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Social inclusion, equity, and access in sport participation among marginalized communities: a systematic literature review (2022–2025)

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ABSTRACT

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. A thematic synthesis approach based on Thomas and Harden (2008) was used to integrate findings across studies. Two independent reviewers performed study screening and quality appraisal using the FICO framework, with disagreements resolved through discussion to ensure methodological consistency. We followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. A structured search on Scopus gave us 1, 281 records published between 2022 and 2025. We removed three duplicates and screened the remaining 1, 278 titles and abstracts. That led to 72 full-text articles that we assessed. Ten of those made it into our qualitative synthesis. The included studies represented diverse marginalized populations, including people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, refugees, socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, women, and older adults. We appraised study quality using the FICO framework and analyzed the data through thematic synthesis. Three themes emerged. First, barriers are multidimensional. They span structural, economic, spatial, cultural, and interpersonal factors. Second, the benefits of sport depend on prior inclusion. Sport tends to reflect social integration rather than create it. Third, inclusion policies can unintentionally reinforce inequalities because they often rest on assimilationist ideas. Pulling together perspectives from social inclusion, social capital, intersectionality, capability, and social-ecology, the review highlights the need for equity-focused, intersectional, community-driven approaches. Looking ahead, research should prioritize longitudinal studies, intersectional analyses, work from the Global South, and community-led projects.



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Introduction

It's well known that regular participation in sport and physical activity boosts physical, psychological, and social health. Global public-health agendas promote it as a matter of population wellbeing and, more recently, of social justice (Ulset et al., 2025). Seen through a health equity lens, opportunities to be physically active aren't random. They're patterned by the social, economic, and environmental conditions people live in (Araujo et al., 2022; Hallum et al., 2024). When entire communities face systematic denial of meaningful access to these opportunities, the resulting gaps aren't just individual misfortune. They become expressions of structural inequity that sport policy claims to fix. So figuring out how and for whom sport participation is enabled or blocked is central to both public health and the sociology of sport.

Marginalized communities, populations disadvantaged by disability, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, migration status, or age, consistently report lower and more precarious sport participation than their more advantaged peers (Moreno-Llamas et al., 2022; Roh & Chang, 2025). Social exclusion theory explains this pattern as the result of processes that push individuals and groups to the edges of valued social institutions, restricting their access to resources, relationships, and recognition (Sandford et al., 2022). Sport, as a highly visible and culturally esteemed institution, both reflects and can amplify these exclusionary dynamics. That makes it a strategic site for examining how marginalization happens and how it might be challenged.

Research has documented participation disparities and their correlates quite extensively. Studies have mapped socioeconomic gradients in access (Smith et al., 2022; Dong et al., 2023), looked at the social environments that help or hinder involvement (Sakalidis et al., 2023), and assessed targeted programmes designed to widen participation (Pochstein, 2022; Young & Block, 2023). A lot of this work draws, explicitly or implicitly, on the concept of social capital. It follows Bourdieu's (1986) view of capital as unequally distributed resources and Putnam's (2000) distinction between bonding and bridging ties, arguing that sport can create relational assets for excluded groups (Block et al., 2025; Nesse et al., 2024). At the same time, the sport-for-development tradition has positioned organized sport as a lever for social integration and community wellbeing (Coalter, 2007; Corvino et al., 2023).

More recent work has pushed the field forward methodologically and conceptually. Researchers have adopted intersectional and mixed-methods designs to capture how multiple axes of disadvantage interact (Kaja et al., 2024; Ominyi et al., 2025). They've used geospatial techniques to quantify spatial inequities in provision (Smith et al., 2022) and they've mobilized the capability approach, Sen's (1999) and Nussbaum's (2011) focus on real freedoms to achieve valued functionings, to reframe participation as a question of substantive opportunity, not just availability. These developments signal a shift from cataloguing who participates less toward explaining the mechanisms that structure unequal access.

Despite this progress, important gaps remain. First, the evidence is fragmented by population. Reviews and primary studies usually focus on a single group, like people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, or older adults, in isolation (Parchem et al., 2024; Fraser et al., 2025; Roh & Chang, 2025). That siloing hides the shared structural drivers that cut across groups and the intersectional realities of people who belong to several marginalized categories at once. Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality makes this limitation analytically clear. Without cross-population synthesis, common leverage points for equitable reform are easy to miss.

Second, theoretical and methodological limitations restrict interpretation. Many studies treat "inclusion" as a self-evident good without questioning the assumptions embedded in policy discourse. That allows assimilationist logics to go unexamined (Dowling, 2024; Ricatti et al., 2022). Others stay descriptive, listing barriers without placing them within multi-level explanatory frameworks like the social-ecological model and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Those frameworks locate behaviour within nested individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy influences (Ominyi et al., 2025). The result is an evidence base rich in correlates but relatively thin on integrated theorization of how disadvantage builds up across levels.

Third, the need for synthesis has become urgent. As sport systems worldwide adopt equity, diversity, and inclusion commitments (Lagerstrom et al., 2025), practitioners and policymakers need consolidated, theoretically grounded evidence on what shapes participation for marginalized communities and where intervention matters most. A systematic review that deliberately spans populations, foregrounds equity, and integrates complementary theoretical lenses can turn a dispersed literature into actionable insight. This review responds to that need by synthesizing recent high-quality evidence within a single analytic frame.

Accordingly, this review aims to synthesize contemporary empirical evidence on sport participation among marginalized communities by identifying multilevel barriers, explaining psychosocial mechanisms that influence inclusion outcomes, and critically evaluating policy and programme approaches designed to improve equitable access to sport.

So this review pursues three questions. The first concerns the anatomy of disadvantage: identifying and organizing the barriers that shape sport participation across marginalized communities. Read through social inclusion theory, which highlights access, participation, and belonging as dimensions of membership in valued institutions, this question tries to move beyond isolated barrier lists toward a coherent, multi-level

account. RQ1: What individual, social, structural, and environmental barriers shape sport participation among marginalized communities, and how are these barriers organized across ecological levels?

The second question tackles mechanisms and outcomes. Drawing on social capital theory, self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci's (2000) account of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as bases of sustained motivation), and the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), it asks how participation, where it does happen, translates into inclusion-relevant outcomes and for whom those benefits materialize. RQ2: Through what psychosocial and relational mechanisms does sport participation generate, or fail to generate, inclusion outcomes like social capital, belonging, and confidence for marginalized participants?

The third question turns to policy and practice. Informed by the sport-for-development and community development traditions and by an equity framework attentive to the fair distribution of opportunity, it examines how inclusion is constructed and operationalized in programmes and policy. It asks whether such efforts dismantle inequity or just reproduce it. Together, addressing these questions across populations and through integrated theory is the novel contribution of this review. RQ3: How do sport policies and programmes construct and enact "inclusion" for marginalized communities, and to what extent do they advance equitable access or reproduce existing inequities?

Method

Research Design and Framework

Because our research questions demanded a transparent, replicable, and rigorous synthesis of dispersed studies, we adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) design (Tranfield et al., 2003). The review process and reporting followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021). That framework lays out clear standards for identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and synthesis. An SLR works well for pulling together evidence that crosses multiple marginalized populations and disciplinary traditions. It allows cross-population comparison within a single, theory-driven frame.

Search Strategy

We developed a Boolean search string that targeted the intersection of sport participation, marginalized populations, and inclusion/equity concepts. It was applied across the title, abstract, and keyword fields (TITLE-ABS-KEY). Truncation () helped capture different word forms, like 'includi' standing for inclusion or inclusive. Here's the string structure:

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( "sport participation" OR "physical activity" OR "community sport" ) AND ( "marginali*" OR "disadvantaged" OR "underserved" OR "ethnic minorit*" OR "refugee*" OR "disabilit*" OR "LGBTQ*" OR "low-income" ) AND ( "social inclusion" OR "social exclusion" OR "equity" OR "inequalit*" OR "access" )
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We balanced sensitivity and precision by using field codes, phrase operators, and truncation. The search string was pilot-tested multiple times, making sure it could find all the important established studies. Three pilot searches were conducted to refine keyword combinations, truncation operators, and Boolean logic. Search sensitivity was evaluated by ensuring retrieval of benchmark articles identified during the preliminary literature exploration.

Database and Information Sources

Scopus provided the primary data for this review. We chose it for its broad multidisciplinary coverage of peer-reviewed literature in sport science, public health, and social science. The entire search was a single Scopus metadata export. This export is the authoritative evidence base; every bibliographic count, author name, title, journal, year, and identifier reported here comes directly from it. No supplementary databases were used, and we acknowledge this as a limitation. Scopus was selected because it provides broader multidisciplinary coverage of sport science, public health, sociology, and policy research than most single databases. Although additional databases such as Web of Science or PubMed may increase retrieval, Scopus was considered sufficient to capture the interdisciplinary nature of the review topic.

Eligibility Criteria

We established eligibility in advance with six criteria, which you can see in Table 1. The included studies had to be peer-reviewed and in English. They also needed to explore sport or physical activity participation among at least one marginalized community and explicitly address inclusion, equity, or access.

Table 1 <Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria>

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English only	Non-English
Document type	Peer-reviewed journal article	Conference paper, book chapter, editorial, note
Publication period	2022–2025	Before 2022
Subject area	Sport science, public health, social sciences addressing sport/PA participation	Unrelated disciplines; no participation focus
Accessibility	Full text available	Abstract only / inaccessible full text
Relevance	Directly addresses marginalized communities and inclusion/equity/access	Tangential mention only

Study Selection Process

Our study selection followed a three-stage process right in line with PRISMA 2020. We started by removing all duplicate records. Next, we screened titles and abstracts against our eligibility criteria to quickly eliminate obviously irrelevant studies. After that, the full texts of potentially eligible papers were carefully reviewed, and we recorded exactly why each one got excluded. We threw out records that covered populations or outcomes outside the review's scope, didn't have a real participation-and-access focus, or had a full text we simply couldn't get. Whenever eligibility was unclear, we kept the record in for full-text assessment so we wouldn't throw it out prematurely. Study selection was independently performed by two reviewers. Any disagreements regarding eligibility were resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved. Where necessary, a third reviewer acted as an arbitrator.

Quality Assessment - FICO Framework

To assess methodological quality and relevance, we turned to the FICO framework. It looks at four dimensions: Focus (how clear the aims are and whether they align with the review scope), Information (whether the methods and data are adequate and transparent), Context (if the setting, sample, and population framing make sense), and Outcome (how credible and relevant the reported findings actually are). We rated each dimension as either adequate or inadequate. Only studies that scored adequate on all four were kept. That way, the final synthesis was built on evidence that's both methodologically solid and directly relevant. The FICO framework was selected because it allows simultaneous evaluation of methodological rigor and relevance across heterogeneous qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies, making it appropriate for systematic reviews addressing multidisciplinary evidence.

Data Extraction Procedure

We designed a structured extraction template to pull key details from every study we included. Each entry captured the author(s), publication year, country, research design, sample and target population, the specific marginalization axis, the intervention or programme if applicable, outcome measures, and main findings. All that data is summarized in Tables 1 and 2, and it directly supports the thematic synthesis so every analytical claim can be traced back to the original Scopus export. Data extraction was independently completed by two reviewers using a standardized extraction form. Cross-checking procedures were undertaken to minimize extraction errors before synthesis.

Network and Bibliometric Analysis Methodology

We started with a descriptive bibliometric analysis of the included corpus. This helped set the stage for our synthesis. We looked at how studies were spread over time (Figure 1), where they came from geographically (Figure 2), and what themes showed up from author and index keywords plus the coded findings (Figure 3). This descriptive mapping wasn't meant to replace the qualitative synthesis. Instead, it complements it and helped us spot where the evidence was concentrated and where gaps existed.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Because the designs and populations varied so much, we went with a thematic synthesis approach, drawing on Thomas and Harden (2008). The reflexive thematic analysis principles from Braun and Clarke (2006) provided additional support along the way. Findings and abstracts were coded line by line. Descriptive themes emerged from those codes, which we then turned into analytic themes aligned with each of the three research questions. For interpreting those analytic themes, we built an integrated theoretical frame. It brought together social inclusion and exclusion theory, social capital, intersectionality, the capability approach, the social-ecological model, self-determination theory, and the theory of planned behaviour. That allowed us to explain patterns across populations, not just describe them.

Reporting and Documentation

This review follows the PRISMA 2020 checklist (Page et al., 2021). A flow diagram shows the record flow through identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Every reported count in the Abstract, Methods, and Results matches the diagram numerically.

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

The selection process is summarized in Figure 1 using the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram. You'll see four colour-coded phases: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. On the right side, exclusion counts and the reasons are listed. Starting with 1, 281 records, the diagram tracks the drop to the final 10 studies. These numbers line up with those reported throughout the manuscript.

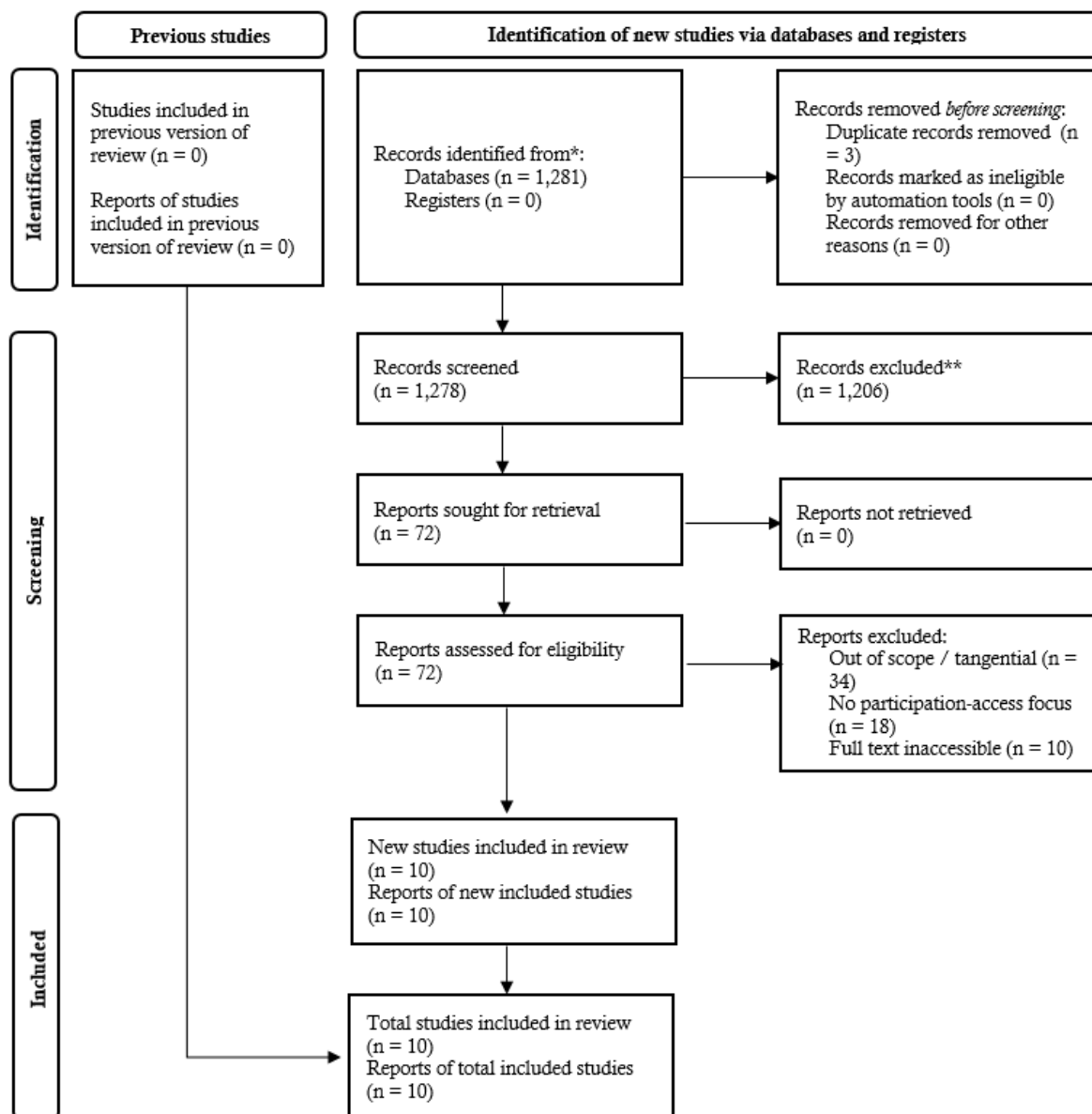


Figure 1 <PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of the Study Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion Process>

The steep drop from screening to full-text assessment, from 1, 278 records down to just 72, shows how broad the initial search was compared to the review's tight focus. Lots of those records talked about physical activity or health inequality, but they didn't really zero in on sport participation and access for marginalized communities. That big gap made sense. Then the number fell further to only 10 studies. That came from the strict FICO appraisal and a deliberate choice: keep only the evidence that was most directly relevant,

methodologically solid, and diverse in terms of population. It was more about deep analysis and covering different groups than about trying to include everything.

Results and Discussions

Study Selection Results

A Scopus search turned up 1, 281 records. After removing 3 duplicates, we screened the titles and abstracts of 1, 278 records, tossing out 1, 206 that clearly didn't fit the review scope. That left 72 records for full-text assessment. Of those, 62 got excluded: 34 were out of scope or barely relevant, 18 lacked a genuine participation-and-access focus, and 10 full texts were inaccessible. So only 10 studies passed all eligibility criteria and the FICO appraisal, making it into the qualitative synthesis. That matches the PRISMA flow diagram. The final sample represented multiple dimensions of marginalization rather than a single population, thereby supporting cross-population comparison and increasing the analytical breadth of the review.

Descriptive Characteristics

A total of ten studies made the cut for the review. They came out between 2022 and 2025 and cover seven different countries across four continents. Method-wise, the designs are a mix of qualitative, quantitative, and combined approaches. The focus of these studies is really broad when it comes to marginalization. We see youth from sexual and gender minorities, people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, ethnic minorities, and refugees. Physical and intellectual disabilities, underserved women, and older adults are also represented. This builds up a solid evidence base that cuts across different populations. Table 2 does double duty here: it summarizes the features of each study and also groups them by theme, design, and outcome focus.

Table 2 <Summary of Included Studies>

Title	Author(s)	Country	Method	Key Findings
Barriers to participation in organized physical activity among LGBTQ+ youth	Parchem et al., 2024.	United States	Quantitative (latent class analysis)	Individual and systemic barriers—including inequitable access and bias-based bullying—are experienced unequally across sexual, gender, and racial identities; the most marginalized identities cluster in high-barrier profiles.
Sports participation as a reflection of social inclusion in youth	Persson & Eriksen., 2025.	Norway	Qualitative (longitudinal interviews)	In a strong sporting culture, participation reflects rather than produces inclusion; non-participants were a selected group already marked by class- and ethnicity-related struggle.
Socioeconomic disparities and inequality of mass sports participation	Dong et al., 2023.	China	Quantitative (ordered probit, survey)	Hidden class-based inequality in access to mass sport persists and widens over time even as gaps by residence, ethnicity, age, and education narrow.
Inclusive sports and recreational programs for learners with disabilities in rural Limpopo	Nemaranzhe et al., 2025.	South Africa	Qualitative (interviews, focus groups)	Inaccessible infrastructure, lack of adaptive equipment, and social exclusion are key barriers; teacher, family, and community support facilitate inclusion, improving confidence and belonging.
Improving access to public physical activity events for disadvantaged communities	Smith et al., 2022.	Australia	Quantitative (geospatial location-allocation)	A socioeconomic gradient exists in access to free community events; strategic siting of new events would most benefit the most deprived communities.
Is sport's 'gateway for inclusion' on the	Dowling., 2024.	Norway	Qualitative (discourse analysis)	Policy discourses treat inclusion as self-evident, embedding assimilationist, Eurocentric assumptions that

Title	Author(s)	Country	Method	Key Findings
latch for ethnic minorities?				marginalize alternatives and distribute power unequally across the majority–minority divide.
Physical activity participation among underserved women	Ominyi et al., 2025	United Kingdom	Mixed methods (ecological framework)	Women’s participation is shaped by intersecting individual, social, structural, cultural, and temporal factors; one-size-fits-all messaging is insufficient and equity-focused, multi-level strategies are required.
Benefits and barriers of community sport for individuals with an intellectual disability	Fraser et al., 2025	Australia	Qualitative (focus groups)	Community sport increased social capital, interpersonal skills, confidence, and goal attainment; greater awareness in schools and communities is needed to widen participation.
Young refugees’ accumulation of horizontal and vertical social capital through sport	Nesse et al., 2024.	Norway	Qualitative (interviews)	Clubs offered limited bridging/vertical capital due to ‘othering’; refugees turned to informal sport for belonging, accumulating horizontal capital but constrained social mobility.
Gender and social stratification in active ageing	Roh & Chang., 2025.	South Korea	Quantitative (MCA, ANOVA)	Older adults’ participation and health are constrained by both socioeconomic stratification and entrenched gender norms; equitable active ageing requires tackling both simultaneously.

The included corpus is methodologically balanced (five qualitative, four quantitative, one mixed-methods) and geographically diverse, though weighted toward high-income settings (notably Norway, with three studies). The “key findings” column reveals a recurring tension: sport is credited with generating inclusion benefits, yet several studies show these benefits are conditional on structural access and pre-existing inclusion.

Table 3 <Study Classification by Theme and Method>

Author(s)	Country	Research Design	Theme / Focus	Population / Intervention	Outcome
Parchem et al., 2024.	USA	Cross-sectional survey; LCA	Intersectional barriers	LGBTQ+ youth (N=4,566)	Barrier profiles; access inequity
Persson & Eriksen., 2025.	Norway	Qualitative longitudinal	Inclusion as reflection	Youth trajectories	Social inclusion / security
Dong et al., 2023.	China	Ordered probit; survey	Socioeconomic inequality	General population (n=4,940)	Mass sport access inequity
Nemaranzhe et al., 2025.	South Africa	Interviews; focus groups	Disability & rurality	Learners with disabilities	Barriers/facilitators; well-being
Smith et al., 2022.	Australia	Geospatial analysis	Equity of access / place	Disadvantaged communities; parkrun	Spatial access equity
Dowling., 2024.	Norway	Discourse analysis	Policy & inclusion discourse	Ethnic minorities (policy)	Assimilationist framing
Ominyi et al., 2025	UK	Convergent mixed methods	Intersectional / ecological	Underserved women	Multi-level PA determinants
Fraser et al., 2025	Australia	Focus groups	Social capital & belonging	Intellectual disability	Social capital; confidence

Author(s)	Country	Research Design	Theme / Focus	Population / Intervention	Outcome
Nesse et al., 2024.	Norway	Interviews	Social capital & mobility	Young refugees	Horizontal/vertical capital
Roh & Chang., 2025.	South Korea	MCA; ANOVA	Gender & stratification	Older adults (n=1,779)	Participation & health inequity

Classification confirms that no single marginalization axis dominates the corpus; instead, studies distribute across disability, socioeconomic status, ethnicity/migration, gender, sexuality, and age. Thematically, three clusters recur—structural/access barriers, social capital and belonging, and policy/inclusion discourse—mapping directly onto the three research questions and providing the organising logic for the synthesis below.

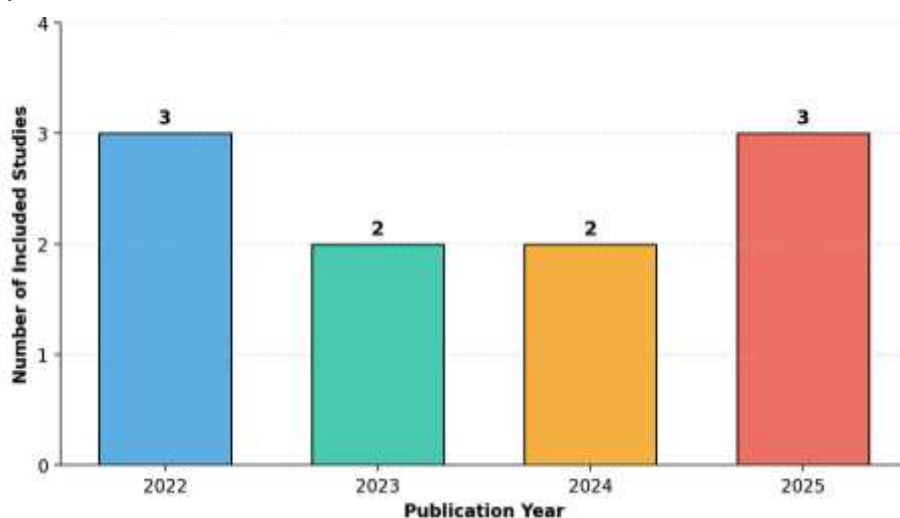


Figure 2 <Temporal Distribution of Included Studies

The publications are spread pretty evenly across the four-year window, though there's a bit of a cluster in 2022 and 2025. That sustained output suggests this is an active, maturing research field, not just a flash in the pan. And since all the studies are from the last four years, the synthesis captures the current state of evidence on inclusion, equity, and access in sport.

Figure 3. Geographic Distribution of Included Studies

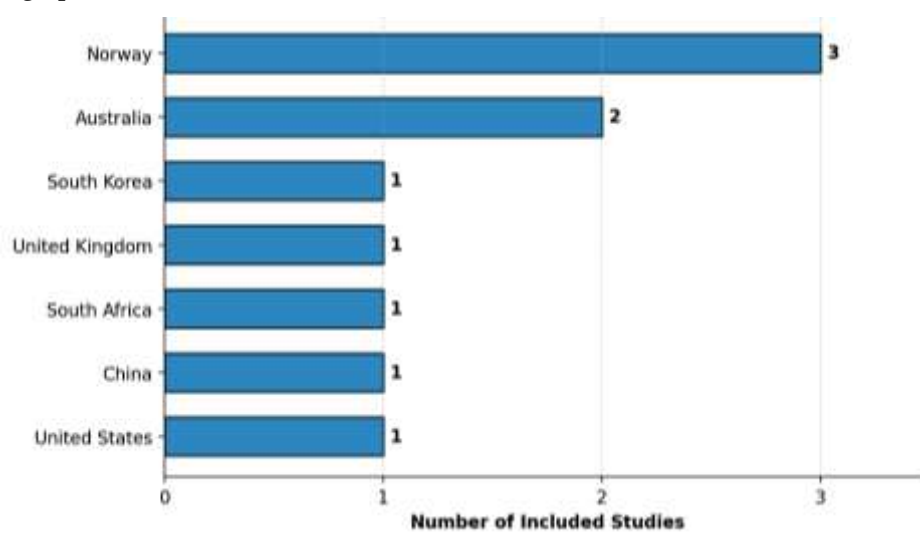


Figure 3 <Geographic Distribution of Included Studies by Country of Study>

The evidence base is dominated by high-income, largely European and Anglophone settings—Norway alone contributes three studies—with a single Global South case (South Africa) and no representation from Latin America, South Asia, or the Middle East among the included studies. This skew is analytically important: models of inclusion and equity derived predominantly from well-resourced welfare states may travel poorly to contexts with different institutional, cultural, and economic conditions, a point developed in the research-gap discussion.

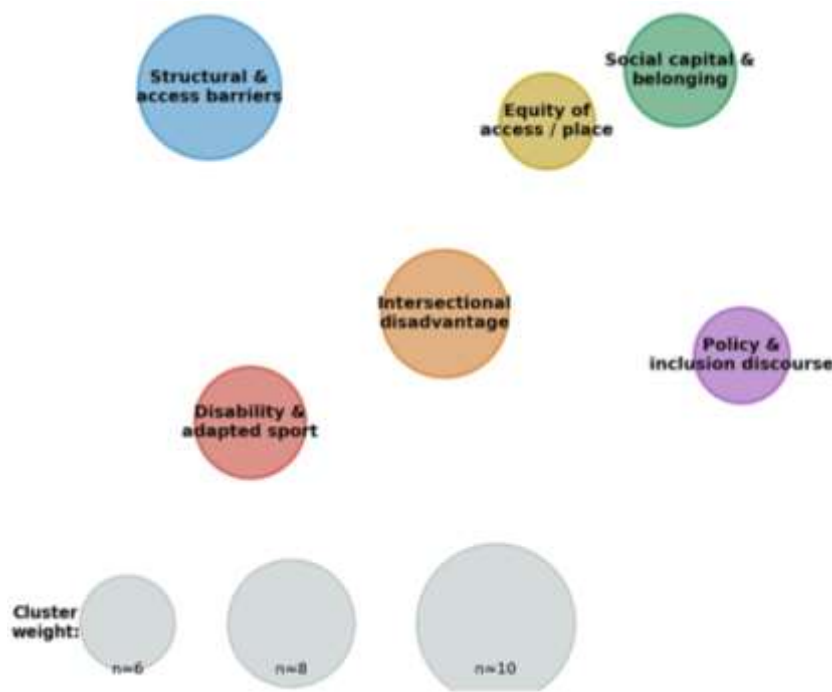


Figure 4. Thematic Cluster Map

The three largest clusters are structural and access barriers, intersectional disadvantage, and social capital and belonging. They represent the analytic centre of gravity for the entire corpus and map onto RQ1, RQ2, and their policy implications (RQ3). Other clusters are smaller but still important. These include policy/inclusion discourse, disability and adapted sport, and equity of access and place. Each represents a focused line of inquiry with real consequences. The visual map makes a core point clear: the real explanatory action lies in barriers and mechanisms, not just in participation counts.

Findings for RQ1 - The Multi-Level Architecture of Barriers

When you look across the whole body of research, barriers to sport participation are never just one thing. They pile up across multiple levels. Structural and material issues like infrastructure that is not accessible, a lack of adaptive equipment, and high costs are especially prominent for people with disabilities in under-resourced settings (Nemaranzhe et al., 2025). These same barriers also affect socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, where geography patterns their access (Smith et al., 2022). Economic inequality in participation is particularly stubborn. Dong et al. (2023) found that class-based gaps in mass sport participation persist and even widen over time in a rapidly developing context. And Roh and Chang (2025) showed that income, education, and occupation all shape whether older adults take part. The social-ecological model and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory help organize all these findings. They put participation within nested layers: individual, interpersonal, organisational, community, and policy.

Barriers are not isolated; they interact. Ominyi et al. (2025) take an explicitly ecological and intersectional approach. They show that underserved women navigate many constraints at the same time. Individual, social, structural, cultural, and temporal constraints all come into play. Think gender norms, caregiving duties, chronic illness, and service cuts. These factors compound each other. Parchem et al. (2024) report a similar dynamic for LGBTQ+ youth. They face both individual and systemic barriers. Bias-based bullying and inequitable access are examples. But these barriers are not spread evenly across sexual, gender, and racial identities. Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality framework is indispensable here. It reveals that the most

marginalized identities cluster in the highest-barrier profiles. That pattern is invisible when you only look at one axis at a time. But it shows up clearly in intersectional disparity research (Kaja et al., 2024).

Interpersonal and attitudinal barriers complete the architecture. Social exclusion keeps getting reenacted through “othering,” attitudinal stigma, and unwelcoming environments (Nemanzhe et al., 2025; Nesse et al., 2024; Sakalidis et al., 2023). If we look at these findings through a health equity and equity framework, they show that the distribution of participation opportunity is systematically skewed against those already at a disadvantage. And provision alone, without attention to affordability, accessibility, and welcome, simply will not lead to equitable access (Hallum et al., 2024; Araujo et al., 2022). So RQ1 is answered by an integrated multi-level barrier model rather than an inventory of discrete obstacles.

Findings for RQ2 - Mechanisms and the Conditionality of Benefit

The corpus suggests that sport can generate assets for inclusion, but only under certain conditions. Social capital is the mechanism most often discussed. Community sport, for instance, has been shown to increase social capital, interpersonal skills, confidence, and goal attainment in people with intellectual disabilities (Fraser et al., 2025). Organised sport can also create connections that promote health (Block et al., 2025). These studies draw on Bourdieu’s (1986) and Putnam’s (2000) ideas about capital and bonding or bridging ties. They also build on the sport-for-development premise that participation yields relational dividends (Coalter, 2007; Corvino et al., 2023).

Yet the benefit remains uneven and often depends on how included someone already is. Nesse et al. (2024) found that young refugees gained only limited bridging and vertical social capital. Those types matter most for social mobility. The reason? “Othering” in clubs pushed them toward informal sport. There they gained horizontal capital and a sense of belonging, but not upward connections. Most strikingly, Persson and Eriksen (2025) argue that in a strong sporting culture, participation reflects inclusion rather than creating it. People who are already secure and included take part easily. Excluded youth, however, face structural barriers that make participation less viable. This reframes the core causal claim at the heart of much sport-for-development advocacy.

Motivational and behavioural mechanisms further shape the outcomes. Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) explains why environments that fail to support autonomy, competence, and relatedness can undermine sustained engagement. Stigma or exclusion makes this worse. The theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) links participation to attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control, all shaped by unequal social conditions. Viewed through the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999), the key question is not whether opportunities exist in name. It is whether marginalised individuals have the real freedom to convert them into valued functionings. So RQ2 is answered with a conditional mechanism model: sport produces inclusion benefits mainly where structural and relational conditions already allow it. Otherwise, it can simply reproduce existing advantages.

Findings for RQ3 - The Construction and Limits of “Inclusion” in Policy and Practice

Tema ketiga berkaitan dengan bagaimana inklusi itu dibangun dan dijalankan. Dari berbagai evaluasi program, kita bisa lihat bahwa intervensi yang dirancang dengan baik dan memang disengaja bisa memperluas partisipasi. Contohnya, penempatan acara komunitas gratis secara strategis sangat membantu populasi yang paling terpinggirkan (Smith et al., 2022). Ada juga program komunitas terarah yang membuka akses lebih lebar bagi penyandang disabilitas (Pochstein, 2022; Young & Block, 2023). Kalau kita lihat dari sisi pengembangan komunitas, faktor-faktor seperti keterlibatan guru, keluarga, dan komunitas itu sendiri menjadi penentu utama dalam mempertahankan penyediaan yang inklusif (Nemanzhe et al., 2025; Meregi et al., 2025).

Namun, dari korpus ini kita juga bisa melihat batasan dan risiko dari wacana inklusi itu sendiri. Analisis wacana oleh Dowling (2024) memperlihatkan bagaimana kebijakan olahraga menganggap inklusi sebagai sesuatu yang sudah jelas dengan sendirinya. Padahal, di dalamnya tertanam asumsi-asumsi asimilasionis dan Eropa-sentris yang meminggirkan praktik-praktik alternatif. Akibatnya, kekuasaan terdistribusi secara timpang di antara kelompok mayoritas dan minoritas. Dinamika ini juga terlihat dalam analisis logika asimilasionis di tempat lain (Ricatti et al., 2022). Pengawasan yang semakin ketat terhadap komitmen institusional tentang kesetaraan, keberagaman, dan inklusi juga mengingatkan kita bahwa pernyataan formal seringkali lebih cepat daripada perubahan yang nyata (Lagerstrom et al., 2025). Teori inklusi sosial menjelaskan apa yang sebenarnya dipertaruhkan: inklusi sejati itu tidak sekadar akses dan partisipasi, tetapi juga pengakuan dan rasa memiliki berdasarkan cara pandang peserta itu sendiri. Bukan hanya masuk dengan syarat ke dalam struktur yang tidak berubah.

Kalau digabungkan, temuan-temuan ini menjawab RQ3 dengan membedakan antara inklusi tipis dan inklusi tebal. Inklusi tipis itu hanya memperluas akses ke struktur olahraga yang sudah ada dan tidak diubah, jadi risikonya adalah asimilasi. Sementara itu, inklusi tebal yang sejalan dengan kerangka kesetaraan dan pengembangan komunitas benar-benar mengubah struktur, praktik, dan relasi kekuasaan. Tujuannya agar komunitas yang terpinggirkan benar-benar dihargai. Bukti yang ada menunjukkan bahwa banyak kebijakan masih berada di ujung inklusi tipis. Ini menjelaskan mengapa peningkatan partisipasi seringkali rapuh dan tidak merata.

Comparative and Critical Analysis

The corpus is methodologically balanced. Qualitative approaches like interviews, focus groups, and discourse analysis bring out lived experience and meaning. Then you have quantitative or geospatial ones, survey modelling, latent class analysis, location-allocation, that measure the scale and spread of inequity. Mixed-methods designs are still pretty rare. Ominyi et al. (2025) stands out as a notable exception. Longitudinal designs are also scarce. Persson and Eriksen (2025) is one of the few that can actually talk about trajectories over time. This distribution suggests a field rich in both experiential and distributional evidence. But it's underpowered for causal and temporal inference. Intersectional quantitative designs, like those in Kaja et al. (2024) and Parchem et al. (2024), mark a real methodological advance. They move past single-axis comparison toward the compound realities the theory predicts.

Discussion

The synthesis points to one clear conclusion. Disparities in participation among marginalized communities aren't caused by a single factor; instead, they result from multiple barriers that interact across different levels. And the inclusion benefits of sport are conditional, not automatic. Sport often mirrors the social order it's supposed to change (Persson & Eriksen, 2025), and its rewards go most reliably to those already advantaged. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that sport participation cannot be conceptualized solely as an individual behavioural choice. Instead, participation emerges from interactions among structural opportunity, social relationships, institutional practices, and policy environments operating across ecological levels.

These findings support an integrated account rather than one that relies on a single theory. The multi-level barrier structure is organized by the social-ecological model and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Compounding disadvantage is explained by intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000) and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) specify the relational and motivational mechanisms that create benefit. And the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999) reframes access as substantive freedom. Social inclusion and exclusion theory provides the overarching normative frame, distinguishing access, participation, recognition, and belonging, while the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) links structural conditions to individual intention. By showing how these theories operate jointly across populations, this integration extends existing frameworks. Rather than functioning independently, the theoretical frameworks employed in this review complement one another. The social-ecological model explains where barriers occur, intersectionality explains why barriers accumulate differently across social identities, social capital theory explains relational outcomes, self-determination theory explains sustained participation, and the capability approach provides the normative standard for evaluating equitable participation opportunities.

The evidence is pretty clear. Universal, one-size-fits-all promotion just doesn't work. Instead, practitioners, policymakers, and coaches need equity-centred, intersectional, and community-embedded programming (Ominyi et al., 2025; Nemananzhe et al., 2025). Interventions should start with the most deprived and least-served populations (Smith et al., 2022). Affordability and physical accessibility must be tackled head-on. Creating welcoming climates that counter "othering" is also critical. And maybe most importantly, genuine community ownership has to be built instead of just assimilation into structures that haven't changed.

Prior reviews have typically synthesized evidence within a single population, such as disability, ethnic minorities, or LGBTQ+ groups. This review deliberately crosses those boundaries. By taking a cross population scope, it reveals shared structural drivers and common intersectional dynamics. Single group reviews just cannot surface those patterns. That makes this work a valuable complement and corrective to more specialized syntheses (Sandford et al., 2022; Ramsden et al., 2023).

Whether sport actually creates inclusion or just reflects it remains a central tension. Optimistic accounts highlight social capital and empowerment (Fraser et al., 2025; Block et al., 2025). Critical accounts, on the other hand, emphasize reflection and reproduction (Persson & Eriksen, 2025; Dowling, 2024). But the two

might not be entirely irreconcilable. The outcome really depends on the structural and relational context. So in different settings, both perspectives can be true.

Looking at this body of work, three major gaps stand out. The first is a geographic bias. Evidence is heavily skewed toward high-income settings (Figure 2). This leaves the Global South and other low-resource contexts severely underrepresented. The second gap is methodological. We don't see enough intersectional or longitudinal work, which really limits our ability to understand causation and change over time. And the third one is critical. There aren't enough studies that rigorously test if inclusion interventions actually lead to thick, substantive inclusion or just a thinner, more superficial version down the line.

This review has a few limitations to consider. First, we relied on Scopus only, so relevant work in other databases or grey literature might have been missed. Second, limiting the search to English-language peer-reviewed articles from 2022 to 2025 introduces language and recency biases. This probably means scholarship from the Global South is underrepresented. Third, we deliberately selected just 10 studies. This prioritizes analytic depth and cross-population diversity over exhaustive coverage, so prevalence-type claims should be made cautiously.

Future work needs to focus on three key areas. Studies should prioritize the Global South, low-resource settings, and communities leading the research. That way we can see if inclusion models actually transfer. Research also needs intersectional and longitudinal designs. Mixed methods are essential here to capture compounded disadvantage and how things shift over time. Finally, we have to develop and test interventions that really target thick inclusion. That means measuring recognition and belonging, not just counting how many people show up.

RQ1 shows barriers are not just single obstacles. They're multi-level, cumulative, and intersectional. An ecological model captures this far better than treating them as discrete hurdles. For RQ2, sport can build social capital, belonging, and confidence, but only where structural and relational conditions already allow it. So benefits are conditional and can even reinforce existing advantages. Finally, RQ3 suggests policies and programs often push a thin, assimilationist version of inclusion. For truly equitable outcomes, we need thick inclusion that actually transforms structures, recognition, and power.

Limitations, This review has several limitations. First, only Scopus-indexed studies published in English were included, potentially excluding relevant evidence from other databases and languages. Second, the review focused on studies published between 2022 and 2025, limiting historical comparison. Third, the relatively small number of included studies restricted quantitative synthesis.

Conclusions

This systematic review synthesised recent evidence on sport participation among marginalized communities, using the lenses of social inclusion, equity, and access. For the first research question, the findings show that barriers aren't just isolated obstacles. They form a multi-level, cumulative, and intersectional architecture spanning structural, economic, spatial, cultural, and interpersonal levels. The best way to understand them is through ecological and intersectional frameworks. For the second question, the inclusion benefits of sport, social capital, belonging, confidence, and motivation, don't come automatically. They're conditional. They accrue most reliably where structural and relational conditions already favour inclusion. So sport often reflects the social order it's claimed to transform. For the third, policy and programme discourses often push a thin, assimilationist form of inclusion that can reproduce inequity. Equitable outcomes, on the other hand, demand a thick inclusion that transforms structures, recognition, and power. The core contribution of this review is its cross-population, theoretically integrated synthesis. It reveals shared drivers and mechanisms that single-group studies obscure. Practically, it calls for equity-centred, intersectional, and community-embedded programming that targets the least-served first and prioritises genuine belonging over nominal access. The review has limitations: it used a single database, only English-language sources, and a recency-bounded scope. Its corpus was deliberately selective, favouring analytic depth over exhaustive coverage. Future research should extend the evidence base to Global South and community-led contexts, adopt intersectional and longitudinal designs, and rigorously evaluate whether inclusion efforts achieve substantive, lasting equity rather than symbolic participation. Future systematic reviews should incorporate multiple databases, include evidence from low- and middle-income countries, and conduct meta-analyses where data permit to strengthen the generalizability of findings.

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