabilities. Studies examining homelessness during COVID-19 highlight how overcrowded

shelters, limited access to hygiene facilities, and structural barriers to testing and isolation disproportionately exposed homeless populations to health risks (Barocas et al., 2021; Hwang & Burns, 2014). These findings reinforce the argument that individual-level empowerment achieved through sport can be rapidly undermined by systemic crises when protective infrastructure is absent.

Moreover, structural stigma and policy environments play a decisive role in shaping post-participation trajectories. Research on social exclusion and victim-blaming demonstrates how societal attitudes toward homelessness—particularly toward women and survivors of childhood abuse—can perpetuate exclusion and erode trust in institutions (Côté et al., 2022). In such contexts, sport-based gains may be insufficient to overcome entrenched barriers to housing and employment.

Social Capital, Storytelling, and Institutional Scaffolding

Social capital emerges as a key mechanism linking sport participation to inclusion, yet its role is complex and contingent. Studies of the HWC consistently document the development of bonding social capital through peer relationships among players with shared lived experiences, fostering trust, solidarity, and mutual support (Sherry et al., 2011). Bridging and linking social capital are also facilitated through interactions with coaches, volunteers, spectators, and service providers, expanding participants’ access to resources and opportunities.

However, as critical evaluations note, social capital does not operate in a vacuum. The conversion of social ties into tangible outcomes depends on institutional scaffolding—organizational capacity, service integration, and policy alignment (Magee & Jeanes, 2013; Okada, 2021). National Partner organizations play a pivotal role in this process, acting as intermediaries between the global spectacle of the HWC and the everyday realities of homelessness. Where these organizations are well-resourced and embedded within supportive welfare systems, HWC participation is more likely to contribute to sustained engagement with education, employment, and housing pathways.

Storytelling represents another distinctive feature of the HWC model. Narrative practices—both formal and informal—allow participants to articulate experiences of trauma, resilience, and hope, contributing to identity reconstruction and public awareness (Donnelly et al., 2024; Whitley et al., 2022). At the societal level, storytelling has been shown to

challenge negative stereotypes and foster attitudinal change among spectators (Sherry et al., 2011). However, ethical tensions arise when personal narratives are selectively amplified or framed in ways that emphasize individual transformation while obscuring structural constraints. Without critical contextualization, such narratives risk reinforcing meritocratic assumptions and shifting responsibility away from social policy.

Insights from research on media use and coping following social exclusion further enrich this discussion. A systematic review of media-based coping strategies suggests that individuals actively seek tools to restore emotional equilibrium and social needs after exclusion, with positive effects observed in a majority of cases (Lutz et al., 2023). Sport-based storytelling may operate similarly, providing meaning-making and emotional regulation, yet its long-term effectiveness remains contingent on structural support.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the central argument of this article: The Homeless World Cup is best understood as a catalyst embedded within a broader institutional and policy landscape. Its strengths lie in facilitating engagement, dignity, and relational connection, but its limitations underscore the necessity of coordinated, trauma-informed, and housing-linked interventions.

Conclusion

This review has critically examined the Homeless World Cup as a sport-based intervention for social inclusion, drawing on interdisciplinary evidence from sport studies, psychology, public health, and homelessness research. The synthesis demonstrates that football-based participation can generate meaningful psychosocial benefits, including enhanced self-worth, social connection, and renewed future orientation among individuals experiencing homelessness. These benefits emerge through mechanisms of recognition, identity reconstruction, and social capital development, positioning the Homeless World Cup as a powerful catalyst for engagement rather than a definitive solution to homelessness.

At the same time, the review underscores the conditional nature of sport-based empowerment. Psychosocial gains achieved through participation are inherently fragile when disconnected from stable housing, integrated health services, and supportive policy environments. Evidence from Housing First, patient-centred care, and COVID-19 responses highlights that structural interventions remain indispensable for sustained

wellbeing and inclusion. Sport-based initiatives such as the Homeless World Cup can complement—but not replace—comprehensive housing and health strategies.

By shifting analytical focus from outcomes to mechanisms and contexts, this article contributes a more realistic and theoretically grounded understanding of sport-for-development interventions. It highlights the importance of trauma-informed delivery, institutional scaffolding, and ethical storytelling in maximizing positive impact while avoiding over-romanticized narratives of individual transformation. For policymakers and practitioners, the findings emphasize the need to embed sport-based programs within coordinated service ecosystems that address both psychosocial and material dimensions of exclusion.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal and comparative designs capable of tracing how sport-based engagement interacts with structural opportunity over time. Evaluations that integrate participant narratives, process indicators, and policy context will be essential for advancing evidence-informed practice. Ultimately, the Homeless World Cup reminds us that meaningful social inclusion begins not with goals scored on the pitch, but with sustained commitments to dignity, housing, health, and social justice beyond it.

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