

Promoting physical activity is key to achieving U.N. Sustainable Development Goals

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Credit: Ketut Subiyanto from Pexels

New evidence supports integrating strategies to promote increased physical activity as a key part of the action plan for achieving the United

Nations Sustainable Development Goals, finds a new study led by researchers at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis.

The study, "Physical Activity Promotion and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: Building Synergies to Maximize Impact," was published July 13 in the *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*. It is the first study to systematically explore the links between the seven strategies known to be effective for promoting physical activity at scale and the 17 U.N. development goals (SDGs).

The study found strong links between [physical activity promotion](#) strategies and eight out of the 17 SDGs: [good health](#) and well-being (SDG 3); gender equity (SDG 5); industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9); reduced inequalities (SDG 10); sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11); climate action (SDG 13); and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16).

"Physical inactivity has been characterized as a pandemic, accounting for 7% of all [premature deaths](#) per year globally and resulting in billions of dollars spent on health-related expenditures," said Deborah Salvo, assistant professor of public health and lead author on the study.

"Even though we know effective solutions to tackle this major public health problem, they are not being implemented at scale and everywhere."

Salvo and her co-authors developed a novel simulation model, which they used to test multiple scale-up scenarios of different physical activity [promotion](#) strategies in city types representing low-, middle- and high-income country settings.

The simulation results indicated that expected physical activity gains are greater for low- and middle-income countries. In high-income countries

with high car dependency, physical activity promotion strategies may help to reduce air pollution and traffic-related deaths, but shifts toward more active forms of travel and recreation and climate change mitigation may require complementary policies that disincentivize driving.

"This paper provides comprehensive evidence on the multiple benefits that at-scale physical activity promotion can bring to individuals, communities and to the planet, with direct contributions to the U.N. sustainable development agenda," Salvo said.

"Beyond the expected benefits due to chronic disease prevention, promoting physical activity at scale can reduce traffic deaths and pollution in cities," she said. "It can also help us achieve more equitable societies and mitigate climate change. Through the evidence we present in this paper, we show how physical activity promotion can help in providing much needed small victories for the sustainable development agenda, while making important strides toward a healthier, more active world."

The international team integrated three major methods: a systematic expert consultation, a systematic review of the literature and a computer simulation model including three city types and six [physical activity](#) promotion scale-up scenarios per city.

More information: Deborah Salvo et al, Physical Activity Promotion and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: Building Synergies to Maximize Impact, *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1123/jpah.2021-0413](https://doi.org/10.1123/jpah.2021-0413)

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