# MOVING TOWARDS A NEW NORMAL

## The Social Climate of Physical Activity

PARTICIPACTION

Let's make room to move

Some readers may remember a time when people smoked in restaurants and there were no curbside collection programs for recycling. But in the last 35 years, the popularity of smoking and recycling have drastically changed because of strategic awareness campaigns, policies, and legislation working together to change the general feelings, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions on both smoking and recycling within society. In other words, we have witnessed a change in their **social climates.**

Physical inactivity is a significant contributor to chronic disease and a major public health concern in Canada, yet the number of children, youth, and adults not meeting physical activity guidelines is growing. Social-ecological models suggest that one strategy for increasing physical activity participation within our population is to reconstruct the **social climate** through changing social norms and beliefs about physical activity. This leads to the following questions:

- Can we change the social climate of physical activity in Canada?
- Can we motivate people to get active like we motivated them to quit smoking and/or recycle?

# DEFINING 'SOCIAL CLIMATE'

*Social climate* is an umbrella term that includes the general feelings, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions on a subject within societies or groups of people.[1] Thus, social climate consists of the **social norms** related to a behaviour, as well as the **social appraisal** and **social identity** that individuals construct based on those norms.[2]

## Aspects of social climate

*Social norms* are patterns of behaviours or beliefs held by a society.[3] They are considered one of the most important parts of social climate[3,4] and can be descriptive or injunctive:[5]

- **Descriptive norms** reflect an individual's perception of how other people are behaving.
- **Injunctive norms** reflect an individual's perception of what others approve or disapprove.

*Social appraisal* involves basing your decision to act on others' feelings and/or opinions on a particular subject.[6]

*Social identity* refers to the ways that people's self-concepts are based on their membership in social groups.[7,8]

The idea behind changing social climates to change behaviour is simple: people are inherently social creatures. When we see others, especially people we look up to, respect, or otherwise want to be like engaging in a behaviour, we have a natural tendency to want to 'fit in' and behave similarly. By leveraging aspects of social climate, it is possible to change what 'fitting in' means to people in Canada.
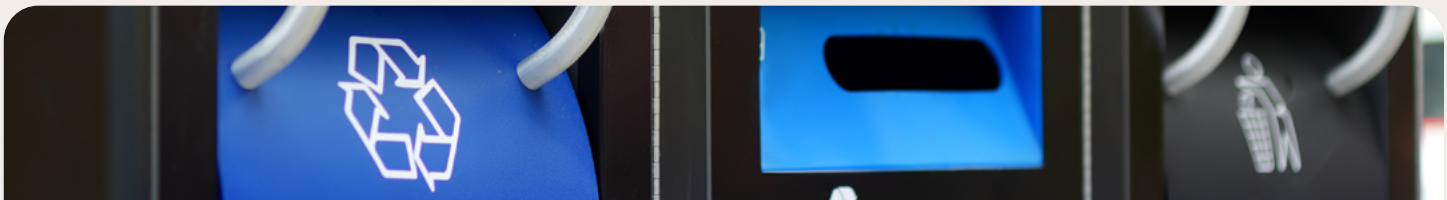
## Case study 1: Smoking (stopping a behaviour)

Changing the social climate through de-normalizing smoking is an excellent example of how changing social appraisals, and then modifying social identification, brought about anti-smoking legislation and behaviour change. Strategies that shifted the social climate included the following:

» Using policies aimed at restricting smoking in public to decrease how frequently smoking was observed in public. The resulting structural changes from these policies increased the perception of in-group status among non-smokers through divisions in social groupings by smoking status (e.g., non-smoker labels and non-smoking logos).

» Deploying awareness campaigns from influential people (e.g., media, health professionals, and family and parent groups) to decrease the social acceptability of smoking.

Programs and policy actions that reinforced the message that tobacco use is not a normal activity have changed public perceptions of the social acceptability of smoking and contribute to the increasing acceptability of policies to further restrict smoking (e.g., bans in more locations and packaging requirements).



## Case study 2: Recycling (starting a behaviour)

Since the mid-1990s, rates of recycling have steadily increased in Canada. While access to recycling programs improved, changes to the social climate were instrumental in the subsequent uptake in behaviour, including the following:

» Education about the benefits of recycling from influential people (e.g., media, scientists, and activists) was used to increase the social acceptability of waste sorting and decrease the acceptability of putting recyclable objects in the garbage.

» Bright blue recycling bins visibly available in front of every home, in every office, and at every school served as visual reminders of the prevalence of recycling by others.

» Messages appealing to a collective responsibility, such as being part of the community to help keep the Earth clean, were promoted.

» Developing slogans/mnemonics (e.g., the three R's: reuse, reduce, recycle) denoted 'in-group' status among those engaging in recycling.

Normalizing recycling has increased the social acceptability and expectation for individuals to routinely recycle to such a degree that many jurisdictions are tackling the issue of well-meaning individuals incorrectly sorting non-recyclables (e.g., black plastic, straws, and bubble wrap).

The two case studies on page 3 highlight how changing the social climate has contributed to shifts in behaviours at a population level. Table 1 below summarizes key changes to aspects of social climate described in case studies 1 and 2. As with all behavioural shifts, changes in the social climate were not the only contributing factors influencing the decline in smoking and uptake in recycling (e.g., disincentivizing problematic behaviours through taxes/fees, increasing individual knowledge related to benefits and harms, and policies to ban products).

**Table 1. Examples of social climate aspects from smoking cessation and recycling case studies**

| Social climate aspect | Description | Case 1: Decrease smoking | Case 2: Increase recycling |
|---|---|---|---|
| Injunctive social norms | Perceptions of what others approve/ disapprove. | Awareness campaigns from key role models to decrease social acceptability. | Education about the benefits of recycling from key role models. |
| Descriptive social norms | Perceptions of how others are behaving. | Policies to restrict public smoking. Banning open displays of tobacco products. | Visible recycling bins in front of households and other locations. |
| Social appraisal | The decision to act based on others' feelings or opinions. | Smoking a cigarette around others would lead to disapproval from non-smoking peers. | Failing to bring out blue bins on recycling day would lead to judgement from neighbours. |
| Social identity | Perceived group membership with others based on shared beliefs and/ or behaviours. | Social groupings based on smoking status. | Messaging that promotes collective action/ responsibility and signals in-group membership. |

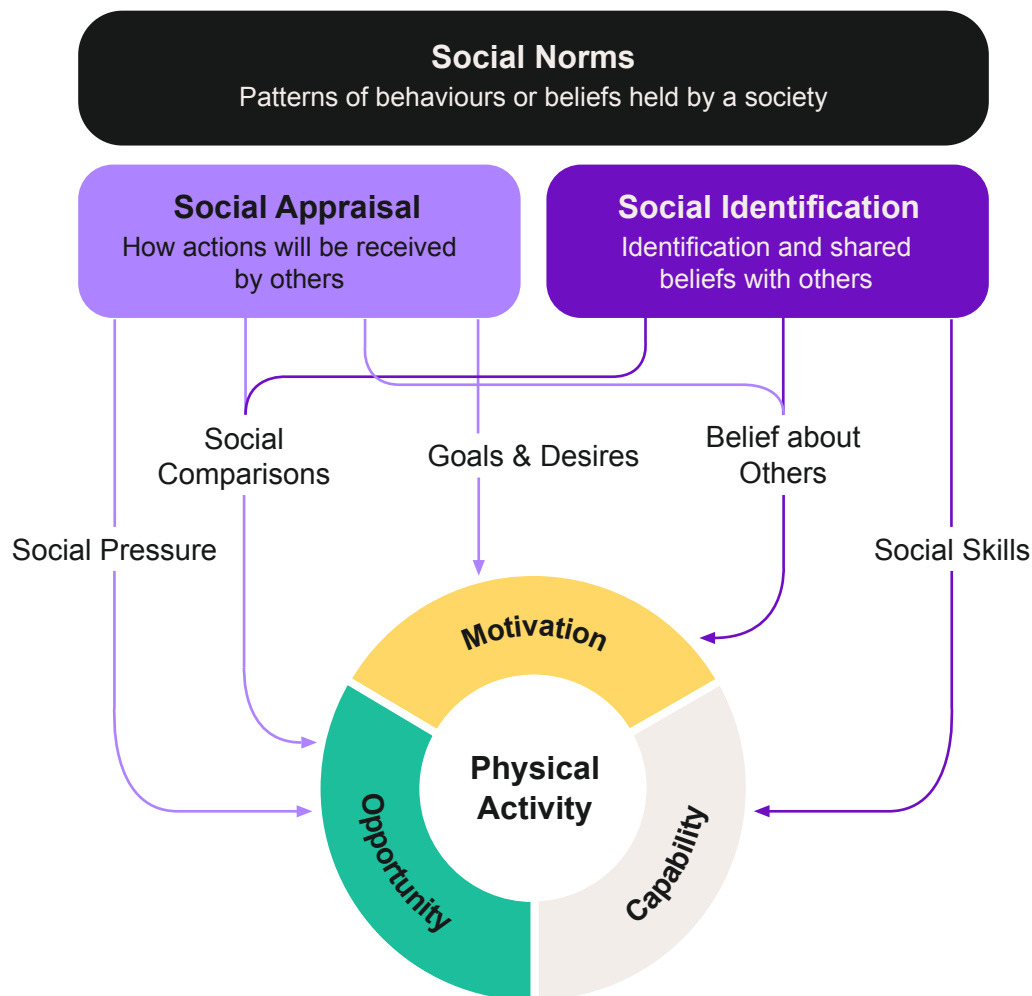# HOW SOCIAL CLIMATE CAN INFLUENCE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Canada's *Common Vision for Increasing Physical Activity and Reducing Sedentary Living* states that, "It is vital to create cultural norms where habitual physical activity is part of the daily fabric of our lives".[9] But what do we consider to be 'cultural' or 'social' norms related to physical activity? If these norms changed over time, how would we know? And speculatively, can interventions be developed that seek to change those norms to increase physical activity at a population level?

Tailoring programs by harnessing people's social norms, identities, and appraisals could facilitate improved acceptability, resulting in greater uptake, adherence, and ultimately improved health outcomes. Social climate provides the environmental context that encourages individuals to engage in physical activity. We know that, broadly speaking, individuals change their physical activity patterns due to **capability**, **opportunity**, and **motivation**.[10]

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- *Capability*: an individual's psychological and physical capacity to engage in physical activity, such as having the necessary knowledge and skills.[10]
- *Opportunity*: all the factors external to an individual that act as facilitators or barriers to physical activity or prompt and nudge people to be active. It consists of both physical and social environmental influences.[10]
- *Motivation*: the psychological and cognitive processes that energize and direct behaviours related to physical activity, including goals, analytical decision-making, habits, and reflexive emotional responses.[10]

Figure 1 conceptualizes potential pathways of *how* social norms, social appraisal, and social identity interact to shift capability, opportunity, and motivation to engage in physical activity. Social norms influence and inform individuals' social appraisals of possible actions and how individuals identify with other people and groups. Leveraging an individual's social appraisals may take the form of testimonials on the benefits of physical activity and visual demonstrations of activities from influential individuals. Desires to behave in alignment with what others think *and* do will encourage physical activity,[2] likely impacting an individual's motivation and opportunity to get active.[6]



**Figure 1. A conceptual model of how social climate can influence physical activity**

Note: This diagram illustrates the potential pathways identified by Rhodes & Beauchamp[2] through which social climate can encourage physical activity by acting on motivation, capability, and opportunity.

Social identity manifests through the attraction to others or groups, shared values and motivation about a behaviour between people, and perceived responsibilities of being a member of a group.[7] Thus, strengthening a bond with a physically active group (e.g., a walking group, bowling club, or exercise class), promoting collective physical activity priorities among people (e.g., spouses who walk together every night after dinner or commitments to a sport team), and/or assigning roles for each member to contribute to a group physical activity are all means of promoting social identification,[8] therefore acting on capability, opportunity, and motivation through various pathways.[6]

Changes to these aspects of social climate may predict or reflect policy implementation or behaviour change within a population. Table 2 provides some indicators of the social climate of physical activity that could be targeted like in the case studies described on page 3.

### Table 2. Examples of social climate aspects related to physical activity

| Social climate aspect | Physical activity |
|---|---|
| Injunctive social norms | Perceptions of whether others approve or disapprove of physical (in)activity help reflect the social climate of physical activity. |
| Descriptive social norms | Perceptions of how common it is to see other people being active. |
| Social appraisal | Physical activity is a positive behaviour, so social appraisal leads people to want to get active because it is perceived by others/outsiders as a "good thing". |
| Social identity | People develop identities in relation to various social groups. Social identity can be harnessed to promote physical activity participation. Social identity underpins group exercise behaviour. |

# THE CURRENT SOCIAL CLIMATE OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN CANADA

In 2018, ParticipACTION's Research Advisory Group undertook the first-ever look at the social climate of physical activity in Canada via a national survey.[11] In 2023, this survey was conducted again to explore whether any changes (positive or negative) had occurred.[12] Table 3 below highlights some of the most notable changes.

Overall, the issue of physical inactivity remained an important public health issue for Canadians across both studies, while tobacco use dropped out of the top three. Although several indicators suggested an increase in the perceived norms of exercise and outdoor play, Canadians reported a decrease in how often they see people walking or wheeling (i.e., primary forms of active transportation) in their neighbourhoods. Simultaneously, more Canadians reported an increase in the proportion of people in their social circle who meet physical activity guidelines. These results suggest that some aspects of the social climate of physical activity may be shifting to be more conducive to physical activity, and these changes could be related to enhancing physical activity participation. However, other norms around physical activity not captured by the survey may be changing for the worse, which represents an opportunity to course-correct and enhance participation in physical activity as part of daily life in Canada.

**Table 3. Key changes related to the social climate of physical activity in Canada (2018 vs. 2023)**

| | 2018 | 2023 |
|---|---|---|
| Physical inactivity remains a serious public health issue for people in Canada. | 1. Unhealthy diets<br>2. Tobacco use<br>**3. Physical inactivity** | 1. Unhealthy diets<br>**2. Physical inactivity**<br>3. Tobacco use |
| More people in Canada report seeing others exercising. | **39%** agreed that they often see others exercising. | **46%** agreed that they often see others exercising. |
| Fewer people in Canada report seeing others walking/wheeling in their neighbourhood. | **56%** agreed that they often see others walking/wheeling. | **45%** agreed that they often see others walking/wheeling. |
| More people in Canada report seeing children playing in their neighbourhoods. | **26%** agreed that they often see children playing outdoors. | **34%** agreed that they often see children playing outdoors. |
| A higher proportion of participants say that most of the people important to them are meeting national physical activity guidelines (≥150 min./week). | Most or all people important to them meet national physical activity guidelines: **13%** | Most or all people important to them meet national physical activity guidelines: **22%** |

While the conceptualization and assessment of social climate and physical activity is new, the existence of actions or prompts related to social norms are not. Figures 2-4 below illustrate some of the ways policy decisions and changes to the physical environment can shape the social climate of physical activity in Canada.

**Figure 2.** In 2021, the City of Toronto began installing variants of 'No Exit' signs that provide access information for pedestrians *and* vehicles. Signs also indicate if the pedestrian access is not suitable for wheelchair users (e.g., difficult terrain).

**Descriptive norm:** Signage normalizing the use of active transportation in the city.

**Injunctive norm:** Signage giving explicit permission to use sidewalks, paths, etc. that may not otherwise be considered for use.

**Figure 3**. In June 2024, the Town of Hay River, Northwest Territories, introduced a bike bus program where grade-school students could join a volunteer-led ride to school along designated routes. The program continued into the 2025 school year.



**Descriptive norm:** Parents and children see the bike bus along the designated route on a regular basis, normalizing active transportation to school.

**Injunctive norm:** Hay River Recreation's organization of the program provides formalized approval from the town.

**Social identity:** Registration with the bike bus leads to attendance expectations from other children.



**Figure 4.** Municipalities across the world, including Canadian cities like Montreal, Waterloo, and Edmonton, have installed devices that count and display the number of cyclists who have used specific bike lanes to travel each day and for the year.

**Descriptive norm:** Displaying the number of cyclists using the bike lane to commute each day normalizes active transportation and justifies devoting infrastructure to cyclist use.

**Social identity:** Seeing live updates while crossing the bridge may give cyclists a sense of group membership by contributing to the count.

*Photo courtesy of Eco-Counter*

The crux of changing social climate relies on people seeing others engage in physical activity, sport, and recreation. Further efforts to shift the social climate of physical activity might include the following:

» In areas with existing supportive infrastructure, leveraging public health campaigns to role-model walking, wheeling, and other forms of active transportation as the norm instead of using cars.

» Developing resources and policies to help early childhood educators, teachers, and managers normalize active breaks in schools and the workplace.

» Advocating for the investment in physical activity, sport, and recreation infrastructure in visible and accessible public places.

» Continuing to depict diverse people (e.g., based on background, age, ability, and body types) engaging in physical activity so that target audiences see people like themselves in promotional materials.

» Developing localized partnerships to promote organizations that provide no- or low-cost opportunities for activity (e.g., free community 5k runs/walks/wheels like those organized by Parkrun).

# THE BENEFITS OF CHANGE

A wide range of benefits for policy-makers, organizations, and people living in Canada could emerge as a result of changing the social climate of physical activity.

A new social climate for physical activity could:

» Help Canada increase physical activity levels by a relative 15% by 2030 to help meet domestic goals and international targets set by the World Health Organization.

» Drastically reduce public healthcare costs and increase productivity, improving Canada's economy and the overall quality of life for people in Canada.

» Create more policy options and flexibility for governments, allowing policy- and decision-makers to allocate funds and resources more efficiently and effectively across various sectors.

» Contribute to creating a healthier planet through increased use of active transportation, including public transit.

» Provide sport, physical activity, and recreation (SPAR) organizations with the opportunity to streamline and/or expand mandates, programs, and initiatives.

» Reduce barriers to physical activity and make it an expected, accepted, and habitual part of everyday life – an everyday life where physical activity is more convenient, inexpensive, and inclusive.

# WHERE DO WE START? 'SOCIALIZING' SOCIAL CLIMATE AMONG THE SPAR SECTOR

A social climate is made up of many sub-climates at the levels of provinces, municipalities, schools, workplaces, households, and other social groups; therefore, changing Canada's overall social climate is a significant undertaking that will require collective and coordinated action. To change the behaviour of entire populations, we will need to de-normalize physical inactivity and re-normalize physical activity by changing norms and beliefs and provide direct support for modifying environments and policies to encourage physical activity.

Since 2018, ParticipACTION has worked with members of its Research Advisory Group, among others, to develop a series of surveys, resources, and publications to better understand the current social climate of physical activity in Canada and equip organizations and governments with the information needed to initiate change. By defining the social climate of physical activity, ParticipACTION wants to spark a broader dialogue across the SPAR sector

about what barriers and competing social climates may be preventing us from moving towards a new normal in Canada. The next step in changing the social climate of physical activity is increasing the awareness, understanding, and integration of the concept of social climate itself.

Physical activity is a modifiable lifestyle behaviour. In conceptualizing the social climate of physical activity, ParticipACTION recognizes that role-modeling and leadership can and will need to trickle through various SPAR streams to create meaningful and substantial change. As leaders within the SPAR sector, let's be leaders and role models where we live, learn, work, teach, and advocate. By first familiarizing ourselves, organizations, governments, and people in Canada with the concept of social climate, we can begin the process of creating a Canada where physical *inactivity* is a distant memory – just like smoking in restaurants and curbsides without blue recycling bins.

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# AVAILABLE RESOURCES AND PUBLICATIONS

- [Assessing the social climate of physical (in) activity in Canada](#) – This study is the first known attempt to assess social climate at a national level, addressing an important gap in knowledge related to advocating for and implementing population-level physical activity interventions in Canada in 2018.

- [Re-assessing the social climate of physical (in) activity in Canada](#) – This study assessed whether the social climate of physical activity in Canada changed over a five-year period (2018 to 2023).

- [The changing views on physical activity in Canada](#) – This Q&A with lead author, Dr. Matthew Fagan, and ParticipACTION's scientific director, Dr. Leigh Vanderloo, discusses the implications of social climate and physical activity in Canada.

- [Political Orientation and Public Attributions for the Causes and Solutions of Physical Inactivity in Canada: Implications for Policy Support](#) – This paper explores how public attributions for the causes and solutions of physical inactivity and individuals' self-identified political orientation are associated with support for different policy actions in addressing physical inactivity.

- [Are Experiences of Discrimination Associated with Views of Physical Activity and Climate Policy Support in Canada?](#) – This study examined whether experiences of discrimination are associated with the social climate of physical (in) activity and support for policies addressing dual benefits of physical activity and climate change.

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