Does every move really count towards better health?

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See Articles page e1232

In 2012, as part of the first *Lancet* Series on physical activity, data from 122 countries and territories were used to produce the first ever estimate of the global burden of physical inactivity among adults, showing a prevalence of 31·1%.[1] Now, after more than a decade and using data from 507 surveys with more than 5·7 million people from 163 countries and territories, Tessa Strain and colleagues[2] estimated that 31·3% of the adults worldwide are physically inactive and provide insights on the effect of inactivity on global health. The Article offers a wealth of national, regional, and age-specific information for researchers, policy makers, and health professionals. However, it is of note that despite the unequivocal progress in surveillance, data availability, and global capacity in physical activity research and policy,[3] the world is yet to observe declining trends in physical inactivity. Therefore, Strain and colleagues[2] correctly predict that the global target[4] of a 15·0% relative reduction in physical inactivity between 2010 and 2030 is unlikely to be met. In this Comment, we present a new perspective for estimating and monitoring the burden of physical inactivity in the Global South, and propose new directions for global physical activity surveillance, research, and policy.

The estimates presented by Strain and colleagues[2] consider overall physical activity, including activities practiced in different domains of life: leisure, travel, work, and household. By adding these activities into a single physical activity score, relevant information about the purpose and context of physical activity might be missed. In terms of purpose, it is essential to differentiate physical activity practiced by necessity from physical activity practice by choice.[5] Many forms of child labour; underpaid, unsafe, and unhealthy jobs; and modern day slavery[6] typically result in high levels of energy expenditure, for example, involving prolonged periods of walking, standing, or strenuous weightlifting or pulling (figure).[7] Even physical activity for transport, which has numerous individual and environmental benefits[5]—particularly in low-income and middle-income countries and in low-income populations from high-income countries—is more a necessity than a choice. Therefore, as outlined by Piggin and colleagues,[8] it is imperative to assess whether some forms of physical activity are congruent with the dignity, cultural norms, economic circumstances, and availability of environments conducive to health-enhancing physical activity for individuals and communities. In this context, is it fair and ethical to continue stating that "every move counts towards better health"?[9]

In fact, a 2020 publication by Strain and colleagues using data from 104 countries[10] offers many insights on the context in which physical activity is practiced globally. In 80 of the 104 countries included in the analyses, work and household domains were the main contributor to overall physical activity. Interestingly, leisure time was the largest contributor to overall physical activity in only one of 104 countries. A striking finding is that the authors observed a seven-fold difference in the contribution of leisure time to overall physical activity when comparing low-income countries (4%) with high-income countries (28%).[10] It is therefore no surprise that the recent publication using data from 163 countries[2] found that the prevalence of overall physical inactivity was 48·1% in the high-income Asia Pacific region and 16·8% in sub-Saharan Africa. Strikingly, the prevalence of inactivity was 2·7% in Malawi and 66·1% in United Arab Emirates.[2] Furthermore, the 2020 publication by Strain and colleagues analysing the domains of physical activity[10]

Figure: **Examples of work and household physical activity globally: does every move really count towards better health?**

showed that two-thirds of overall physical activity in Malawi takes place in the work and household domain.

We urge the field to consider the purpose and context in which physical activity is practiced in each community. The sole use of overall physical inactivity indicators in surveillance, research, and policy should therefore be replaced with a strategy that adds other indicators when collecting, analysing, and interpreting physical activity globally. Furthermore, it is essential to consider how to tailor recommendations to better address the needs of individuals in strenuous occupations who are already at a higher risk of harm, to truly achieve health-enhancing physical activity goals globally. In terms of surveillance, the Global Observatory for Physical Activity commits to present domain-specific physical activity indicators from here onwards. The Global Observatory for Physical Activity will also monitor physical activity research and policy separately, with a focus on leisure time physical activity. Finally, we refer back to the first *Lancet* Series on physical activity,[1] which claimed that "governments, policy makers, and the research community should help to build societies in which the choice of being physically active is not only healthy, but also convenient, enjoyable, safe, affordable, and valued".

For more on the **Global Observatory for Physical Activity** see https://new.globalphysicalactivityobservatory.com/

We declare no competing interests.

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