

“I Can Only Participate in Free Sports”

Leisure-Time Physical Activity of Low-Income Working People in Finland

Hanna-Mari Ikonen 

Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Author contact <hanna-mari.p.ikonen@jyu.fi>

Abstract

Drawing on a precarization framework, this article argues that sport sociologists should more explicitly recognize the growing influence of contemporary working life on individuals' sport and leisure practices. Leisure is an ideal context for diverse physical activities, which are widely recognized as beneficial for health and wellbeing. However, an increasing number of people hold precarious jobs, such as fixed-term or involuntary part-time contracts, or are permanently employed in very low-paid positions. These conditions limit their opportunities for active leisure. This article examines the barriers, enablers and meanings of leisure-time physical activity (LTPA) among people in Finland who self-identify as experiencing in-work poverty. A qualitative thematic analysis of 417 free-format written narratives and 20 in-depth interviews reveals how LTPA is shaped by employment conditions and influenced by intersectional factors. For some, LTPA is vital for well-being and preserving one's sense of worth in their challenging situations; for others, it is constrained by time and financial limitations or entirely absent due to energy-draining work. Physical activity may become a significant individual coping mechanism in situations where one is at the mercy of others – a phrase that describes the nature of precarity – but its value may diminish if one is repeatedly forced to settle for only free activities. The article shows that precarious, low-income employment profoundly affects people's lives from emotions to material conditions. It highlights the importance of integrating the discussions of work inequalities into leisure and physical activity theorizations, as well as into policies aimed at increasing participation in physical activity.

Keywords: leisure-time physical activity, sport participation, precarity, low-income work, in-work poverty, inequality, writing call, interviews, Finland

Introduction

The well-being benefits of physical activity (PA) are widely recognized. Leisure-time activities enhance mental and physical health, improve work capacity, and even contribute to “human flourishing” (Sager, 2013). Despite these well-known benefits, global PA levels remain insufficient – over 80% of adolescents and 27% of adults fail to meet WHO recommendations, leading to high treatment costs for preventable noncommunicable diseases; in high-income countries, up to 70% of healthcare expenditure is projected to be spent on illnesses resulting from physical inactivity (WHO, 2022).

Socioeconomic disadvantage is a well-documented barrier to PA (Beenackers et al., 2012; European Commission, 2022; Huikari et al., 2021; Kari, 2018; Kirk and Rhodes, 2011; Mäkinen et al., 2009; Withall et al., 2011). However, existing research does not fully capture the mechanisms linking *labor market position and leisure-time physical activity* (LTPA). The relationship between labor market position and socioeconomic status (SES) is no longer straightforward, and even individuals with higher education face low income and *precarious employment* (Jakonen et al. 2023; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018; European Parliament, 2016; Lewchuk et al., 2014). Precarious employment can create a generalized sense of insecurity across multiple life domains (Campbell and Price, 2016; Norbäck and Styhre, 2021), yet its impact on leisure, particularly on LTPA, remains poorly understood. While qualitative research has examined how precarious work affects mental health (Irvine and Rose, 2024), studies on its influence on leisure are scarce. This gap calls for an in-depth qualitative analysis of how and why precarious labor market conditions intersect with LTPA.

Precariousness often manifests as financial hardship despite employment, a phenomenon referred to as in-work poverty. The EU defines individuals as at risk of in-work poverty when they work more than half the year and their equalized disposable household income falls below 60% of the national median (Eurofound, 2017).¹ In this article, I examine individu-

1 However, this definition is contested (see Eurofound, 2017). Additionally, in Finland, social benefits are counted as income. Some Finns cross the poverty line because of this income, although the main problem remains: they cannot live decently by their wages or entrepreneurial income alone (Jakonen et al., 2023; Kangas and Kallioma-Puha, 2019). It has been estimated that in Finland, around 200,000 people live in a situation where their income from wages or self-employment is not sufficient to rise above the poverty line (Jakonen et al., 2023). While the existence of a pretty good social security system can be an advantage, if one relies on social security (or holds multiple jobs simultaneously) to live a decent life, the situation contradicts the idea of the social security sys-

als who self-identify as experiencing in-work poverty, using precarization theory as the conceptual lens. The study draws on a large qualitative dataset and addresses the following research question:

What are the obstacles, enablers, and perceived meanings of leisure-time physical activity among individuals who self-identify as experiencing in-work poverty?

The focus is on the broader impacts of precarious situations beyond work, making the meanings of LTPA an intriguing topic. While PA is known to be beneficial, precarious living imposes financial and temporal constraints, creating barriers that merit closer examination. The national context of this study is Finland, a high-income welfare state where PA participation rates are among the highest in the EU (European Commission, 2022) and Sport for All policies are widely supported (Mikkonen et al., 2022). Nevertheless, physical inactivity remains a public concern (Kolu et al., 2022), and work precarity is increasingly relevant (Jakonen et al., 2023; Säilävaara et al. 2023). Here, LTPA refers to activities outside occupational contexts, including exercise, sport, and unstructured recreation (Khan et al., 2012). Participants also discussed active transport and domestic physical activity, which are also considered in the analysis.

Theoretical background and previous research

The theoretical framework informing this study is that of precarization, which is not a unified theory but offers a theoretical approach and conceptual framework. While having “low income” can be studied separately from precarization, here it is linked to the wider phenomenon and conceptualization of the precarization of work. Precarious work refers to uncertain, unstable, insecure, often poorly paid, unprotected and other non-standard work (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2024; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018, p. 1). Precarization theory thus describes these changed working conditions in which stable employment systems become increasingly fragmented and nonlinear, and make individuals’ lives vulnerable when compared to Fordist times of “assembly lines” and mass produc-

tem itself, which is to support those outside work with the taxes drawn from the wages of those in work.

tion (Spelman et al., 2025). Precarization is often theorized as a transformation of capitalism according to the lines of neoliberal and post-Fordist policies (della Porta et al., 2015). Societal changes underpinning precarization encompass processes such as digitalization and robotization, which have enabled the reconfiguration of work through multiple novel arrangements, including its fragmentation into short, task-based units (Jakonen et al., 2023). Work is increasingly based on performance-driven and results-based projects, and the short-term nature of tasks explains the reduction in permanent staff in both operational and expert roles. Yet at the same time, market-mediated work contributes to the decline of stable career positions (Norbäck and Styhre, 2021). Thus, in post-industrial welfare states such as Finland, precarization not only perpetuates low-wage employment in service sectors but increasingly extends to occupations requiring higher education (Jakonen et al. 2023; Lewchuk et al., 2014). As a further consideration, precarization is a process that can increase in-work poverty.

Given the limited research on precarious work and LTPA, this article now turns to examine prior studies on socioeconomic status and low income and leisure, especially LTPA.

Prior research consistently *shows socioeconomic inequalities* in physical activity. A systematic review across Europe found that LTPA is more common among individuals in higher socioeconomic positions (Beenackers et al., 2012), which is also echoed by other studies (European Commission, 2022; Kirk and Rhodes, 2011). Finnish research similarly indicates that SES is positively associated with LTPA and sports participation (Huikari et al., 2021; Kari, 2018; Mäkinen et al., 2009; Mäkinen et al., 2019), although income within SES groups does not always explain differences in LTPA (Huikari et al., 2021).

Income inequalities are also linked to physical inactivity (Szilcz et al., 2018) and lower wellbeing (Welsch and Biermann, 2019). Low-income populations tend to be less active (Kegler et al., 2022; Lindström, Hanson and Östergren, 2001), partly because of the cost of exercise activities (Withall, Jago and Fox, 2011). These disparities intersect with race and education, as lower activity levels among low-income groups are disproportionately observed among people of color and those with less education (Mielke et al., 2022). Scarcity further amplifies trade-off thinking since money spent on sport competes with essential needs (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013; Deutsch et al., 2015). For those in employment, time scarcity adds another layer of constraint. Not only must they choose whether to spend money on a sport activity or next week's food, but also whether to go to the gym

with friends or take an extra shift at work to earn much-needed money or ensure future work offers.

Leisure activities, including but not limited to physical activity, have well-documented benefits for biological and psychological wellbeing and can strengthen social capital and community participation (Shin and You, 2013; Cantor et al., 2022; Glover, 2004; Frisby and Millar, 2002; Hodgetts and Stolte, 2025). They offer opportunities for escape, companionship, and skill development that may improve life conditions (Bowling, 2002; Scott and McCarville, 2008; Oncescu and Neufeld, 2019; Trussell and Mair, 2010; Vandermeerschen and Scheerder, 2017), and social participation can partly offset the negative effects of lower SES and limited LTPA (Lindström et al., 2001). However, poverty often curtails these benefits: while sport is widely promoted as a response to inactivity (Vandermeerschen and Scheerder, 2017) and even described as “a customary activity” offered to the poor (Tink et al., 2019), the social gains of sport remain harder to access when resources are scarce (Vandermeerschen et al., 2017).

Importantly, lower participation in leisure and sport is not simply a matter of individual “choice” (Vandermeerschen et al., 2017). Constraints operate at multiple levels, for example, structural (e.g., limited support networks), mediating (e.g., gatekeeping by coaches or organizations), and personal (e.g., low income, limited social capital) (Collins and Kay, 2014). Gendered childcare responsibilities and caregiving workloads further restrict time and energy for leisure (Cantor et al., 2022; Withall et al., 2011; Scott and McCarville, 2008). Policies that prioritize income generation can implicitly devalue leisure, pushing poorer individuals to justify their need for play and rest (Cantor et al., 2022; Smith-Carrier, 2017). These factors intersect – e.g., employment precarity, support availability, and personal circumstances such as single parenthood, injury, poor health, or disability – and intensify barriers to participation (Cantor et al., 2022; Smith-Carrier, 2017; Collins and Kay, 2014).

Precarious work adds further complexity. It hampers integration into social and family networks (Castel, 2000), contributes to poorer health (Pfortner, 2023) and health behavior (Poulter et al., 2023), extends the risks of poor mental health (Irvine and Rose, 2024) and is related to a lower SES (Kim et al., 2008). Precarious work is a well-known job stressor negatively related to sports participation (Kim and Cho, 2015; Mutz et al., 2020). Chasing work opportunities can leave little time or energy for physical activity, and some precarious workers report guilt about engaging in “unproductive” leisure (Batchelor et al., 2020). In-work poverty limits ex-

ercise opportunities, and short-lived escapes through LTPA may not yield lasting benefits (Bowling, 2002). Yet Finnish Time Use Surveys do not reveal a straightforward link between precarious labor-market status and time spent on LTPA, suggesting that determinants beyond employment conditions shape leisure patterns (Ikonen and Anttila, 2025). In addition, not all precarious work is harmful, and it may allow flexibility for other life spheres such as studying (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2024; Campbell and Price, 2016; Jakonen et al., 2023) – or practicing sports. However, precarity is often involuntary, including involuntary part-time jobs (Kauhanen and Nätti, 2015). Consequently, understanding this complexity is essential for explaining participation in physical activity under conditions of precarization.

Methods

The objective of this study calls for a qualitative approach. The research follows a qualitative orientation that acknowledges the researcher's positionality and situatedness as unavoidable, and thus approaches them with reflexivity (Haraway, 1988). It adopts a hermeneutic and emancipatory knowledge interest, aiming to understand human agency and reveal asymmetries in power and resources (Habermas, 1971). This orientation implies a normative premise: that a balanced life with decent employment and sufficient leisure for recovery is essential for individual well-being and societal sustainability, and the lack of such opportunities is considered problematic. The following section describes how the study was conducted under such premises.

Data Collection and Participants

The research participants of this study are people who self-identified as individuals suffering from in-work poverty. The data originates from a research project, *Working Poor in a PostIndustrial Welfare State*, in which today's precarious labor markets were a main topic, and purposefully included the consequences of this situation for various life spheres, such as leisure activities. The data was collected via two writing calls (2015, n=170 and 2021, n=247) and interviews (2023, n=20). The research invitation described the phenomenon of in-work poverty and provided figures illustrating the number of people affected by it. In the writing calls, people who

had experiences of labor markets that do not provide security and a decent income were invited to describe their experiences in their own words. The former call was the first extensive study in Finland to map experiences on the topic, and the latter call was launched because we wanted to find out whether the experiences were permanent and similar to those in the first collection. The call texts were published on the webpage of the research project. The call link was circulated mainly via social media, and members of those networks (such as European Anti Poverty Network Finland) were asked to circulate the link further, to enable a wide range of people facing in-work poverty to write about their experiences. In addition, some newspaper appearances and blog posts (for example in Arts and Culture association webpages) about the topic increased the visibility of the call.

The request for experiences included the following call text:

The writing can be a short description of an everyday situation or coincidence, or it can be a broader text that maps your own life and work history. In your writing, you are free to combine the themes of poverty, work, entrepreneurship, social security and social relationships (intimate relationship, family, parenting, friendships, kinship, hobbies) as you wish. First, we ask a few background questions. You can write anonymously.

Because only a few writings in English were sent by people of foreign origin, in 2023 we conducted twenty interviews with people who had moved to Finland from abroad and experienced difficulties finding other than precarious, low-paying jobs or who struggled to earn enough by their entrepreneurship. The interviewees were reached by circulating the call link, and also via personal networks and snowballing. In all data collections, the participants read and accepted a research notification and privacy notice sheet which explained what information would be collected, how their data would be handled and saved, and how their anonymity would be guaranteed.

Both the interviewees and those who answered the writing calls filled out similar background information sheets in the internet-based Webropol survey software, through which free-format writings were also sent. We asked the participants background questions regarding gender identity, year of birth, place of residence (four categories from capital area to sparsely populated area), relationship status, number of children and their ages, highest education, other education, degrees and courses, employment status, approximate number of employment contracts throughout

their life, and their total monthly income before taxes². The range of employment status was diverse. For example, in the 2021 data, the most common employment type was permanent contract, but particularly among women, the permanent contract might be part-time and the wage level too low to provide a living wage. Among women, fixed-term contracts were also common, and for all participants, overlapping positions were possible, such as being in a part-time job and partly unemployed (receiving adjusted unemployment benefit).

Some socio-demographic descriptives of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

Data analysis

Before starting the analysis for this article, I had previously read the data several times for other purposes and developed an understanding of its content, including themes beyond leisure and physical activity. Previous analyses with the research team (e.g., Jakonen et al., 2023; Säilävaara et al., 2023) and seminar discussions informed the preparation of this study. Relevant segments (consisting of a couple of paragraphs or at least a couple of sentences) were identified and marked by searching for Finnish and English keywords related to sport, exercise, physical activity, leisure time, and hobbies. In the interviews, direct questions about leisure activities and hobbies were posed, and these sections were marked in full.

The analysis employed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019), combining inductive coding with theoretical sensitivity to in-work poverty and LTPA. Six preliminary themes emerged:

1. forms and levels of LTPA;
2. problems of living with scarce resources;
3. body and LTPA;
4. leisure-time use in general;
5. physical activity related to housing and chores;
6. children and LTPA (all in the context of low income and precarious work).

2 See Table 1 for the numbers of this data. The median for total earnings of full-time wage and salary earners in 2021 (when we collected our biggest dataset) was 3,315 euros and the average 3,738 euros per month (Statistics Finland, 2023).

Table 1. Socio-demographic descriptives of the three datasets.

<i>Back-ground information</i>	<i>Data</i>	<i>Written accounts from those who answered the writing call 2015</i>	<i>Written accounts from those who answered the writing call 2021</i>	<i>Interviews with immigrants 2023</i>
<i>Amount of participants</i>		170 (more than 73,000 words)	247 (more than 52,000 words)	20
<i>Gender identity</i>		women: 64%, men: 36%	women: 82.6%, men: 13.8%, other: 2.8%, prefer not to tell: 0.8%	women: 70%, men: 30%
<i>Age, mean at the time of the study</i>		44 years	43 years	38 years
<i>Partnered (marriage, cohabiting, in a relationship)</i>		62%	61.5%	85%
<i>Children</i>		yes: 53%	yes: 61%	yes: 45%
<i>Higher education (degree from University or Univ. of Applied Sciences)</i>		46%	56%	80%
<i>Monthly income (in 2021 and 2023 it was explicated the question also meant possible social benefits, in 2015 not)</i>		<500€: 8.2% 500-1,000€: 24.1% 1,000-1,500€: 27.6% 1,500-2,000€: 13.5% 2,000-2,500€: 18.2% 2,500-3,000€: 4.2% >3,000€: 4.2%	<500€: 32% 500-1,000€: 10.9% 1,000-1,500€: 17.0% 1,500-2,000€: 20.2% 2,000-2,500€: 23.1% 2,500-3,000€: 13.4% >3,000€: 12.2%	The question was not posed in a comparable way, but no one chose the categories under 500€, 2,500-3,000€, or over 3,000€. Other categories were chosen.
<i>Have been living in Finland</i>				0-4 years: 35% 5-10 years: 35% >10 years: 30%

Themes were refined through iterative reading and coding. Numerous subcategories were organized into two to seven categories, which were arranged under the themes. The first theme, forms and levels of LTPA, proved central for answering the research question on obstacles, enablers, and the meanings of LTPA. Overlapping content from other themes was integrated into this “supertheme”. Thus, the other themes complemented the analysis, for instance, in what was said about children in relation to the respondent’s own LTPA.

Categories within this theme included:

- a) *Being active* (with subcategories such as lifelong activity, pride in maintaining activity, good condition as self-worth);
- b) *Regular but restricted activity* (with subcategories such as use of free sports, limited hobbies, inability to set goals in sports, physical condition as capital);
- c) *Being passive* (with subcategories lack of energy, lack of money, exercising only when work situation improves).

This structure allowed both explicit and latent meanings to inform the interpretation of leisure behavior under precarious conditions.

Results

The findings are organized around four themes that illustrate the diversity of experiences with LTPA among individuals living with low and precarious income. First, some participants described being highly active and maintaining good physical condition, despite financial hardship. Second, the analysis highlights factors that restrict LTPA in precarious situations. Third, it examines cases where LTPA is almost absent. Finally, the fourth theme explores how the meanings of LTPA are deeply intertwined with labor market position. To provide context, the results include information about participants' lives and quotations from their writings and interviews. Most quotations are from women, reflecting the gender distribution of respondents and the accumulation of vulnerabilities, such as single parenthood, low-paid part-time work, and insecure jobs among women (Cantor et al., 2022; Kangas and Kalliomaa-Puha, 2019; Kauhanen and Nätti, 2015; Smith-Carrier, 2017).

Being active

For some respondents, high activity meant enjoyment and was done to show one's own worth. One way to express the meaning of a frequently practiced sport was to say "otherwise I would go crazy" as an interviewee said about a sport she played regularly. She had followed her Finnish husband to Finland but had not found a job that corresponded to her education or would provide more than occasional hours, although she was highly educated and had worked in demanding positions in her previous country. She is an example of respondents who stated that they were, and in some

cases always had been, active in sports, and in particular, they reflected on the positive effects of sports such as being energetic and sustaining their mental wellbeing in their otherwise stressful lives.

Some participants explained that they were proud of being in good physical condition despite being busy and lacking economic resources. One respondent wrote,

As a poor person, even sports have become more efficient – running is free, cycling is free, exercising with your own body weight costs nothing... You don't need fancy group exercise classes to stay in good shape. My husband and I run in "shifts", and sometimes one of the children bikes along, so we get a moment of one-to-one time and exchange our thoughts. Sometimes running alone is the only momentary escape from everyday sorrows.

A woman in her forties with a husband and four children; precarious part-time jobs with earnings less than 2,000 euros per month; left higher education after having her first child and now cannot afford to study.

By showing their effectiveness, thrift and creativity in finding free sports, the respondent expressed that she or her family are neither passive nor marginalized, and running to forget one's sorrows mirrors cost-effective self-responsibility and activity.

Another respondent reflected in his writing that his active sporting was a defense mechanism in life; he felt unsuccessful because he had not achieved anything other than a precarious labor market position:

The small salary made me an actual artist of my existence, and when my hobby was focused on long-distance running, my condition and health in this respect were fine, even top. Even in the poorest moment, sports results remained; it was probably also about the defense of the psyche. This was something to boast about, at least to oneself.

50-year-old man with a doctoral degree; reports currently earning less than 3000 euros in a month

Regular but Restricted Activity

Most of the respondents who described their LTPA were not very active exercisers, but had for example, one regular sport hobby or did various sports irregularly. Some said that they were content with their sport opportunities and proud of not spending money on sports. Some wondered why anybody would need particular sport hobbies when one can be physi-

cally active in daily life. Many stated that basic physical activities were possible for them, such as walking in the woods with their family, partner or dog. One interviewee said she spent all of her leisure time outdoors during the summer, and a few expressed that they engaged in a good amount of activity at work or by active transportation to work. Some mentioned some free sports they participated in and said that these were enough for them, but they also expressed other challenges, highlighting that access to sport hobbies was not a core problem in their lives.

However, several participants were not content with their opportunities to engage in LTPA. They had been more active before their current low-income or precarious situation, and they felt they would like to be more active now, engage in their sport more often, take part in various sporting events, have access to equipment or money to try new sports, and get more variety in their exercise, as exemplified in this written account:

In everyday life, I can only afford free exercise, in other words, jogging and cycling, and going to exhibitions. I would like to go to the gym or try new sports, but I can't afford them.

30+ woman with higher education in arts; works as an artist with occasional grants and does other precarious jobs, studies in a university, earns less than 500 euros per month

Such restrictions sometimes lowered the respondents' motivation because even pleasurable exercising had become boring and monotonous. These feelings were further worsened if the respondent was interested in sports and followed a community that surrounds a certain sport and thus saw unattainable possibilities around them. This was the case in the following written account:

I cannot compete in the labor market with those who can afford to invest in themselves. I go jogging and to free sports events, which help me stay in moderate condition. I can't do any marathons because I can't afford to eat the kind of food and in large quantities that the hobby would require, and I can't afford heart rate monitors, etc.

A woman in her mid-thirties who had not managed to get a proper job after graduating from university, earns less than 1,000 euros per month from various precarious jobs

It must be borne in mind that these participants were working at least to some extent, which means that in social circles such as their workplaces, they constantly interact with people who live without a scarcity of re-

sources. Many expressed sadness, bitterness and other negative emotions because they could not, despite having the same level of education, afford the same standard of living, leisure included.

Some participants see sportive behavior and an athletic appearance as competitive advantages in seeking a less precarious position in the labor market. Yet the opposite is also true: when one has a relatively good position at work, one feels more appreciated and needed, and has as a consequence much more energy to exercise and take care of one's body. An occasionally better labor market situation also meant that it was possible for respondents to invest some money into sports equipment or practices with a coach, and when their physical condition improved, so did their mental state and satisfaction with their body. The quote from a written account below is an example of that process:

I've been able to purchase a "blue card" from the city's Sports division, and I'm able to load swimming time to it. I also go jogging – it's free of course, but I've had to buy the equipment for it, which has been a hindrance in the past. I'm in good physical condition now, and feel I look pretty good.

A single mother of four; used to work as a freelancer; has, after several years in poverty and an extremely burdensome family situation, got waged work, now earns 1,500–2,000 euros a month

Being passive

The analysis provides an understanding of the interconnectedness of a lack of leisure and lack of leisure time physical activity. Despite the obvious advantages of physically active leisure time, people in low income and precarious work situations lack the means to engage in physical activity exactly because of their situation. Respondents quite commonly mentioned that they had no energy for sport hobbies or even light daily physical activity. The feeling of a lack of energy was, in a complex way, related to mental and physical health and embodiment. Having health issues, developing depression, being unfit, being ashamed of one's body shape and being stressed often resulted in a downward spiral, which some respondents recognized in themselves. Pure lack of money was also a common reason for low levels of physical activity, and respondents expressed that this was painful in many ways, for example, if they needed to give up a previous sport hobby. Some were frustrated that others do not understand that even "affordable" exercise cannot always be afforded:

I hate it that people don't understand how much everything costs – for example, exercise. The comment from the non-poor is “Well, taking care of yourself can't be measured in money!” Oh well, the gym card is 50–100 euros a month, that is food money for the whole month, it's just not an option, using that food money for something other than food – what would you eat then? Or “Hey jogging is free!” Well, it's not, jogging clothes and equipment costs. People easily forget that those things don't come for free in the world, not everyone has running shoes in their closet or anything like that.

A nearly 30-year-old woman with higher education but a precarious, low-income work history, which is why she is now studying further and living on less than 500 euros per month

She was not the only respondent to discuss a lack of even basic outdoor exercise equipment. In one case, the equipment was even pawned. In situations of various burdens and uncertainty, not all are able to perform home exercising, although it would be free of charge. Very often, children's needs must be covered first, and many said they wanted to guarantee at least one hobby for their child, which meant compromising their own leisure-time needs and desires. Often, the respondents mentioning this were single mothers.

Below is an interview quote in which a woman wonders whether to use her limited funds to get a university sports card. She used to engage actively in sports but was now unsure whether, due to her mental state, it would be worthwhile to buy the card:

But at the moment, I'm not doing any of those [sports she did previously] to be honest, because I can't afford it. I mean, I even have to think twice to register myself to sports uni. Because I wasn't sure if I could, you know, like if I would have the motivation or energy. Because [my] psychological state impacts a lot, sometimes I don't even want to leave the house or even bed.

A woman with higher education and an upward career trajectory in her home country; moved to Finland to do a PhD, but had not managed to get funding for it or any decent job

Several participants described how they have no time for sports or any leisure activities because they must use all their time to scrape together a living. In the quotes below, an entrepreneur writes of how busy she is, and a care sector worker describes the need to recover before her next work shift:

I will never recommend becoming an entrepreneur to anyone, but still, in my case, I prefer this to being unemployed. For me, life is practically just work. I can't afford to do the things I'd like to do and there's nothing in free hobbies that interests me, and on the other hand, I wouldn't have time for them anyway.

A woman in her mid-forties with higher education; started entrepreneurship after years in precarious jobs because she could not live with the continuous insecurity; works very long hours and earns less than 1,000 euros a month

Free time goes to recovery for the next work shift, insomnia, fatigue, anxiety, swelling of the waist, joylessness and lifelessness.

A woman in her late forties doing shift work in a low-paid, female-dominated care sector

Leisure Time Physical Activity in Precarity, or, When Being at the Mercy of Others

The main message of the data indicates that when participants engaged in physical activities, it clearly had positive effects on their physical and mental wellbeing. This is not a very surprising finding and is in alignment with the reviewed studies on people's leisure in challenging situations (Bowling, 2002; Cantor et al., 2022; Scott and McCarville, 2008; Vandermeersch et al., 2017). What a precarious situation means here in particular is that the individual has less feeling of control over their own life. In situations where individuals navigate between periods of unemployment and various short-term jobs, and where different authorities, employers and governing bodies constantly challenge one's self-image, LTPA was likened to (re)drawing your body's boundaries again:

In unemployment and poverty, what is most distressing is the feeling of becoming paralyzed, being powerless. It is felt in the body as pressure and sometimes a vague pain. Or as physical weakness. That's why I take care of regular exercise. After a heavy physical effort, for a long time it feels as if someone has drawn your body's boundaries again. It's a wonderful feeling. Perhaps the lack of participation, invisibility, and lack of belonging associated with unemployment has exactly that effect: physical boundaries blur, become loose, and your entire private life is under a magnifying glass all the time. It is a violent invasion of a person's private area. That's why knowing the limits of your body, drawing your own limits with the help of exercise feels so joyful.

A nearly 60-year-old woman with higher education; had held part-time jobs and was working with a wage subsidy [a special form of social support] at the time of writing; earned less than 1,000 euros a month

This account is a poetic reflection on the etymology of precarity: “being at the mercy of others”. When a society implicitly appreciates individuals who excel at work, and even explicitly degrades the worth of people who have not found their proper place in working life, then physical fitness and particularly the act of exercising can become both a vital coping mechanism and a self-imposed measure of personal worth. However, it is also vital to understand how not only limited financial resources, but also the social and mental resources shaped by insecurity affect participation in LTPA, as demonstrated in this article.

Discussion

The findings reveal that LTPA among individuals experiencing in-work poverty is shaped by intersecting financial, temporal and social constraints, and also by strong personal motivations. While some participants maintained high activity levels despite hardship, others faced significant barriers or disengaged from LTPA entirely. These patterns partly align with previous research on socioeconomic inequalities in physical activity (e.g., Huikari et al., 2021; Beenackers et al., 2012), but extend it in a critical way, in that earlier studies have rarely examined how precarious employment (and also the growing likelihood of finding oneself in such a position despite having educational capital) conditions opportunities for LTPA.

Unlike prior work that treats SES as relatively stable, this study demonstrates that instable labor market conditions matter. Precariousness introduces uncertainty, having to remain “on call” and be ready to accept any job offers, work multiple jobs, and endure long commutes and cumulative vulnerabilities that reshape leisure choices (e.g., European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2024; Irvine and Rose, 2024; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018; European Parliament, 2016). For some in precarious situations, LTPA becomes a resource for coping and maintaining identity, and for others, it is overshadowed by the urgency of securing income or managing caregiving responsibilities. The predominance of women’s voices in the data further reflects the accumulation of vulnerabilities such as part-time

work, single parenthood and low wages, among women in precarious labor markets.

The results show that while it is necessary to emphasize the far-reaching positive consequences of physically active lifestyles, it is equally important to voice and politicize the broader issues behind inactivity, which are often rooted in inequality and human suffering. If a person can only participate in “free sports” for years because of a low and insecure income, they may eventually give up altogether. LTPA loses its appeal when new sports, venues and equipment emerge but remain out of reach. If a person is also stressed by their job situation – for example being underemployed, underpaid, or threatened by instability – their participation in “free sports” may decline, and many lack the energy for any sports at all.

Thus, limited or absent LTPA is not merely a matter of money. Nor does it help to simply ask a stressed individual to do more sports. Therein lies a need to understand the patterns and mechanisms through which social conditions that are not beyond political control such as work influence PA behavior. A comment on an earlier version of this article by an established leisure scholar suggested that “there are plenty of resistance training exercises that are free to do (crunches, sit-ups, pull-ups, chin-ups, etc.), and you can run in anything – no special equipment really is required.” This comment illustrates a lack of understanding of how disadvantages accumulate and negatively affect the psychological and other latent supportive features of work.

Low-income and precarious working conditions may become increasingly common in Finland, where recent policy shifts toward austerity include cuts that disproportionately affect disadvantaged groups such as single parents in insecure labor market positions. At the same time, the government has launched the “Finland on the Move” program (2024) to promote physical activity. This forms a paradox given that austerity measures and social security reductions may undermine the very conditions needed for participation.

This contradiction underscores the relevance of examining how work precarity intersects with leisure-time physical activity. Haudenhuyse (2019) notes that empirical research rarely addresses the impact of austerity policies on sport participation. He argues that sport participation has not been situated within broader life domains and policy contexts, and that sport and leisure scholarship has often avoided critical political analysis. Although this study did not explicitly focus on austerity politics, its findings reveal how precarious employment and austerity are mutually

reinforcing, shaping opportunities for LTPA. These connections call for further critical elaboration in both research and policy debates.

In terms of the practical solutions, this study underscores that scarcity of financial and temporal resources produces social exclusion across life domains, meaning that no single change in sports or leisure policy can fully address the barriers faced by precarious and low-income individuals. Instead, a multi-actor approach is needed.

Community-level actors such as local sports clubs could reduce stigma by offering low-cost activities without directing them only to the low-income people. Flexibility in participation regarding frequency, style and timing would allow individuals to choose options that fit their work and life situations. Clubs can seek funding and collaborate with stakeholders to support such initiatives, although it is likely that only some clubs will assume this additional role that supports public service provision. Municipalities should avoid high user charges, which is a decision that is shaped not only by financial constraints, but also by values and ideology. Private sector actors could also integrate affordable leisure services into their corporate social responsibility strategies. Finally, if the ultimate purpose of leisure is to foster human flourishing (Sager, 2013), then policies should prioritize creating conditions for that flourishing, rather than justifying LTPA primarily through economic or public health gains.

Limitations and suggestions for further studies

This study has several limitations. First, the sample primarily consisted of individuals who were relatively functional, had internet access, and were willing to share their experiences. Those with the fewest resources or lowest activity levels may require alternative recruitment strategies to be included in future research.

Second, the data were not collected exclusively to explore LTPA, but rather to examine broader life experiences of low-income and/or precarious workers. While the interviews systematically addressed leisure activities, the writing calls allowed participants to choose topics freely. Consequently, some accounts omitted LTPA, and the study did not capture quantitative measures of physical activity. This approach, however, enabled insights into the significant wider effects of precarious work.

Third, the theoretical framework of precarization introduces complexity. While this lens essentially reflects structural transformations shaping work and leisure, it may appear overly broad from a sport-focused perspective. Finally, the Finnish context with strong Sport for All policies and comprehensive social security differs from countries where affordable leisure opportunities are less available.

Therefore, future research should examine precarious workers across diverse socio-cultural contexts to clarify how labor market precarity and sport provision influence LTPA. Comparative studies could explore enablers and barriers in specific types of precarious positions (e.g., high vs. low education requirements), and investigate why some individuals remain active despite precarity, whereas others do not. Intersectional mechanisms and emotional dimensions such as exclusion, anger, or non-belonging, also warrant attention.

Conclusion

Precarious employment creates low and irregular income, time strain, and an insecure life horizon, all of which shape leisure practices. This study demonstrates how precarity (and especially low income) conditions leisure practices. Three distinct patterns emerged: 1) Being active and finding pleasure in physical activities, and simultaneously building one's (self) worth through good physical condition; 2) Restricted participation with mixed feelings about limitations, and 3) Complete withdrawal from activities when time and resources undermine wellbeing.

At its best, LTPA can foster self-confidence, physical fitness, and even employability. Yet, it remains a complex question as to who will take advantage of the available opportunities to be physically active in otherwise burdensome circumstances. By highlighting the role of labor market instability and not just SES, this study extends existing research and underscores the need for policies that support leisure opportunities for those in insecure work. As in-work poverty prevails in Europe (Eurofound, 2017; ILO, 2012), ensuring equitable access to LTPA is a pressing public health and social policy challenge.

Ethics Statement

University of Jyväskylä Human Sciences Ethics Committee has decided (register number 842/13.00.04.00/2025) that this study does not require ethical review under the TENK (the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, which is an expert body under the Ministry of Education and Culture) guidelines.

Acknowledgement

The data of this article originates from a research project supported by the Finnish Cultural Foundation (grant number 00220392).

References

- Batchelor, S., Fraser, A., Whittaker, L. & Li, L. (2020) 'Precarious leisure: (re) imagining youth, transitions and temporality', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23(1), pp. 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2019.1710483>
- Beenackers, M.A. et al. (2012) 'Socioeconomic inequalities in occupational, leisure-time, and transport related physical activity among European adults: A systematic review', *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 9, Article 116. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1479-5868-9-116>
- Bowling, C.P. (2002) 'Exploring the leisure lives of the working poor through photoelicitation', *Leisure/Loisir*, 27(1–2), pp. 3–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2002.9651293>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2019) 'Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis', *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), pp. 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Campbell I. & Price, R. (2016) 'Precarious work and precarious workers: towards an improved conceptualisation', *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 27(3), pp. 314–332. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1035304616652074>
- Cantor, P. et al. (2022) 'Leisure possibilities of adults experiencing poverty: A community-based participatory study', *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 89(2), pp. 103–114. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00084174211073266>
- Castel, R. (2000) 'The roads to disaffiliation: Insecure work and vulnerable relationships', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 24(3), pp. 519–535. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.00262>
- Collins, M. & Kay, T. (2014) *Sport and social exclusion*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

- della Porta, D. et al. (2015) 'The Precarization Effect', in della Porta, D. et al. (eds.) *The New Social Division*, pp. 1–23. Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137509352_1
- Deutsch, J. et al. (2015) 'Material deprivation in Europe: which expenditures are curtailed first?', *Social Indicators Research*, 120, pp. 723–740. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-014-0618-6>
- Eurofound (2017) *In-work poverty in the EU*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2806/125135>
- European Commission (2022) *Special Eurobarometer 525 - Sport and physical activity*. <https://doi.org/10.2766/356346>
- European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2024, September 30) *Precarious work: definitions, workers affected and OSH consequences*. OSHwiki. Available at: <https://oshwiki.osha.europa.eu/en/themes/precarious-work-definitions-workers-affected-and-osh-consequences> 7 December 2025
- European Parliament (2016) *Precarious employment in Europe. Part 1: Patterns, trends and policy strategies*. Policy Department A: Economic and Scientific Policy Study for the EMPL Committee. European Parliament. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/587285/IPOL_STU\(2016\)587285_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/587285/IPOL_STU(2016)587285_EN.pdf) 7 December 2025
- Frisby, W. & Millar, S. (2002) 'The actualities of doing community development to promote the inclusion of low income populations in local sport and recreation', *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 2(3), pp. 209–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184740208721923>
- Glover, T.D. (2004) 'Social capital in the lived experiences of community gardeners', *Leisure Sciences*, 26(2), pp. 143–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400490432064>
- Habermas, J. (1971). *Knowledge and human interests*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Haraway, D. (1988). 'Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), pp. 575–599. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3178066>
- Haudenhuyse, R. (2018) 'The impact of austerity on poverty and sport participation: mind the knowledge gap', *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 10(1), pp. 203–213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2017.1406975>
- Hodgetts, D. & Stolte, O. (2015) 'Homeless people's leisure practices within and beyond urban socio-scapes', *Urban Studies*, 53(5), pp. 899–914. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098015571236>
- Huikari, S. et al. (2021) 'Leisure-time physical activity is associated with socio-economic status beyond income – Cross-sectional survey of the Northern Finland Birth Cohort 1966 study', *Economics & Human Biology*, 41, art. 100969. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ehb.2020.100969>
- Ikonen, H.M. & Anttila, T. (2025) 'Kenellä on aikaa liikuntaan? Yhteyksistä työtälanteen ja liikunnan harrastamiseen käytetyn ajan välillä', in Haaramo, J., Hanifi, R. & Saarenmaa, K. (eds.). *Ajan jäljet – elämänrytmit koronakriisissä ja 2020-luvulla*, pp. 131–154. Helsinki: Tilastokeskus. Available at: <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-244-746-3> 22 February 2026

- ILO (2012) *From precarious work to decent work: Outcome document to the Workers' Symposium on Policies and Regulations to combat Precarious Employment*. Geneva: International Labour Office, Bureau for Workers' Activities.
- Irvine, A. & Rose, N. (2024). 'How does precarious employment affect mental health? A scoping review and thematic synthesis of qualitative evidence from Western economies', *Work, Employment and Society*, 38(2), pp. 418-441. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170221128698>
- Jakonen, M., Säilävaara, J. & Ikonen, H.-M. (2023) "Eipä tästä käteen jää juuri yhtään mitään, kun toisesta päästä leikataan heti": Työssäkäyvien köyhien kokemuksia prekaarista työstä ja sosiaaliturvasta 2000-luvun Suomessa', *Työväentutkimus Vuosikirja*, 37, pp. 6–27. <https://doi.org/10.37456/tvt.131469>
- Kalleberg, A.L. & Vallas, S.P. (2018) 'Probing precarious work: Theory, research and politics', in Kalleberg, A.L. & Vallas, S.P. (eds.) *Precarious work*, pp. 1–30. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Kangas, O. & Kalliomaa-Puha, L. (2019) In-work poverty in Finland. European Commission. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=21113&langId=en> 7 December 2025
- Kauhanen, M. & Nätti, J. (2015) 'Involuntary temporary and part-time work, job quality and well-being at work', *Social Indicators Research*, 120, pp. 783–799. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-014-0617-7>
- Kari, J. (2018) Lifelong physical activity and long-term labor market outcomes. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä. (Jyväskylä Studies in Business and Economics, 184).
- Kegler, M.C. et al. (2022) 'Inequities in physical activity environments and leisure-time physical activity in rural communities', *Preventing Chronic Disease*, 19, 210417. <https://doi.org/10.5888/pcd19.210417>
- Khan, K.M. et al. (2012) 'Sport and exercise as contributors to the health of nations', *The Lancet*, 380(9836), pp. 59–64. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(12\)60865-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(12)60865-4)
- Kim, C. & Cho, Y. (2015) 'Working conditions and leisure-time physical activity among waged workers in South Korea', *Journal of Occupational Health*, 57(3), pp. 259–267. <https://doi.org/10.1539/joh.14-0028-OA>
- Kim, M.-H. et al. (2008) 'Is precarious employment damaging to self-rated health?', *Social Science & Medicine*, 67(12), pp. 1982–1994. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2008.09.051>
- Kirk, M.A. & Rhodes, R.E. (2011) 'Occupation correlates of adults' participation in leisure-time physical activity', *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 40(4), pp. 476–485. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2010.12.015>
- Kolu, P. et al. (2022) 'Economic burden of low physical activity and high sedentary behaviour in Finland', *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 76(7), pp. 677–684. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2021-217998>
- Lewchuk, W., Laffèche, M., Dyson, D., Goldring, L., Meisner, A., Procyk, S., Rosen, D., Shields, J., Viducis, P. & Vrankulj, S. (2014) Is precarious employment low income Employment? The changing labour market in Southern Ontario. *Just Labour: A Canadian Journal of Work and Society* 22, pp. 52–73.

- Lindström, M., Hanson, B.S. & Ostergren, P.O. (2001) 'Socioeconomic differences in leisure-time physical activity', *Social Science & Medicine*, 52(3), pp. 441–451. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536\(00\)00153-](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(00)00153-)
- Mäkinen, J. et al. (2019) Aikuisväestön liikunnan harrastaminen, vapaaehtoistyö ja osallistuminen 2018. KIHUn julkaisusarja, 73. Jyväskylä: Kilpa- ja huippu-urheilun tutkimuskeskus.
- Mäkinen, T. et al. (2009) 'Twenty-five year socioeconomic trends in leisure-time and commuting physical activity among employed Finns', *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, 19(2), pp. 188–197. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0838.2007.00739.x>
- Mielke, G.I. et al. (2022) 'All are equal, but some are more equal than others', *BMC Public Health*, 22, Article 36. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-12428-7>
- Mikkonen, M. et al. (2022) 'Sport policy in Finland', *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 14(4), pp. 715–728. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2022.2127837>
- Mullainathan, S. & Shafir, E. (2013) *Scarcity: Why having too little means so much*. New York: Times Books.
- Mutz, M., Abdel Hadi, S. & Häusser, J.A. (2020) 'Work and sport: relationships between specific job stressors and sports participation', *Ergonomics*, 63(9), pp. 1077–1087. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00140139.2020.1772381>
- Norbäck, M. & Styhre, A. (2021) On the precarity-spectrum: Exploring different levels of precariousness in market-mediated professional work. *Management Revue*, 32(3), pp. 266–295. <https://doi.org/10.5771/0935-9915-2021-3-266>
- Oncescu, J. & Neufeld, C. (2019) 'Low-income families and the positive outcomes associated with participation in a community-based leisure education program', *Annals of Leisure Research*, 22(5), pp. 661–678. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2019.1624586>
- Poulter, H. et al. (2023) "'Bottom of the pile": Health behaviors within the context of in-work poverty in North East England', *Journal of Poverty*, 27(3), pp. 197–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10875549.2021.2023721>
- Pförtner, T.-K. (2023) 'The emergence of precarious employment as a determinant of health in Europe', *International Journal of Social Determinants of Health and Health Services*, 53(3), pp. 266–281. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207314221139797>
- Sager, A. (2013) 'Philosophy of leisure', in Blackshaw, T. (ed.) *Routledge handbook of leisure studies*, pp. 5–14. London: Routledge.
- Scott, J. & McCarville, R. (2008) 'Leisure behaviors among selected women living in poverty', *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 26(4), pp. 83–104.
- Shin, K. & You, S. (2013) 'Leisure type, leisure satisfaction and adolescents' psychological wellbeing', *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*, 7(2), pp. 53–62. <https://doi.org/10.1017/prp.2013.6>
- Smith-Carrier, T. (2017) 'Reproducing social conditions of poverty', *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, 38(4), pp. 498–521. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2016.1268874>

- Statistics Finland (2023) Total earnings of wage and salary earners highest in Uusimaa. Available at: <https://stat.fi/en/publication/cl8lqceyyrjo2odukt2s8fy8p> 7 December 2025
- Szilcz, M. et al. (2018) 'Time trends in absolute and relative socioeconomic inequalities in leisure time physical inactivity in northern Sweden', *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 46(1), pp. 112–123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1403494817713123>
- Säilävaara, J., Ikonen, H.-M. & Jakonen, M. (2023) 'Feeling poor and lonely: The felt experiences of low-income working lone mothers in Finland', *Affilia*, 39(3), pp. 517–533. <https://doi.org/10.1177/088861099231223495>
- Tink, L.N. et al. (2019) 'Rereading the history of recreation in Canada', *Leisure/Loisir*, 43(4), pp. 445–457. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2019.1697350>
- Trussell, D.E. & Mair, H. (2010) 'Seeking judgement free spaces: Poverty, leisure, and social inclusion', *Journal of Leisure Research*, 42(4), pp. 513–533. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2010.11950216>
- Vandermeersch, H. & Scheerder, J. (2017) 'Sport managers' perspectives on poverty and sport', *Sport Management Review*, 20(5), pp. 510–521. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.02.002>
- Vandermeersch, H., Van Regenmortel, T. & Scheerder, J. (2017) 'There are alternatives, but your social life is curtailed', *Social Indicators Research*, 133, pp. 119–138. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-016-1360-z>
- Welsch, H. & Biermann, P. (2019) 'Poverty is a public bad', *The Review of Income and Wealth*, 65(1), pp. 187–200. <https://doi.org/10.1111/roiw.12350>
- WHO (2022) Global status report on physical activity 2022. Available at: <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/363607/9789240059153-eng.pdf?sequence=1> 7 December 2025
- Withall, J., Jago, R. & Fox, K.R. (2011) 'Why some do but most don't', *BMC Public Health*, 11, Article 507. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-11-507>