

Doing, Being, Belonging and Becoming in the Occupation of Dumpster Diving: A scoping review

 Tanja Turtiainen, MScOT¹  Anni Pekkanen, MScOT²  Ella Mutanen, OT³

Affiliation:

¹Independent researcher, Oulu, Finland

The Wellbeing Services County of North Ostrobothnia, Oulu, Finland

²Independent researcher, Helsinki, Finland

Master's Degree Programme in Project Management, Turku University of Applied Sciences, Turku, Finland

³Independent researcher, Jyväskylä, Finland

Terveystalo Rehabilitation Services, Jyväskylä, Finland

Corresponding Author:

Tanja Turtiainen

Email: tanja.turtiainen@pohde.fi

Dates:

Received: 15/02/2026

Accepted: 09/04/2026

Article citation:

Turtiainen, T., Pekkanen, A., & Mutanen, E. (2026). Doing, being, belonging and becoming in the occupation of dumpster diving. *The Human Occupation & Wellbeing Journal*. 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.18552/pscygm83>

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.



Scan QR Code to share

ABSTRACT

Background: Dumpster diving refers to the practice of salvaging edible food from commercial or residential waste containers. Although stigmatized and associated with poverty, recent public discourse suggests a shift towards greater visibility and acceptance, particularly in relation to sustainability and food waste reduction. From an occupational science perspective, dumpster diving remains largely unexplored. This scoping review aims to understand how food-related dumpster diving as an occupation can be conceptualized through the dimensions of doing, being, belonging, and becoming.

Methodology: Guided by Arksey and O'Malley's methodological framework, a scoping review was conducted. Data of nine studies representing over 120 individuals engaged in dumpster diving across Europe, North America, and Australia was used and analysed deductively.

Findings: Findings portray dumpster diving as a multidimensional occupation. Doing involved planning, executing and activities related to conserving the food. Use of sensory and cognitive skills as well as risk management were highlighted. Being was reflected in identity formation, values, choice, and motivations ranging from food insecurity to activism and enjoyment. Belonging emerged through shared practices, social connections and knowledge exchange, while also shaped by encounters with authority. Becoming incorporated changes in diets, environmental awareness, self-sufficiency, and wellbeing, alongside potential health risks.

Conclusion: This review demonstrates that dumpster diving can support meaning, participation, and wellbeing despite its non-normative and sometimes illegal nature. Recognizing dumpster diving as an occupation broadens occupational therapy's understanding of human engagement and highlights the importance of addressing marginalized and non-sanctioned occupations, discussed here through the lenses of dark side of occupation, occupational justice and ecopation.

Keywords: dumpster diving, non-sanctioned occupations, occupational perspective of health, occupational science, wellbeing

Copyright: © 2026. The Author/s. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work first published in *The Human Occupation & Wellbeing Journal* is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author/s or with their consent.

INTRODUCTION

Dumpster diving refers to the practice of searching for and salvaging edible food and other usable items from commercial and residential waste containers (Scott, 2011). This study focuses on food-related dumpster diving, where the aim is to find packaged foods, fresh produce, and prepared meals that have been discarded for cosmetic issues, inventory practices, or nearing expiration dates, while still safe for consumption. Recent newspaper articles (Dieterle 2021; Ulrich 2024) describe how dumpster diving has shifted from a stigmatized, poverty linked practice to a more openly discussed and even trendy occupation. In general discussion, dumpster diving is an urban phenomenon and evokes various opinions. Social media sharing and online groups celebrating recovered goods have helped shift dumpster diving from a socially unacceptable practice to a more normalized one. Sustainable development is strongly emphasized in all areas, including occupational therapy research (Persson & Erlandsson, 2014; WFOT, 2018).

The authors first became interested in food related dumpster diving in 2021 during master's studies at Jönköping University, Sweden. While researching the topic only, one occupational science reference was found. Cunningham and Slade's (2019) study, focusing on the occupational side of homelessness, frames dumpster diving as a survival occupation for homeless individuals, involving risk taking in searching and preparing food. Discussions around the topic revealed that some students found the whole idea of diving unpleasant or disgusting, while others were intrigued. As authors, we want to acknowledge that all above-mentioned definitions, descriptions, and discussions related to dumpster diving have emerged within Western and Nordic cultural contexts and

thereby shaping the understanding of this occupation in the present study.

In occupational therapy and science, all forms of human occupation and participation warrant attention. Twinley (2013; 2020) reminds us that occupations should not be categorized as good or bad but seen as multidimensional and complex. If occupations are considered bad, it can lead to judging and stigmatizing the person participating in them. Many occupations may not promote health in the usual sense but can still offer wellbeing or a sense of belonging to those who engage in them. According to Kiepek et al. (2019, 2022) occupational science often neglects non-sanctioned occupations, and they are viewed as inappropriate, illegal, or unacceptable. This narrows our understanding of these occupations and the lived experiences of those who engage in them, causing us to lose valuable insight into the complexity of human behaviour, occupational engagement, and the diverse meanings occupations can hold.

A recent review by Watson et al. (2023) examined who engages in dumpster diving and why. While the question of who remains unclear, the motivations were identified. People participate because of enjoyment, social excitement, food security, and political activism. Although the review explores these reasons in depth, it does not address dumpster diving as an occupation, leaving it largely unexplored. Dumpster diving for food has received very little attention in occupational therapy or science, and as far as the authors know, no articles focusing on it exist. This invites us to take a closer look at the phenomenon from an occupational perspective, defined as a way of looking at or thinking about human doing (Njelesani et al., 2014). Therefore, in this study, we aim to understand how dumpster diving as an occupation can be

conceptualized through the dimensions of doing, being, belonging, and becoming.

Doing, Being, Belonging, and Becoming

Doing, being, belonging and becoming are dimensions of occupation and can be seen as concepts of wellbeing and health (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Doing is described as a basic human need that both shapes and is shaped by who we are. Being provides the foundation for what we do while belonging develops through connections with others, communities, and shared occupations, reflected in how people participate and feel included. Doing can be linked to becoming, which emerges through meaningful engagement and future-oriented aspirations. The ability to do things both mandatory and pleasing supports wellbeing and enables becoming, which is especially visible when individuals work to change their circumstances. (Hltch et al., 2014; Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). However, doing does not automatically lead to becoming; actions must be tied to personally meaningful goals. Grounded in doing, becoming reflects a person's potential and growth and can be positive or negative. Inner and external barriers can limit engagement in such activities and restrict opportunities for becoming. Wellbeing depends on having the opportunity to use one's abilities, pursue desired activities, and strive toward one's potential.

By reflecting dumpster diving through the four dimensions of occupation, Doing, Being, Belonging, and Becoming, we can explore how non-normative activities may support wellbeing, health, and inclusion. Linking these dimensions to dumpster diving can also challenge prevailing norms around consumerism and socially acceptable behaviour. Such reflection may open new ways to advance occupational therapy's core mission of fostering meaningful participation.

METHODS

As no studies from the occupational perspective of dumpster diving exist, scoping review approach was considered appropriate and Arksey and O'Malley's methodological framework (2005), along with the refinements proposed by Levac et al. (2010) was applied. Identifying the research question was generated around concept (dumpster diving as an occupation), target population (people who participate in dumpster diving), and outcome of interest (dimensions of doing, being, belonging, and becoming in dumpster diving). The research question guiding this scoping review was: In what ways does the current literature describe dumpster diving as an occupation in relation to the dimensions of doing, being, belonging, and becoming? Initial try-out proved that including multiple search words did not provide results, so a decision was made to only use the term "dumpster diving".

Identifying relevant studies was conducted using the databases of CINAHL, MEDLINE, PubMed, APA PsycInfo, Sage Journals online, Taylor & Francis online and Scopus due to focus on occupational and social issues. The preliminary data search was initiated by the first and second authors in November 2021 and revised in December 2025. Inclusion criteria included empirical research articles published between 2001-2026 in English, involving dumpster diving participants and qualitative descriptions of dumpster diving as an occupation (see Table 1 for full inclusion/exclusion criteria). Study selection (Table 1, Figure 1) was accomplished by first screening titles, then abstracts. Selected

articles were screened for relevance and either excluded or included in the scoping review. Charting the data was conducted iteratively with the extraction sheet (Table 2) updated as familiarity with the study data increased.

Collating, summarizing, and reporting the results were accomplished by analysing the data, reporting results, and applying meaning to the results. Deductive qualitative analysis by Pollack et al (2023) was applied following three steps: immersion in data, extraction of relevant data and review of framework. Willcock and Hocking’s (2015) doing, being, belonging and becoming were used as framework for the extraction and operationalised as presented in Table 2. Articles were divided between first and third authors so that initial analysis was accomplished by one and reviewed by others. The whole extraction and organization of the framework was created and reviewed in collaboration between all three authors.

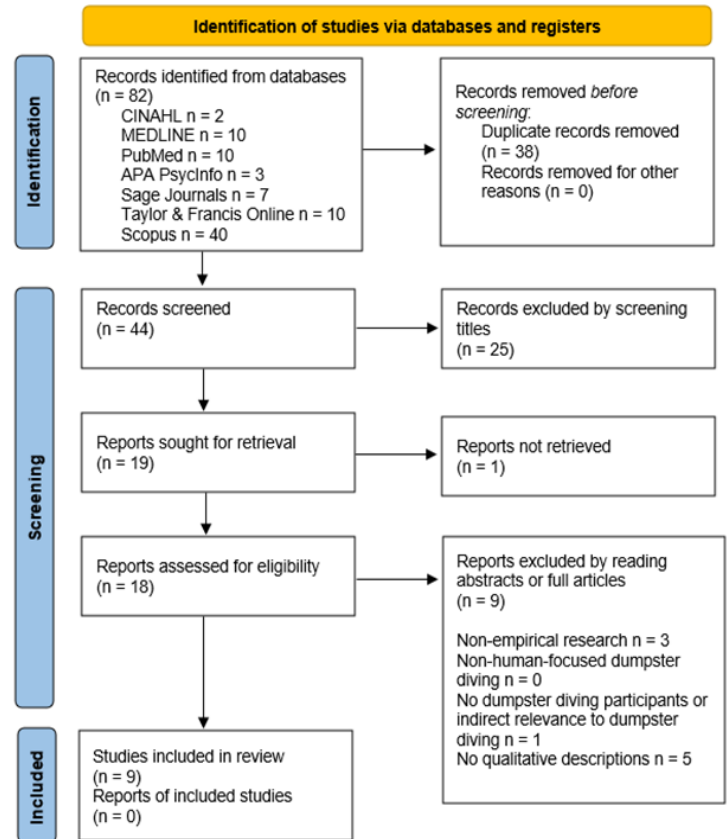


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram

Table 1. Presentation of the search process

Literature search period: 5 Nov 2021–31 Dec 2025					
Inclusion:					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Published empirical research articles between 2001-2026 Articles in English language Studies on dumpster diving with human context Studies including dumpster diving participants and dumpster diving being the primary, or one of the focus points Qualitative or mixed-methods studies, providing qualitative descriptions of dumpster diving 					
Exclusion:					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-empirical or pre-2001 publications Articles not in English language Studies on non-human-focused dumpster diving (e.g., medical or technical waste studies) Studies with no dumpster diving participants or only indirect relevance to dumpster diving Studies without qualitative descriptions of dumpster diving 					
Data bases and search terms including Boolean operators and used limitations	Number of hits	Hits minus duplicates	Chosen titles	Chosen abstracts	Chosen articles
CINAHL [dumpster diving] Source type: academic journals	2	2(0)	1	0	0
MEDLINE "dumpster diving".mp. Year: 2001-2026, Language: English	10	8(2)	1	1	0
PubMed ("dumpster"[All Fields] OR "dumpsters"[All Fields]) AND ("dived"[All Fields] OR "dives"[All Fields] OR "diving"[MeSH Terms] OR "diving"[All Fields] OR "divings"[All Fields]) Year: 2001-2026, Language: English	10	0(10)	0	0	0
APA PsycInfo [dumpster diving] Year: 2001-26, Document Type: journal articles, Methodology: empirical research, qualitative study	3	3(0)	2	1	1
SAGE journals online [Abstract: dumpster diving] Year: 2001-2026, Language: English	7	4(3)	4	4	1
Taylor & Francis online [Abstract: dumpster diving] OR [Abstract: dumpster] AND [Abstract: diving] Year: 2001-2026, Language: English	10	10(0)	5	5	5
Scopus TITLE-ABS-KEY (dumpster diving) Article search; Year: 2001-2026, Language: English	40	17(23)	6	4	2
Total number of articles	82	44(38)	19	15	9

FINDINGS

The findings are based on nine articles published between 2005 and 2026. Two studies were conducted in the United States and two in Canada. One study, originating from Austria, included data from both Austria and Germany. The remaining studies were conducted in Germany, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Finland. This scoping review draws on qualitative descriptions of over 120 individuals who engage in dumpster diving. The real number cannot be announced, as not all studies included numerical information (Table 2), and some included non-diver participants. The chosen studies represented sociology, anthropology, food-, health-, atmospheric and earth sciences as well as environmental and critical management studies.

Table 2: Data extraction sheet

Article details: First author, title, journal, year, country	Aim / Purpose	Participants	Research design and method	Key findings related to doing, being, be- longing and becoming in the occupation of dumpster diving	Ethical con- siderations
Carolsfeld, A.L Beyond Desperation: Motivations for Dumpster Diving for Food in Vancouver. Food and Food- ways, 2013, Can- ada	To explain dumpster diving for food and why people do it	24 participants (21 of them were divers) in Vancouver, Canada.*	Ethnographic research in- cluding par- ticipant ob- servation and qualitative semi-struc- tured inter- views	<u>Doing</u> : Occupation is described as fun and thrilling activity, but also as an alternative response to the conventional food system. Descriptions of “norms” and silent rules around dumpster diving. Using senses and safety systems while diving was discussed. <u>Being</u> : Divers are a variety of different kinds of people, some presenting alternate life- styles. Freedom of choice was important, as well as ideological purposes. Memories of childhood diving with family. <u>Belonging</u> : Descriptions of doing together and connecting with others. <u>Becoming</u> : Participants were looking for more sustainable consumption patterns and opportunities to save money for what is needed. A sense of self-sufficiency was dis- cussed. Diving for better quality food.	Ethics ap- proval The first au- thor was ac- tively in- volved in dumpster diving with the partici- pants and discusses how this af- fected the study pro- cess. Dumpster di- vers were thanked
Plank, A Free lunch, struc- tural violence, and normalization: A neo-Gramscian analysis of food waste and dump- ster diving. Organization, 2020, Austria	To examine the phe- nomena of food waste and dump- ster diving in structural and agentic levels.	9 participants (6 male, 3 fe- male) in Aus- tria and Ger- many	Qualitative, phenomeno- logical inter- views	<u>Doing</u> : Dumpster diving is a financially ben- eficial and regular activity for participants. It is adventurous and exciting, and on the “border of legality”. <u>Being</u> : Participants were feeling bad for the wasted food. <u>Belonging</u> : Divers see the occupation as social practice and doing together. <u>Becoming</u> : Doing something good for the environment in a long haul. Economic ben- efits exist while reducing the amount of waste.	No mention of ethical ap- proval or eth- ical consider- ations re- garding the study.
Capponi, G The taste of waste: reclaiming and sharing rotten food among squatters in Lon- don.	To analyse the con- sumption practices and dump- ster diving among	Inhabitants of three squatted social centres in London, UK.	Ethnographic research in- cluding par- ticipant ob- servation and interviews	<u>Doing</u> : The process of acquisition and con- sumption of dived (skipped) food includes many steps/phases, such as evaluating, storing, and sharing. Skills and knowledge needed for dumpster diving were dis- cussed.	No mention of ethical ap- proval or eth- ical consider- ations re- garding the study.

Food, Culture and Society, 2020, UK	squatting communities in London			<p><u>Being</u>: Using wasted food is a way to criticize production-distribution chains. Most participants were supporting an anti-capitalist lifestyle.</p> <p><u>Belonging</u>: All food was equally shared. Communal dinners were arranged. Doing together and collaboration was discussed.</p> <p><u>Becoming</u>: Participants were involved in raising awareness not only of food waste but also about social inequality, access to resources and over-production.</p>	The author was actively involved in dumpster diving with the participants.
<p>Eikenberry, N. Attitudes, beliefs, and prevalence of dumpster diving as a means to obtain food by Midwestern, low-income, urban dwellers.</p> <p>Agriculture and Human Values, 2005, USA</p>	To explore dumpster diving as a method some food-insecure adults use for obtaining food as well as the prevalence of the behaviour. Also, the perceptions, attitudes and beliefs of people who dumpster dive are considered.	<p>396 participants (inc. 44 male and 29 female dumpster divers) in two low-income urban communities in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.</p> <p>Initial (n= 21), and additional focus groups (n=14). Later composed of dumpster divers, half of them homeless. *</p>	Mixed method study including quantitative survey and qualitative focus group interviews.	<p><u>Doing</u>: Dumpster diving is one method for low-income residents to obtain food to supplement their diet. Descriptions of doing included safety precautions while diving, timing of the activities, cooking and preparing the salvaged goods and health-related issues when consuming the food. Only minor differences between homeless and other participants in how they participate can be seen due to lack of adequate facilities and equipment.</p> <p><u>Being</u>: Dumpster diving is mostly seen as an acceptable occupation, even though sometimes also a social statement against consumerism. Most divers were diving out of necessity but had sometimes also other solutions available to food insecurity. One participant describes diving as a practice learned from mum.</p> <p><u>Belonging</u>: Descriptions of environments where dumpster diving happens and learning skills related to dumpster diving from others.</p> <p><u>Becoming</u>: Descriptions of eating better, but also discussions about getting ill from eating spoiled food.</p>	<p>The University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects approved the study.</p> <p>Dumpster divers were thanked.</p> <p>No other mentions or ethical considerations are presented.</p>
<p>Lehtonen, T-K. Living on the margins: dumpster diving for food as a critical practice.</p> <p>Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory, 2021, Finland</p>	To describe and conceptualize the practice of dumpster diving. Research question: <i>In what way is voluntary dumpster diving a "critical practice"?</i>	14 participants (6 male, 8 female) in the Finnish cities of Helsinki, Tampere, and Turku, between 23 and 43 years of age	Qualitative in-depth interviews	<p><u>Doing</u>: Dumpster diving is seen as a way of getting food for free. Choosing and choice are mentioned as key elements in dumpster diving. Participants describe what they do with the found food. Economic and ecological matters, as well as legal issues were also mentioned.</p> <p><u>Being</u>: Dumpster diving can provide a sense of autonomy and choice-making. Dumpster divers can also feel obliged to save food that would otherwise go to waste. Participants enjoyed occupation because it allowed experimentation on the limits of the contemporary norms, while at the same time promoting sustainability.</p> <p><u>Belonging</u>: Participants describe a different form of togetherness with others. Diving in</p>	No mention of ethical approval or ethical considerations regarding the study.

				<p>a group and sharing tasks is also discussed.</p> <p><u>Becoming:</u> Participants brought up the idea of caring for the environment in a long haul. Also, unhealthy eating occurred when there was just too much of everything.</p>	
<p>Vinegar, R. More than a response to food insecurity: demographics and social networks of urban dumpster divers.</p> <p>Local Environment, 2016, Canada</p>	<p>To assess who the community of dumpster divers are and to understand how they recuperate waste.</p>	<p>26 participants (10 males, 15 females, 1 transgender) in Montréal, Quebec, Canada, between 21 and 50 years of age</p>	<p>Participant observation and semi-structured interviews</p>	<p><u>Doing:</u> Dumpster diving was not just to access food but also linked to other “doings” such as saving money, protecting the environment. Occupation was also described as a mission with planning, timing and using known routes and places to dumpster dive. Also, safety, laws and rules of the occupation are described.</p> <p><u>Being:</u> People who dumpster dive were from varying backgrounds. “Alternative” identity was common among divers, meaning that many described themselves socially conscious in reference to lifestyle, politics or ideology. They described sometimes diving for the thrill of it or for ideological purposes. Findings were similar between food-insecure and –secure participants. Participants sometimes concealed their activities because of concerns about being judged or stigmatized.</p> <p><u>Belonging:</u> Dumpster diving offered enjoyable interactions, networks and social experiences to some. Sharing goods with others was happening often. Socialization among divers varied. Food-insecure divers were little less socially connected, while food-secure divers had very strong social connections.</p> <p><u>Becoming:</u> Participants described feeling happier when time is not spent “bumming around”. Dumpster diving also improved the quality and quantity of consumed foods and thereby manifested in better health and food intake. Similarly, also descriptions of getting ill from spoiled food was mentioned.</p>	<p>The positionality of the first author is presented.</p> <p>The first author was actively involved in dumpster diving with the participants.</p> <p>Dumpster divers were thanked.</p> <p>Participants did not receive incentives.</p> <p>No other ethical considerations are presented.</p>
<p>Savio, G. Organization and Stigma Management: A Comparative Study of Dumpster Divers in New York.</p> <p>Sociological Perspectives, 2017, USA</p>	<p>To gather information on the social contexts in which dumpster diving was practiced, and on understandings of dumpster</p>	<p>Two groups of dumpster divers in New York City, USA (informal group = divers visiting regularly the same location & formal group = divers belonging to Freegan movement)</p>	<p>Ethnographic field research</p>	<p><u>Doing:</u> Dumpster diving acquires certain practical skills and knowledge. Also, tools and techniques and safety precautions to use while dumpster diving were discussed.</p> <p><u>Being:</u> Participants were not ashamed or feeling guilty for dumpster diving, even though they recognized the stigmatized status of the occupation. Some participants identified as freegans.</p> <p><u>Belonging:</u> Dumpster diving includes a lot of socialization and sharing. Dumpster diving with others allowed a way to develop shared views and understanding about</p>	<p>No mention of ethical approval or ethical considerations regarding the study.</p> <p>The author was actively involved in dumpster diving with</p>

	diving and freeganism			<p>dumpster diving. Sharing information with others was seen as useful.</p> <p><u>Becoming:</u> Becoming part of something, becoming better at dumpster diving while learning more</p>	the participants.
<p>Jahnke, B. Dumpster Diving for a Better World. Explaining Unconventional Protest and Public Support for Actions against Food Waste.</p> <p>Nature and Culture, 2021, Germany</p>	To examine dumpster diving as an unconventional protest action	<p>Interviews included 20 individuals who go dumpster diving. 208 dumpster divers completed the online survey.*</p> <p>Factorial survey experiment on the acceptance of dumpster diving was taken by 2299 people.*</p>	Mixed methods design with qualitative semi structured interviews, quantitative online survey and factorial survey experiments.	<p><u>Doing:</u> Descriptions of different phases of the occupation, like planning, doing things together and sharing duties, sorting and preparing the food. Legal issues of dumpster diving are also discussed among participants and minor mischief is approved if no real harm is done.</p> <p><u>Being:</u> Divers were mostly students with a middle- or upper-class background, between 20-30 and with a left-wing political orientation. Participants described both altruistic and egoistical motives for taking part in dumpster diving. Dumpster diving is one way of escaping everyday life while experiencing an adventure but simultaneously rescuing food.</p> <p><u>Belonging:</u> Descriptions of dumpster diving locations and being together with other people. Happily taking others along and teaching them. Opportunities to meet like-minded people.</p> <p><u>Becoming:</u> Dumpster diving allows one to save money for something that matters, like buying more organic products. It allows also to practice critical consumption and helps preserve resources.</p>	No mention of ethical approval or ethical considerations regarding the study is presented.
<p>Ross, W. Diving into shadow places: dumpster diving, food waste, and care.</p> <p>Social & Cultural Geography, 2026, Australia</p>	To develop new understandings of dumpster diving and shadow places	<p>15 dumpster divers in their twenties and thirties, evenly across genders (women, men, nonbinary).</p> <p>Almost all participants lived in shared houses or squats, held precarious employment and/or relied on welfare support.</p>	Experimental and creative approaches inspired by cultural geography. Study included 'dive-along' interviews, solo participant observation and collaborative zine-making workshops	<p><u>Doing:</u> Descriptions of dumpster diving as a sensory and risky experience, involving planning, avoiding surveillance, injuries and harassment. Participants made their activities public by posting their hauls online.</p> <p><u>Being:</u> Participants expressed outrage against the food system that generates excessive waste.</p> <p><u>Belonging:</u> Descriptions of many kinds of collaborations and sharing during dumpster diving. Participants also discuss how others are involved in dumpster diving, like for example staff, security and animals.</p> <p><u>Becoming:</u> Descriptions of getting better in dumpster diving by gaining more experience. Participants went also beyond just dumpster diving by taking part in organized food rescue markets and by running workshops for students around the topic. They aimed to participate in mutual aid by providing salvaged food for those in need.</p>	<p>Ethics approval.</p> <p>The first author was observing and doing dive-alongs with the participants.</p> <p>Dumpster divers were thanked.</p> <p>No other ethical considerations are presented.</p>

Doing

All articles presented dumpster diving as a whole set of activities and interconnections connected to it. Diving could be a once-in-a-lifetime experience for some, but also a regular way of food acquisition and a habit for others. Occupation involved planning, executing and activities related to preservation, preparing and even consuming the found food. Needed skills depended on where, when, with whom and with what equipment the activity was performed. The main skill recognized was to be able to evaluate the condition of food. Senses were in a key role, both in selecting applicable products and staying alert. Sensory skills, like sight and smell, were needed when assessing if the food was still edible or spoiled. Cognitive skills were equally important and needed when choosing products and using safety precautions (Capponi, 2020; Carolsfeld & Erikson, 2013; Lehtonen & Pyyhtinen, 2021). Ross and Phillips (2026) described avoiding staff and security personnel, glass, sharp objects and dangerous chemicals as some of these safety precautions. They also highlighted the sensory side not always being pleasant while encountering rotten or mouldy food.

Occupation also involved practices happening after the actual diving experience. This included more detailed inspection and sorting and cleaning of the items and either preserving and freezing or preparing them for eating (Capponi, 2020; Carolsfeld & Erikson, 2013; Jahnke & Liebe, 2021; Lehtonen & Pyyhtinen, 2021). In Eikenberry and Smith (2005) article alternate ways to cook were mentioned, as homeless participants did not have cooking facilities to use. They described, for example, barbecuing in the park and using hospital microwaves to heat up the food. When looking further beyond the diving

experience, some were also actively involved in posting their hauls in social media (Ross & Phillips, 2026).

While doing, divers needed to acknowledge specific rules; those restricted by laws and regulations and unwritten ones, known to all participants. Beginners were usually guided by more experienced ones, and this is how the silence knowledge was passed on. Dumpster diving was illegal in some countries, while in others only trespassing private property was sanctioned, or no policies existed at all (Eikenberry & Smith, 2005; Jahnke & Liebe, 2021; Lehtonen & Pyyhtinen, 2021; Savio, 2017).

Being

Articles revealed that dumpster divers were not a homogeneous group, but included variation in gender, age, cultural and ethnic background, socioeconomic status and housing arrangements. Findings did not showcase significant differences between genders or countries but presented divers as mostly working-aged adults. Motivations behind dumpster diving included food insecurity, physical need for food as well as practical, ideological, social and economic reasons. The practice was sometimes passed on from one generation to another as some participants shared childhood memories around diving (Eikenberry and Smith 2005; Carolsfeld & Erikson, 2013). Participants recognized that dumpster diving was a stigmatized occupation that others saw as filthy, disgusting or illegal. Still most participants were proud and very outspoken about their activities. (Savio, 2017; Vinegar et al., 2016). Dumpster diving as an occupation enabled many opportunities for choosing and personal decision-making, and even engaging in dumpster diving instead of shopping, was a ready-made choice. Many food-insecure people had chosen dumpster diving instead

of stealing, going to soup kitchens or other charities (Carolsfeld & Erikson, 2013; Vinegar et al., 2016). Only one article (Eikenberry & Smith, 2005) described situations where participants used dumpsters to access food out of necessity and shared more ambivalent feelings about it. Most divers identified themselves as activists, “socially conscious”, or “alternative” in reference to general lifestyle (Lehtonen & Pyyhtinen, 2021; Plank 2020; Vinegar et al. 2016). In a study by Savio (2017) some of the participants identified as freegans and were portrayed as members of subculture whose practices are framed as collective political statements challenging dominant consumption norms. Dumpster diving was also used as a way to escape everyday life by experiencing an adventure while simultaneously rescuing food (Jahnke & Liebe; 2021). This enabled individuals to momentarily step outside routine structures and experience their lives differently and derive meaning beyond regular food acquisition.

Belonging

Dumpster diving provided enjoyable social experiences and opportunities to be and communicate with others. It was sometimes an alternative way to spend time with friends and do something together. Even when diving alone, people met and connected with others. Some considered it as a group activity that was carried out together by sharing duties and responsibilities and by happily taking new people along (Eikenberry & Smith, 2005; Lehtonen & Pyyhtinen, 2021; Ross & Phillips, 2026). Sharing meant many things. Divers share experiences, tips, information, silent knowledge, conversations and even the found food. For some, social interaction is pointed out to be the main reason for engaging in these activities. Meeting like-minded people was considered a major plus and it was not uncommon for the divers to

cook the food together and prepare dinner or feast from the salvaged goods (Carolsfeld & Erikson, 2013; Capponi, 2020; Jahnke & Liebe, 2021; Plank, 2020; Savio, 2017). Due to active socializing, some participants proposed that people with poor social skills rarely take part in dumpster diving (Vinegar et al., 2016).

Besides meeting other divers, different kinds of encounters also happened. For example, participants of the Ross and Philips study (2026) describe the non-human element of dumpster diving, and expressed meeting various animals, like for example seagulls and possums. Some participants also described experiencing harassment from aggressive security personnel and even police. These confrontations were sometimes violent and shaped the experiences of belonging very differently.

Becoming

As a result of dumpster diving, the variety, quantity and quality of the food people consumed was often diversified as they obtained products they would not otherwise buy, like more fruits, vegetables, and quality products. Acquiring food from dumpsters enabled saving money and reducing financial stress by allowing people to use money in other meaningful and purposeful things, promoting simultaneously a sense of self-sufficiency. Besides eating healthy, unhealthy habits could occur if people chose large quantities of treats and pastries to consume. Similarly, participants without decent facilities to store, clean and prepare the food, described getting sometimes sick after eating the food (Carolsfeld & Erikson, 2013; Eikenberry & Smith, 2005; Jahnke & Liebe, 2021; Lehtonen & Pyyhtinen, 2021; Plank, 2020; Vinegar et al., 2016).

Becoming was not only related to food and money. One participant particularly expressed feeling proud and much happier when having opportunities to share and time was not spent “bumming around” (Vinegar et al., 2016). But in dumpster diving, becoming included more than just the changes on the individual level. Many divers saw dumpster diving as a way to reduce waste, promote sustainability and protect the environment to some degree. Some also felt obligated to utilize the food waste and save the still edible products. In this way, voluntary dumpster diving could have lasting effects on an individual's life (Carolsfeld & Erikson, 2013; Lehtonen & Pyyhtinen, 2021; Plank, 2020; Ross & Phillips, 2026; Vinegar et al. 2016).

DISCUSSION

In the findings of this study, dumpster diving was presented as a multidimensional occupation promoting alternative ways to do, be, belong and become. These findings are especially interesting, as no occupational therapy-related studies on the topic were found but still dumpster diving can be linked to several theories in occupational therapy and science.

Doing is described as human participation in any activity (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Because it is grounded in human characteristics and biological needs, dumpster diving as an alternative way of food acquisition lies at the very core of doing. According to the findings, dumpster diving is situated in a grey area, between forbidden and allowed and therefore leans heavily towards the dark side of occupations. Twinley (2020) explains that occupations can be identified as being in the dark side by five common features: identity meanings, rewards on the dark side, risk recognition, intertwining of occupations and attracting judgment. According to findings, all these elements were present in dumpster

diving. Occupation was described as fun, thrilling and rewarding, but carrying a sense of stigma with it. It had more meaning than just a way to get food and activities were often performed secretly in the night-time, increasing the aspect of excitement even more. Risks were taken and rewards were plenty. Watson et al. (2023) studied dumpster diving from the public health perspective and focused on finding out why people take part in “potentially illegal or physically risky activity that could have health implications”. In relation to the dark side of occupations, the phrasing of the question already gives many answers to why some people might be attracted to the adventurous side of it. Wilcock and Hocking (2015) point out that illegal activities, like dumpster diving in certain areas, can lead to punishments that can limit access to other continuous chosen occupations. Even if the main motive for dumpster diving is hunger, you are choosing the risk of being punished and thereby ultimately jeopardizing one's own future opportunities to engage in doing, being, belonging and becoming.

Being is the personal dimension of occupation, shaped by past, present, and future experiences, identity, and motivation (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Dumpster diving may be driven by a combination of material needs, such as food insecurity, and broader social, ideological and personal motivations, including influences from individuals' personal and cultural histories. It may also be a response to the need for adequate nutrition. Since nutrition is essential to being, dumpster diving can both support being and express individual values. The concept of occupational justice could be recognized from the findings as most divers had made a conscious choice to participate in this occupation highlighting the right to choose what they do and value. In dumpster diving, occupational injustices

mostly occurred when people were forced to dive out of necessity or did not have equal access to appropriate facilities and equipment, increasing the health risks for some. Findings also indicate that diving was sometimes used as a form of escapism. Turtiainen et al. (2024) explored occupational escapism in the context of unemployment, noting that experiences can range from merely passing time to engaging in meaningful and enjoyable activities, or even potentially harmful ones, often accompanied by a sense of guilt. In contrast, the findings of this study characterize dumpster diving as a win-win situation. It is described as both an escape from everyday life and a productive activity involving acquiring or salvaging food. Notably, no accounts of guilt emerged in the findings. Viewed through Wilcock and Hocking's (2015) dimensions of occupation, dumpster diving can be understood as an everyday escape that allows individuals to step outside social norms. It primarily reflects being, offering opportunities for self-reflection, choice, freedom, and meaning, while enacted through doing via the activities of searching and salvaging food. Over time, repeated engagement may also support becoming by shaping individuals' values and environmental awareness.

Belonging is the social dimension of occupation, grounded in the human need for connection. It is primarily experienced through shared doing and reflects a sense of connection, inclusion, and relatedness shaped by relationships, culture, place, and power (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). The findings portray dumpster diving as a socially situated occupation that creates connections, shared identity, and inclusion. A sense of belonging can be supported by shared activities, values and social interactions, even when operating outside mainstream norms.

Becoming refers to personal development and changes through occupation, affecting physical, mental, and social wellbeing (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Findings showcased many beneficial effects on the individual and the environment but also reflected some negative aspects of becoming with potential health risks through exposure to spoiled food and other dangers (i.e., Doing, Belonging, Becoming). Dumpster diving can be also understood as an ecopation (Erlandsson & Persson, 2020), linking environmental concerns with WFOT's sustainability principles (2018) of improving quality of life without compromising future generations' resources. Ecopations are internally motivated, socially oriented, and characterized by a being-doing attitude focused on creation and contribution, which closely aligns with descriptions of dumpster diving. By reclaiming discarded food, dumpster divers may have an opportunity to align their everyday doings with environmental responsibility, which can have positive effects for both individuals and the environment.

Carolsfield and Erikson (2013) reason that it may be difficult to return to mainstream consumption patterns after the experience of dumpster diving. One author's personal experience supports this statement. The excitement of finding usable food and reducing local food waste fosters a sense of agency and accomplishment. With the existing knowledge that food waste reduction can lower greenhouse gas emissions and resource use (Osei-Owusu et al., 2023), there is a feeling that by dumpster diving you are taking part and doing good for the environment, no matter how minimal the effort is. Dumpster diving also exemplifies occupational consciousness described by Kronenberg (2025), by turning a stigmatized activity into a form of protest

that challenges consumerism and enacts alternative, value-driven ways of being human.

Wilcock and Hocking (2015) reflect on how the meaning of occupation has changed from past to the present. Whereas life once revolved around obtaining food through hunting and gathering, industrialization and technology have greatly reduced this necessity. If you dive your food from dumpsters, whether it is a choice or a forced situation, the amount of effort is completely different than, for example, picking up a frozen meal from the supermarket. Findings suggest that dumpster divers are not necessarily more depressed, and some may even experience greater wellbeing when engaged in purposeful activity rather than inactivity (Vinegar et al., 2016). Wilcock and Hocking (2015) further argue that a lack of opportunities for work or play increases vulnerability to depression, boredom, and destructive behaviour. Together, these perspectives highlight the importance of doing and becoming for wellbeing.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The authors of this study are Finnish occupational therapists, who share experiences and knowledge on Finnish food security, insecurity and social welfare. Reflexivity was practiced throughout the research process, including open discussion of our prior knowledge and positionality, to ensure that interpretations reflect the perspectives presented in the studies themselves and are not influenced by the authors' own value judgements. However, reflexive awareness does not entirely remove the impact of previous understandings on theory selection, construct definition, and analytical decisions. As deductive approach relies on concepts derived from an existing theory, the analysis is inherently shaped by the authors' theoretical choices. Although efforts were taken to

ensure that the operationalisation of concepts aligned as much as possible with their original theoretical definitions, alternative interpretations of these may exist (Fife & Gossner, 2024).

A clear ethical limitation is the lack of engagement with ethical considerations in the studies reviewed. Given the direct involvement of human participants and the reliance on methodologies involving active researcher participation and observation, this limited and superficial engagement with ethical issues constitutes a significant gap in literature (Table 2). Finally, it is extremely important to highlight that all the articles, as well as their authors, originate from a Western cultural context, which inevitably shapes the cultural perspective of the research.

Recommendations for Future Research

As this study presents the views of the people participating in dumpster diving, it would be equally important to find out how occupational therapists view and value it as an occupation, and further on how findings correlate with this study. Also, of importance is to know how dumpster diving is related to other activities often referred to as non-sanctioned activities or those considered to be in the "dark side of occupations". The findings suggest many positive aspects, but further research is warranted to explore whether obtaining food in alternative ways affects wellbeing, and to what extent.

CONCLUSION

Dumpster diving is a multi-layered occupation that can be understood through the dimensions of doing, being, belonging, and becoming. It has the potential to support health by providing nutrition and fostering a sense of purpose, empowerment, and social or environmental connection, though it also carries risks. For occupational therapists, these

findings highlight the importance of recognizing and respecting the diversity and complexity of human occupations. Even unconventional activities, like dumpster diving, can hold significant meaning, promote wellbeing, and contribute to personal development. Understanding this broadens our perspective on how people engage with life and what supports their overall health and fulfilment.

Acknowledgments

This study was initiated during our studies in the Occupational Therapy Master's Programme at Jönköping University, Sweden. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to PhD Inger Jansson for her encouragement in developing our original project into a full research study and article.

REFERENCES

- Arksey, H., & O'Malley, L. (2005). Scoping studies: towards a methodological framework. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *8*(1), 19–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000119616>
- Capponi, G. (2020). The taste of waste: reclaiming and sharing rotten food among squatters in London. *Food, Culture & Society*, *23*(4), 489–505. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2020.1773691>
- Carolsfeld, A. L. & Erikson, S. L. (2013). Beyond Desperation: Motivations for Dumpster™ Diving for Food in Vancouver. *Food & Foodways*, *21*(4), 245–266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710.2013.849997>
- Cunningham, M. J., & Slade, A. (2019). Exploring the lived experience of homelessness from an occupational perspective. *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *26*(1), 19–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11038128.2017.1304572>
- Dieterle, M. (2021, May 11). Dumpster divers salvage food, furniture and more as pandemic fuels fondness for free stuff. Baltimore Fishbowl. <https://baltimorefishbowl.com/stories/dumpster-divers-salvage-food-furniture-and-more-as-pandemic-fuels-fondness-for-free-stuff/>
- Eikenberry, N. & Smith, C. (2005). Attitudes, beliefs, and prevalence of dumpster diving as a means to obtain food by Midwestern, low-income, urban dwellers. *Agriculture and Human Values*, *22*(2), 187–202. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-004-8278-9>
- Erlandsson, L.-K. & Persson, D. (2020). The ValMO model: occupational therapy for a healthy life by doing (Ehnsjö, Trans.). Studentlitteratur.
- Fife, S. T., & Gossner, J. D. (2024). Deductive Qualitative Analysis: Evaluating, Expanding, and Refining Theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *23*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241244856>
- Hitch, D., Pépin, G., & Stagnitti, K. (2014). In the Footsteps of Wilcock, Part Two: The Interdependent Nature of Doing, Being, Becoming, and Belonging. *Occupational Therapy in Health Care*, *28*(3), 247–263. <https://doi.org/10.3109/07380577.2014.898115>
- Kiepek, N., Beagan, B., Patten, S., & Ausman, C. (2022). Reflecting on conceptualisations of “meaning” in occupational therapy. *Cadernos Brasileiros de Terapia Ocupacional*, *30*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2526-8910.ctoarf24193156>
- Kiepek, N., Beagan, B., Rudman, D. L., & Phelan, S. (2019). Silences around occupations framed as unhealthy, illegal, and deviant. *Journal of Occupational Science*, *26*(3), 341–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2018.14991237>
- Kronenberg, F. (2025). A Poo Protest Inspired Contemplation on Three Provocations to Occupational Therapists and Scientists. *The Human Occupation & Wellbeing Journal*, *1*(1). <https://howj.org/index.php/howj/article/view/28>
- Lehtonen, T.-K. & Pyyhtinen, O. (2021) Living on the margins: dumpster diving for food as a critical practice, *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2020.1853581>
- Levac, D., Colquhoun, H., & O'Brien, K. K. (2010). Scoping studies: advancing the methodology. *Implementation Science: IS*, *5*, 69. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748->

- 5908-5-69
- Njelesani, J., Tang, A., Jonsson, H., & Polatajko, H. (2014). Articulating an occupational perspective. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 21(2), 226–235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2012.717500>
- Osei-Owusu, A. K., Read, Q. D., & Thomsen, M. (2023). Potential energy and environmental footprint savings from reducing food loss and waste in Europe: A scenario based multiregional input–output analysis. *Environmental Science & Technology*, 57(43), 16296–16308. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.est.3c00158>
- Persson, D., & Erlandsson, L.-K. (2014). Ecopaction: Connecting Sustainability, Globalisation and Well-being. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 21(1), 12–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2013.867561>
- Plank, A. (2020). Free lunch, structural violence, and normalization: A neo-Gramscian analysis of food waste and dumpster diving. *Organization*, 30(2), 240–263. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508420973348>
- Pollock, D., Peters, M. D. J., Khalil, H., McInerney, P., Alexander, L., Tricco, A. C., Evans, C., de Moraes, E. B., Godfrey, C. M., Pieper, D., Saran, A., Stern, C., & Munn, Z. (2023). Recommendations for the extraction, analysis, and presentation of results in scoping reviews. *JB I evidence synthesis*, 21(3), 520–532. <https://doi.org/10.11124/JBI ES-22-00123>
- Ross, W., & Phillips, C. (2026). Diving into shadow places: dumpster diving, food waste, and care. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 27(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2025.2541822>
- Savio, G. (2017). Organization and Stigma Management: A Comparative Study of Dumpster Divers in New York. *Sociological Perspectives*, 60(2), 416–430. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121416632012>
- Scott, A. E. (2011). Dumpster Diving. In J. Mansvelt (Ed.), *Green consumerism: an A-to-Z guide* (1st ed., pp. 106–108). SAGE Publications.
- Turtiainen, T., Morville, A.-L., & Jansson, I. (2024). Experiences of long-term unemployment from an occupational perspective: A scoping review. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 31(3), 458–475. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2023.2286466>
- Twinley, R. (2013). The dark side of occupation: A concept for consideration. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, 60(4), 301–303. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.12026>
- Twinley, R. (2020). *Illuminating The Dark Side of Occupation: International Perspectives from Occupational Therapy and Occupational Science*. Taylor and Francis.
- Ulrich, A. (2024, Aug 4) How dumpster diving went from taboo to trendy: 'It's a treasure hunt'. Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/aug/04/dumpster-diving-cost-of-living-waste>
- Vinegar, R., Parker, P., & McCourt, G. (2016). More than a response to food insecurity: demographics and social networks of urban dumpster divers. *Local Environment*, 21(2), 241–253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2014.943708>
- Watson, M., Booth, S., Velardo, S., & Coveney, J. (2023). The “who” and “why” of dumpster diving for food in wealthy industrialised countries – an international scoping review. *British Food Journal* (1966), 125(10), 3784–3799. <https://doi.org/10.1108/BFJ-01-2023-0014>
- Wilcock, A. A., & Hocking, C. (2015). *An occupational perspective of health* (3. ed.). Slack.
- World Federation Occupational Therapy. (2018). *Sustainability Matters: Guiding Principles for Sustainability in Occupational Therapy Practice, Education and Scholarship*. <https://www.wfot.org/resources/wfot-sustainability-guiding-principles>