

Leveraging the Global Growth of Running to Promote Physical Activity at the Populational Level

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Key Points

- Running presents a timely and scalable opportunity to address challenges in physical activity promotion.
- Community-based programs demonstrate how running can strengthen social cohesion and sustainability.
- National and local policies should integrate running initiatives to broaden access and maximize population-level impact.

The global prevalence of physical inactivity remains a major public health concern, affecting approximately 31% of adults worldwide¹ and contributing substantially to an economic burden estimated to be INT\$520 billion between 2020 and 2030.² This scenario has underscored the need for coordinated, multisectoral actions to reduce inactivity levels, such as the World Health Organization's Global Action Plan on Physical Activity, which provides a framework of evidence-based and feasible policy actions to increase physical activity (PA) across all population groups.³ However, despite efforts, progress remains insufficient, and the world is currently off track to achieve the target of a 15% relative reduction in physical inactivity by 2030.⁴ Although key actions have been outlined,⁴ we would like to highlight the importance of leveraging practices that are expanding organically within populations. Such practices, by emerging from individuals' preferences and social dynamics, often reflect feasible, low-cost, and sustainable pathways for increasing PA engagement across diverse contexts.

In this context, running has shown sustained global growth, with adult participation rates ranging from 8.5% in the Americas to 11.3% in the Western Pacific.⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, with approximately 28.8% of current runners having started during this period,⁶ and global data for 2024 indicating a 59% increase in running clubs.⁷ This increase has also been observed for women, young adults, and older people⁸ highlighting its potential for reducing inequalities in PA participation.⁹ Beyond participation, a global report on running culture demonstrates that it is a multifaceted phenomenon, being practiced worldwide, yet shaped locally.¹⁰ For instance, parent-child runs have become increasingly popular in China, searches for running friendly parks are common in Japan, and women-focused events are gaining visibility in Brazil and France. These examples show how running adapts to distinct cultural and social environments while maintaining its global appeal.¹⁰


In addition to its cultural impact, running is associated with a 3.2-year increase in life expectancy and reduces the risk of all-cause, cardiovascular, and cancer mortality by 27%, 30%, and 23%, respectively.¹¹ Running also lowers the risk of anxiety and depression, while fostering social cohesion through community-based running clubs,¹² such as Park Run, Sanctuary Runners, Queer Run CBR, and Free to Run. In addition, running is usually performed in nature-based environments,¹³ which underscores its value not only as PA but also as a feasible tool for promoting sustainable urban living.

For that, running presents a timely and scalable opportunity to address critical challenges in health promotion, social cohesion, and sustainability. However, the lack of adequate and safe spaces represents a critical limitation to regular running practice. Urban violence and traffic hazards¹⁴ are deterrents to PA participation in many cities. Addressing these issues requires the development of safe, inclusive, and gender-sensitive environments. Its impact can be amplified through existing community-based programs that should be supported and expanded by national and local policies. For example, in Portugal, the National Walking and Running program is an initiative led by the Portuguese Federation of Track and Field and the Portuguese Institute of Sports and Youth, which aims to promote health and well-being through the practice of walking and running across the country.¹⁵ Similar strategies could be adapted and decentralized to address regional specificities, socioeconomic disparities, and infrastructural differences in larger and more heterogeneous countries, such as Brazil. By supporting the current trend and integrating strategies that promote running into public health policies and urban planning, it would be possible to further expand this phenomenon and enhance population-level engagement in PA.

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