



The Australian Prevention  
Partnership Centre

# The Australian Systems Approaches to Physical Activity (ASAPa) project

Final report

June 2022



# The Australian Systems Approaches to Physical Activity (ASAPa) project: Final report

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# Contents

Summary	5
Why is this issue important?	6
What did we do?	7
Mapping the physical activity landscape (3Ps)	7
Physical activity surveillance workshops and model framework indicators	7
Practical resources for systems approaches	8
Developing understanding about legal and regulatory approaches for physical activity	9
What did we find?	11
Mapping the physical activity landscape (3Ps)	11
Physical activity surveillance workshops and model indicators	12
Developing understanding about legal and regulatory approaches for physical activity	13
Reviewing the application of systems approaches for physical activity in peer-reviewed literature	14
What did we produce?	15
Practical resources for systems approaches	15
Publications	15
Resources	16
Videos	16
Presentations	17
News and podcast episode	16
Next steps?	18
Acknowledgements	18

# Summary



- Insufficient physical activity in the Australian population has been a longstanding issue, with minimal evidence of improvement over the past 25 years.
- Effective national action requires a systems-based approach which engages multiple sectors and addresses systems-level determinants of physical inactivity. These include governance, legislation and regulation, and an improved national surveillance of the physical activity system.
- We adopted a collaborative approach with policy makers and stakeholders across sectors, jurisdictions and nationwide, to foster systems thinking and approaches for physical activity.
- This project provided insights into the existing physical activity landscape to understand how different sectors are contributing towards population physical activity in their policies and programs, and how states and territories are measuring physical activity in their adult populations.
- We developed practical resources, including a conceptual systems map for physical activity, and a world-first comprehensive guide on systems approaches for physical activity, [Getting Australia Active 3: A systems approach to physical activity for policy makers](#).
- We progressed understanding about the role of laws and regulation for physical activity, with a further focus on laws that affect the built environment for walking and cycling in Australia.
- We brought together stakeholders to work towards national consensus around a comprehensive and standardised physical activity surveillance system.
- We synthesised the peer-reviewed literature to assess how systems approaches are understood and applied to physical activity and identified an urgent need to move beyond describing the system, to implementing and evaluating systems interventions.
- This project sets a strong foundation for further policy-relevant practice and research to support systems approaches for physical activity in Australia.

## Why is this issue important?

Physical inactivity is a significant public health concern, with limited signs of improvement in Australia despite a global commitment to achieving a 15% reduction by 2030. Like many complex public health problems, it is an issue which cannot be comprehensively approached with simple or single interventions. Effective action requires an integrated, system-wide approach that engages stakeholders across multiple sectors.

Systems approaches to physical activity (and to public health more broadly) are a relatively recent phenomenon, although the general concept of intersectoral policy planning for physical activity is not entirely new in Australia. In the 1990s, efforts to take a multisectoral approach to physical activity showed promise but were not sustained due to shifts in political agendas and priorities.

The release of the World Health Organization's Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018–2030 provided a renewed opportunity to revive physical activity as a political priority. This has been followed by other supportive developments in Australia, including Australia's first National Sport Plan which adopts the World Health Organization's goal as a major policy objective, the National Preventive Health Strategy 2021–2031 which endorses a systems approach and recognises physical activity as a core priority, and other state strategies for physical activity. Some jurisdictions are also pursuing more intersectoral approaches to health and wellbeing.

The aim of the Australian Systems Approaches to Physical Activity (ASAPa) project was to support these emerging developments and foster systems thinking and systems approaches for physical activity in practice.

# What did we do?

Throughout this project, we adopted a collaborative approach with policy makers, including through sustained engagement with the National Physical Activity Network (NPAN) – an informal, cross-sectoral network of interested and engaged policy makers involved in physical activity.

## Mapping the physical activity landscape (3Ps)

Our first step was to map and understand the existing physical activity landscape regarding the 3Ps (policies, programs, prevalence). This involved understanding how physical activity is incorporated in policies and programs across different sectors, and how jurisdictions are measuring physical activity in the adult-population. Through NPAN, we mobilised over 30 policy makers from health, transport, planning and sport to share information about the 3Ps at two national meetings. Following these meetings, we conducted comprehensive audits and analyses of the 3Ps.

## Physical activity surveillance workshops and model framework indicators

Our initial work to map 'prevalence' has led to ongoing efforts, in partnership with NPAN, to build national consensus around a comprehensive and standardised physical activity surveillance system. This has involved facilitating workshops in association with NPAN, with jurisdictions across Australia to gather perspectives about the existing health and cross-agency data that are being collected of relevance to physical activity, and their views about building a comprehensive and standardised physical activity surveillance system in Australia.

Since providing our findings and recommendations to NPAN, we have continued to support their ongoing efforts to progress this longstanding issue. This has included the development of a draft list of core indicators that could be considered as part of a comprehensive physical activity surveillance system, with an Australian audience in mind, covering the elements in Figure 1. These indicators were initially developed by considering other physical activity surveillance systems internationally, physical activity-relevant indicators reported in the literature, and additional indicators identified through our stakeholder workshops. The importance of these indicators was rated by NPAN through survey feedback.

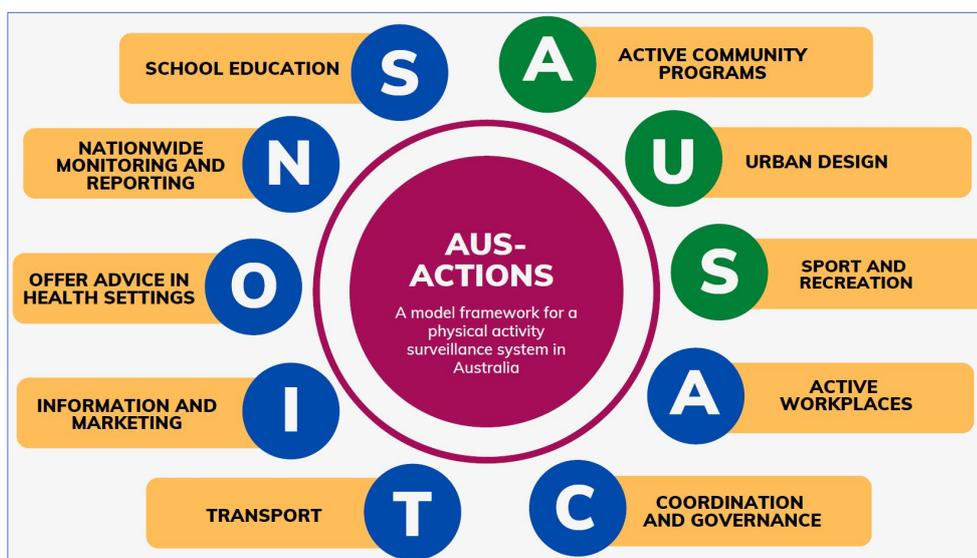


Figure 1. The AUS-ACTIONS model framework for a physical activity surveillance system in Australia

# Practical resources for systems approaches

## Conceptual systems map for physical activity

We developed a conceptual systems map for physical activity that supports systems approaches (Figure 2) and provides a broad overview of the multiple factors that influence physical activity. The research team incorporated feedback from national stakeholders, existing systems approaches described by public health researchers and policy makers, and other work related to physical activity in its development.

Policy makers may refer to the conceptual systems map as a prompt, or discussion trigger, for the range of areas that are important for developing comprehensive policy action in relation to physical activity. This versatile map can also be adapted or further developed by policy makers and practitioners to suit a given purpose or local or regional contexts, instead of having to build the map from the beginning.

Watch a short video explaining the different components of this map [here](#) .

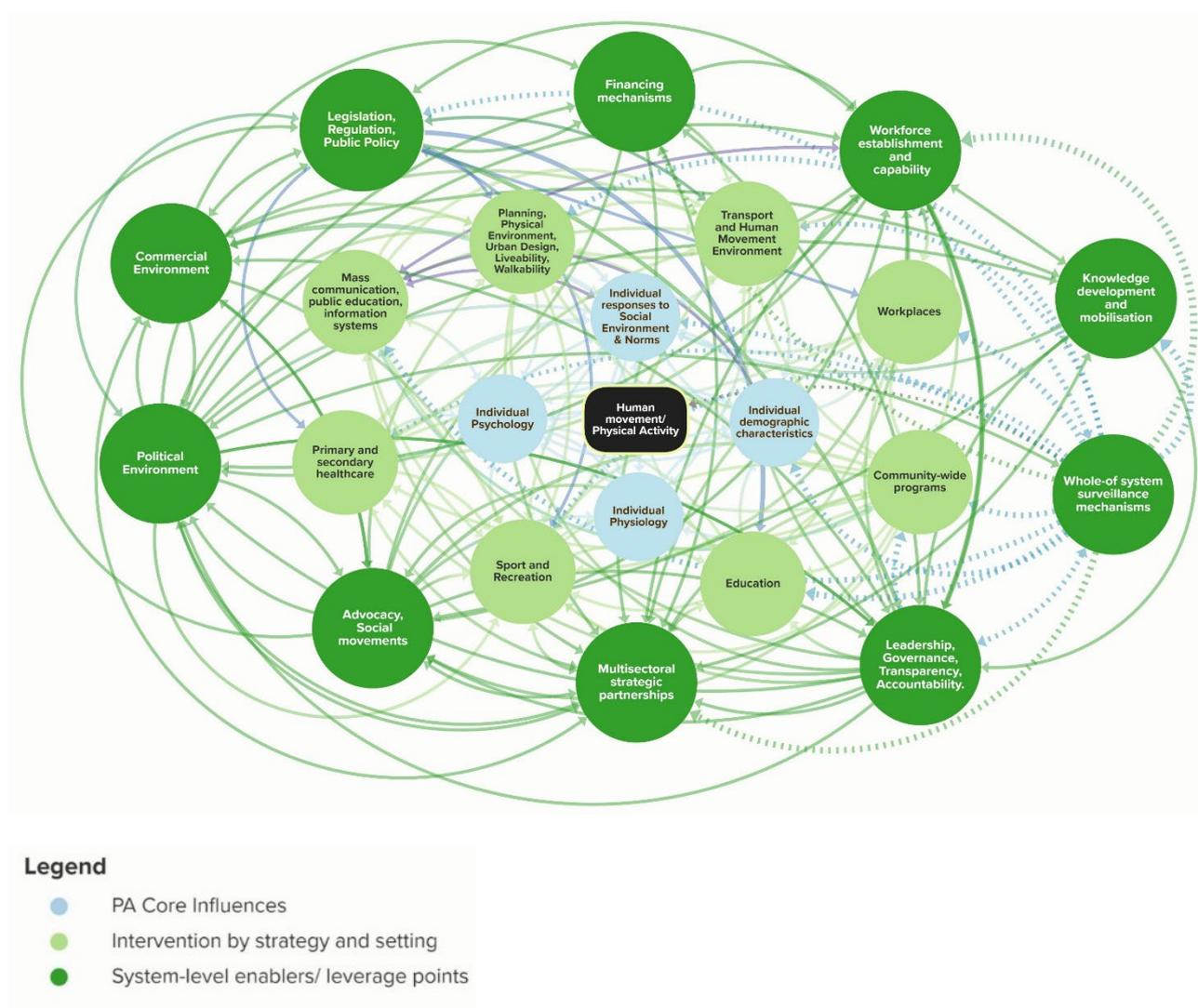


Figure 2. Conceptual systems map for physical activity

## Getting Australia Active 3: A guide for policy makers and practitioners

Getting Australia Active 3 (Figure 3) is a comprehensive guide primarily written for government policy makers and practitioners that includes the latest evidence on 'what works' and recommendations for policy action and investment in physical activity. It is part of a series of evidence reviews on physical activity led by Bill Bellew and Adrian Bauman, and the first to explicitly focus on using a systems approach for physical activity. The report provides action-oriented guidance for policy makers to support the implementation of a systems approach to physical activity in Australia.



Figure 3. Getting Australia Active 3: A systems approach to physical activity for policy makers

<https://preventioncentre.org.au/resources/getting-australia-active-3-a-systems-approach-to-physical-activity/>

## Developing understanding about legal and regulatory approaches for physical activity

### RAMPARTS conceptual framework

Since there is limited understanding around the role of law and regulation for physical activity compared to other areas of public health regulation such as tobacco and alcohol control, we developed a conceptual framework known as RAMPARTS (Regulatory Approaches to Movement, Physical Activity, Recreation, Transport and Sport). The RAMPARTS framework aligns legal strategies with policy objectives in the World Health Organization's Global Action Plan on Physical Activity (Figure 4). It aims to focus researcher and policy maker attention on the breadth of legal strategies that could help achieve the Global Action Plan's objectives.

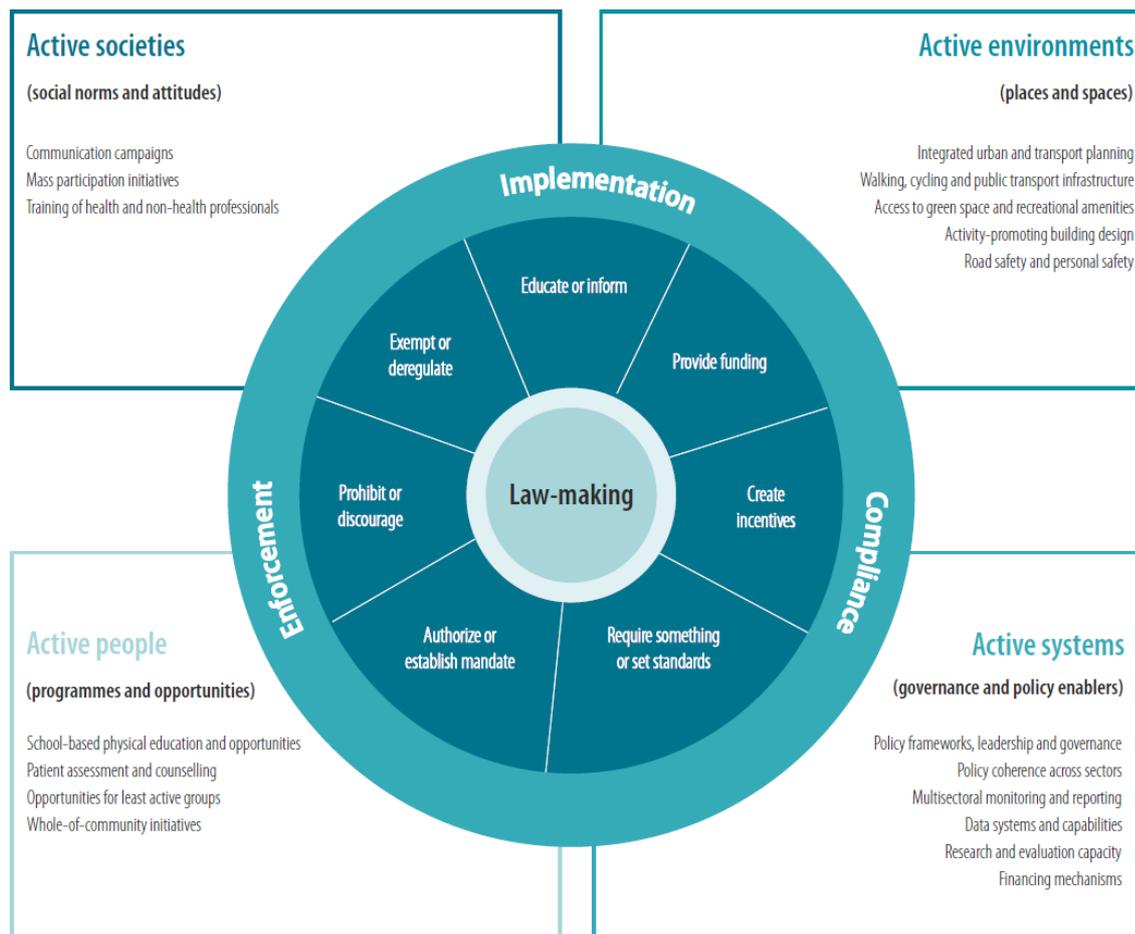


Figure 4. The RAMPARTS framework – Regulatory Approaches to Movement, Physical Activity, Recreation, Transport and Sport [from Nau T, Smith BJ, Bauman A, Bellew B. Legal strategies to improve physical activity in populations. Bull World Health Organ. 2021;99(8):593-602. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8319864/>]

## Legal mapping and analysis of the built environment for walking and cycling

Subsequent discussions with NPAN identified that understanding the legal barriers and enablers for walking and cycling was an important priority. To improve such understanding within the Australian context, we conducted an analysis of the legal framework influencing the built environment for walkability.

We followed this with a scientific legal assessment to characterise the specific features and variations of laws between states and territories that are relevant to walking and cycling. To support further research and exploration of the legal mapping data, the protocol, dataset, and interactive map will be made available online at [lawatlas.org](http://lawatlas.org)

## Reviewing the application of systems approaches for physical activity in peer-reviewed literature

Finally, if the full potential of systems approaches to PA is to be realised, there is a need for greater awareness, knowledge and skills among practitioners and policy makers about how to apply systems approaches and a greater understanding about their added value. We reviewed the peer-reviewed literature with the aim of offering insights on how systems approaches are understood and applied for physical activity in chronic disease prevention.

# What did we find?

## Mapping the physical activity landscape (3Ps)

Our mapping work revealed some key gaps and opportunities where policies, programs and prevalence or surveillance systems could be improved. Our key findings included:

### Policy audit

- Considerable policy action exists in the planning and transport sectors to promote the World Health Organization's objective of achieving more active environments as part of the Global Action Plan on Physical Activity.
- There were encouraging indications of multi-sectoral engagement (e.g. multi-agency policy development, shared implementation).
- Limited consideration was apparent of high needs groups and healthcare and workplace settings.
- Scope to use a wider range of policy mechanisms (the most common strategy was informational in nature, for example through public education, or guidance for policy makers and other providers).
- Greater attention is needed towards strengthening 'active systems', another key objective of the Global Action Plan on Physical Activity, as few policies described clear arrangements for funding or specific indicators to support and monitor implementation. In the few cases where governance arrangements were described, these were rarely independent of government.

### Programs audit

- Most programs were aimed at the whole population although some had components that were adapted for specific population sub-groups.
- The most common domains for physical activity programs were in sport and recreation, and local government and local communities. There were far fewer programs in the workplace and healthcare settings.
- The most common modality used by programs was funding (to support the delivery of programs by others). Provision of information was also common. Environmental change and transportation interventions were the least commonly described or used.

### Prevalence audit

- There were differences in how states and territories measure population physical activity in their population health surveys. Some jurisdictions have adopted comparable survey systems that used the same questions and definitions over time; others have used different definitions and questions that sometimes changed. These changes make between and within-jurisdictional comparisons difficult to interpret.
- Differences in state and territory survey systems have produced greater variability in the proportion of people meeting the WHO 'physical activity guidelines' than is suggested by state-level analysis over time using Australian Bureau of Statistics National Health Survey data. The variations that some jurisdictions have made to their survey questions and definitions may have contributed to variability between-jurisdictions and differences in physical activity trend data. No physical activity measure is perfect, and continuous measurement improvement may exacerbate the situation, preventing the availability of longer-term trend data to inform monitoring towards the WHO global target for physical activity by 2030.

- Standardisation across Australia is required if physical activity trends are to be reliably interpreted and useful for informing policy and practice. This could be achieved with physical activity coordination and leadership that works towards standardised core measurement and a clear physical activity strategic plan.
- Beyond this, there needs to be a broader national discussion about a more comprehensive 'physical activity surveillance system' that not only measures physical activity behaviours, but also assesses underpinning and antecedent changes within and beyond the health sector, and at the organisational and policy level; and integrates measures of the built environment and data from non-health sectors such as transport, education and sport.

## Physical activity surveillance workshops and model indicators

- There was a high level of interest across jurisdictions for engaging in future discussion about standardising physical activity measures in population health surveys and developing a more comprehensive and comparable physical activity surveillance system.
- Jurisdictions identified a variety of physical activity-relevant measures across socio-ecological levels (e.g. individual, settings, environmental) that are currently being collected by different sectors. The most common types were individual-level measures of physical activity behaviours (e.g. active transport, sport participation). Interpersonal, settings, environmental and policy measures were less commonly available, although it was recognised that many of these are important and desirable components of a comprehensive physical activity surveillance system.
- Feedback from NPAN about our initial set of model indicators, revealed that individual-level indicators were the most highly rated as important indicators for a comprehensive physical activity surveillance system. Conversely, policy indicators and interpersonal indicators were rated as being of lowest importance. This is broadly consistent with the types of indicators that are currently available. Systems-level indicators were generally rated as highly or moderately important, the most highly rated being leadership and coordination, monitoring and intelligence, and funding and resources. This feedback can be considered in subsequent discussions about a comprehensive surveillance system for physical activity in Australia.
- Several agencies expressed interest and shared challenges in finding appropriate and feasible measures to assess physical activity in their populations. To assist, we provided a single physical activity question that has been validated in adults and developed for adolescents to self-complete, which can be incorporated into the surveys of different agencies and does not preclude longer local instruments being maintained across agencies for ongoing monitoring.

# Developing understanding about legal and regulatory approaches for physical activity

## RAMPARTS conceptual framework

Our conceptual framework of legal approaches for physical activity (RAMPARTS), covers the following elements:

- ‘Lawmaking’ which refers to the determinants of lawmaking for physical activity (e.g. the factors that lead governments to use law in the first place to address this issue, or the successful or unsuccessful passage of physical activity-promoting laws)
- Seven different legal mechanisms to capture the different ways in which law can operate to effect change (e.g. requiring something or setting standards, authorising or establishing a mandate, prohibiting or discouraging)
- Four areas of the World Health Organization’s Global Action Plan on Physical Activity in which changes in law can be directed towards (i.e. social norms and attitudes; places and spaces; programs and opportunities; and governance and policy enablers)
- Compliance, implementation and enforcement as key mediators for the effectiveness of laws for physical activity.

## Analysis of the legal framework influencing walking

- The literature identifies several ‘walking needs’ or environmental factors influencing walking decisions. These are basic to higher-order needs: accessibility, safety, convenience, comfort and enjoyment. A person deciding to walk may be less likely to consider a higher-order need if a more basic need is not satisfied.
- There are numerous built environment characteristics that influence each of these ‘walking needs’, which are being addressed in law by the states and territories, using various legal instruments and approaches.
- Jurisdictional approaches differ in the specificity and measurability of their legal provisions for the built environment, ranging from high-level objectives and principles to outcomes-based and rules-based criteria. These findings revealed uncertainty about the scope and strength of legal support for creating walkable environments at the national level. We recommended using scientific legal mapping to systematically uncover the specific features and variations of these laws, which we subsequently conducted.

## Scientific legal mapping of laws influencing the built environment for walking and cycling

- Most jurisdictions in Australia do not currently embed objectives in primary legislation that would promote physical activity and an integrated approach to land use and transport planning that encourages active and sustainable lifestyles.
- Only four jurisdictions addressed most of the evidence-based standards that promote active living.
- Of the standards addressed in law, few fully met evidence-based recommendations. While most jurisdictions legislated responsibility for enforcement of planning law, few legislated obligations for monitoring implementation.
- Our findings reveal opportunities where laws could be strengthened to promote more active environments.

## Reviewing the application of systems approaches for physical activity in peer-reviewed literature

- Current practice, as reported in the peer-reviewed literature, is skewed towards some basic methods and frameworks for systems approaches, with many papers focused on conceptual frameworks to inform systems approaches, as well as numerous simulation/predictive modelling studies.
- There are few well-described examples of systems interventions which have been planned, implemented and evaluated through a systems lens.
- The field needs to move more towards demonstrating the effectiveness of systems-informed approaches, and to the development, implementation and evaluation of systems-level interventions including components such as: (a) governance, (b) leadership, (c) legislation and regulation, (d) multisectoral partnerships, (e) workforce capabilities, (f) advocacy, (g) information systems, (h) system surveillance, and (i) financing mechanisms.
- Discussion, formulation and evaluation of these strategic system-level interventions remain largely untouched and should be a priority for future practice and research.

# What did we produce?

## Practical resources for systems approaches

### Conceptual systems map for physical activity

The conceptual systems map for physical activity has the following components, as identified in Figure 2 and explained in this [video](#).

- Core influences on physical activity
- Intervention points in the system and 8 domains for 'best practice' investment in physical activity (see: <https://www.ispah.org/resources/key-resources/8-investments/>)
- Other important factors that interact with the system, including: politics, lobbying and social advocacy; governance and knowledge mobilisation; the legal and policy environment; and surveillance systems.

### Getting Australia Active 3: A guide for policy makers and practitioners

The GAA3 report includes:

- A summary of the evidence on the multiple cross-sectoral benefits derived from an active society and current rates, trends and social disparities in physical activity participation.
- A broad overview of systems approaches and how they can be applied by policy makers to better understand the range of opportunities and partners that can be engaged to generate the policy impact needed to shift the physical activity system towards a more positive state.
- Guidance on how to support and use systems approaches in practice and promote better governance and knowledge mobilisation to strengthen the durability, integration and impact of cross-sectoral action.
- Specific recommendations for action and investment in each of the physical activity areas where policy can intervene to promote more physically active society and environments, with specific consideration of the additional actions and investments needed to address inequity across these areas.
- Recommendations for improving coordination and consistency in surveillance of physical activity behaviours and monitoring of a broader set of indicators to evaluate progress in physical activity system-related factors across different sectors.

GAA3 is accompanied by a series of policy briefs that highlight key messages from major chapters. It is a unique resource for policy makers in Australia and internationally as a policy-informing, evidence-based guide to implementing systems approaches for physical activity.

## Publications

- Bellew W, Nau T, Smith BJ, Ding M, Bauman A. Systems approaches to physical activity: New tools and resources. *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*. 2022;19(10):645. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jpah.2022-0421>
- Nau T, Perry S, Giles-Corti B, Bellew W, Bauman A, Smith BJ. Mapping and analysis of laws influencing built environments for walking and cycling in Australia. *BMC Public Health*. 2023;23(1):1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-14897-w>
- Nau T, Bellew W, Giles-Corti B, Bauman A, Smith BJ. The built environment and population physical activity: Methods for mapping the relevant laws. *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*. 2023;1(aop):1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jpah.2022-0279>

- Nau T, Bellew W, Smith BJ, Bauman A. Formative assessment: is Australia ready for a physical activity surveillance system? [*manuscript submitted for peer review*]
- Nau T, Bauman A, Smith BJ, Bellew W. A scoping review of systems approaches for increasing physical activity in populations. *Health Research Policy and Systems*. 2022;20:104. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-022-00906-2>
- Nau T, Bauman A, Bellew W, Giles-Corti B, Smith BJ. An analysis of the legal framework influencing walking in Australia. *Public Health Research & Practice*. 2022. Online early publication. <https://doi.org/10.17061/phrp32122205>
- Nau T, Smith BJ, Bauman A, Bellew B. Legal strategies to improve physical activity in populations. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*. 2021;99(8):593-602. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8319864/>
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- Bellew W, Smith BJ, Nau T, Lee K, Reece L, Bauman A. Whole of systems approaches to physical activity policy and practice in Australia: The ASAPa project overview and initial systems map. *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*. 2020;17(1):68-73. <http://doi.org/10.1123/jpah.2019-0121>
- Nau T, Lee K, Smith BJ, Bellew W, Reece L, Gelius P, Rutter H, Bauman A. Toward whole-of-system action to promote physical activity: a cross-sectoral analysis of physical activity policy in Australia. *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*. 2019;00:1-10. <http://doi.org/10.1123/jpah.2019-0122>

## Resources

- Bellew B, Nau T, Smith B, Bauman A (Eds.) *Getting Australia Active III: A systems approach to physical activity for policy makers* [monograph]. Sydney, Australia. The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre and The University of Sydney. April 2020. Available from: <https://preventioncentre.org.au/resources/getting-australia-active-3-a-systems-approach-to-physical-activity-for-policy-makers/>
- Bellew B, Nau T, Smith B, Bauman A. *Getting Australia Active III: 12 summaries*. Sydney, Australia. The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre and The University of Sydney. April 2020. Available from: <https://preventioncentre.org.au/resources/getting-australia-active-3-summaries/>

## Videos

- Building a systems map of the influences on physical activity (11 Aug 2022)
- An introduction to physical activity surveillance in Australia (25 Feb 2022)
- The Australian Systems Approaches to Physical Activity (ASAPa) project (28 Oct 2021)
- Building surveillance systems for physical activity (23 Jul 2021)
- Creating systems change for physical activity (8 Jul 2021)
- The rise and fall of systems approaches to physical activity (3 June 2020)
- The physical activity landscape in Australia: Mapping physical activity programs (27 Aug 2019)
- Conceptual systems map for physical activity in Australia (27 Aug 2019)

## Podcast episode

- Prevention Works podcast, 'Tackling how to get Australians moving each and every day', Adrian Bauman

## News articles

- Prevention Centre News 14 Apr 2022: The missing steps to support walkability
- Prevention Centre News 4 Apr 2022: World Day for Physical Activity is on April 6 so let's get physical
- Prevention Centre News 23 Sept 2020: Investigators' Forum and the future of chronic disease prevention
- Croakey 22 Jan 2020: When community sport becomes a political football it's time to change the game

## Presentations

- Nau T, Bellew B, Bauman A. Translating whole system approaches into practice to increase population physical activity – the Australian Systems Approaches to Physical Activity (ASAPa) project. ISPAH Conference 2021, online, Oct 2021.
- Bellew B, Nau T, Bauman A. Measuring policy actions for healthy and sustainable food and physical activity environments; A SIG Policies and Environment Webinar. ISBNPA Conference 2020, online, Sept 2020.
- Nau, T. The rise and fall of systems approaches to physical activity. PHAA Preventive Health Conference 2020, online, May 2020.
- Nau T and Bellew B. Overview of the Getting Australia Active III report. Prevention Research Collaboration, Sydney University, 14 May 2020.
- Bellew B. Research findings from ASAPa at the first National Physical Activity Strategy Working Group meeting, Sydney, 5 February 2020.
- Bauman A. Systems approaches to Physical Activity policy, National Physical Activity Policy Conference, Dublin, Ireland, 29, 30 January 2020.
- Bauman A. Systems approaches to physical activity seminar, University of Aarhus, Denmark, 5 February 2020.
- Nau T. ASAPa as a research-practice partnership to promote a systems approach to physical activity in Australia. Physical Activity Research Seminar Series hosted by the Prevention Research Collaboration, Charles Perkins Centre, Institute for Musculoskeletal Health, and SPRINTER. 31 October 2019.
- The ASAPa team shared NSW-specific project findings with the SPRINTER team to support the development of the NSW physical activity strategy, led by the NSW Office of Sport. SPRINTER has also presented findings to several NSW health agencies.
- Presentations on the role of physical activity and physical activity policy to the Obesity Summit in Canberra and the National Preventive Health Strategy consultations in Sydney, 30 September 2019.

## Next steps?

This systems project, resourced by the MRFF through The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre, will continue to develop under a new program of work that will be known as ASAPa+.

The core aim of ASAPa+ is to co-create a decision-support tool with policy makers and other stakeholders to assess the complex interactions between environmental change, climate and human health and provide estimates and forecasts of the co-benefits and trade-offs associated with different intervention scenarios.

ASAPa+ aims to continue:

- Supporting national discussion around the core elements to advance the surveillance of physical activity in Australia
- Providing systems evaluation expertise and support in systems mapping exercises at regional, state and national levels
- Investigating legal approaches to strengthen physical activity promotion.

## Acknowledgements

The project team would like to thank the following for their contributions over this four-year project.

- Karen Lee for her integral efforts towards setting up the national meetings at the start of the project
- Members of the National Physical Activity Network for their engagement, support and feedback during this project
- The ASAPa Project Working Group for their input in guiding the early direction of the project
- The cross-jurisdictional, cross-agency policy makers for their contributions particularly during the physical activity surveillance workshops
- Professor Fiona Bull of the World Health Organization for her Foreword to GAA3 and advice on linkages to the Global Action Plan on Physical Activity
- The many co-authors to the GAA3 guide who have been duly acknowledged in that document.



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