

Policy Impact on Physical Activity in Schools

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What is already known on this topic

Priority of the problem

Physical inactivity is the fourth leading risk factor for premature mortality worldwide. To improve public health and to prevent NCDs, the World Health Organisation (WHO) physical activity (PA) guidelines recommend an average of 60mins of daily MVPA for children. Despite all the evidence of benefits, epidemiological data indicate that over 80% of children and adolescents globally do not meet PA recommendations.

Schools are an important setting because they reach the majority of children and adolescents, who spend a substantial amount of time in this setting. Policies that support PA in schools may be promising, but their impact on PA behaviour is poorly understood. The aim of this PEN review was to ascertain the level and type of evidence reported in the international scientific literature for policies within the school setting that contribute directly or indirectly to increasing PA.

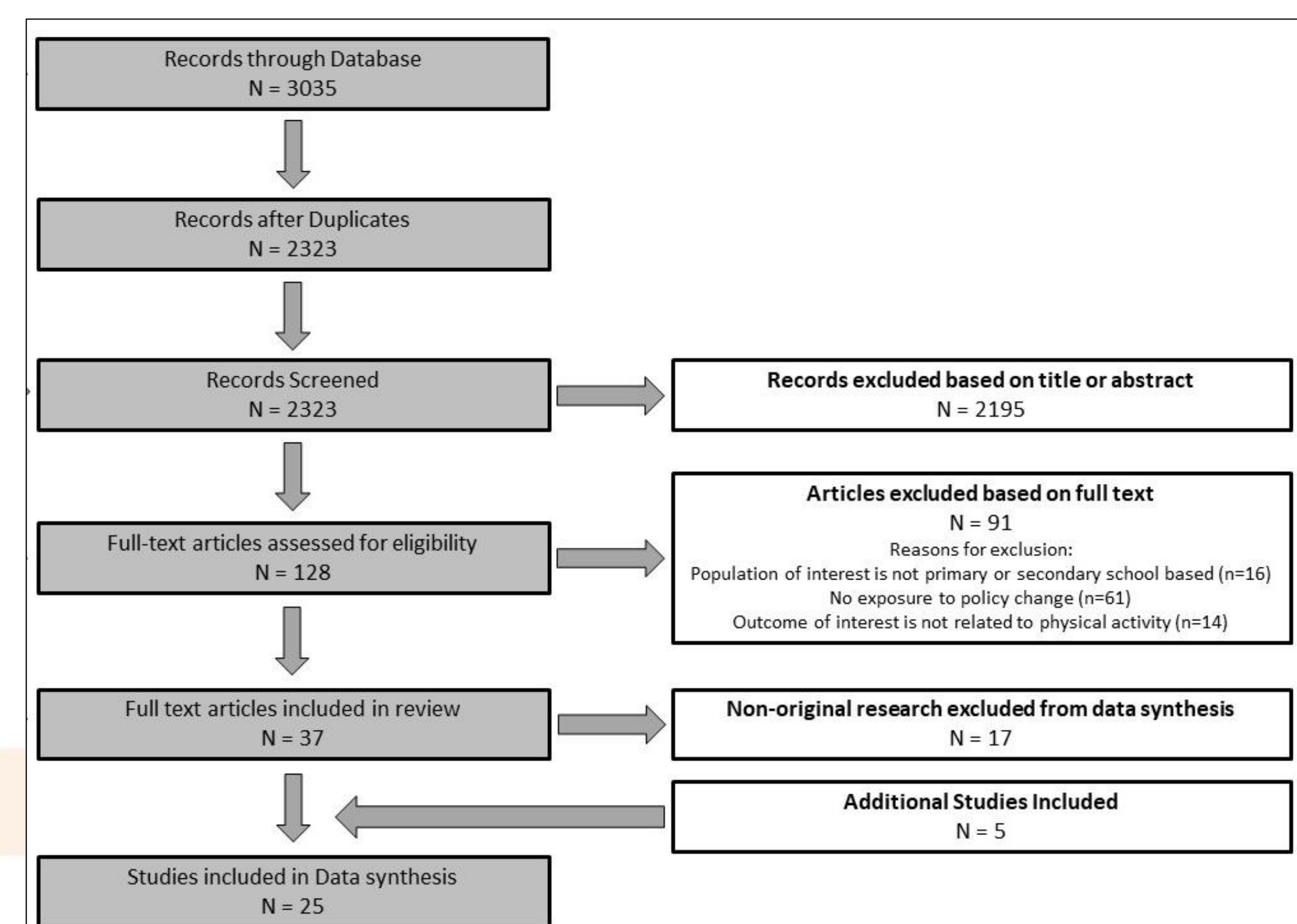


Fig 1. Study inclusion flowchart

What our study adds



Fig 2. Policy areas & actions for PA in schools

In total, 3,035 publications were identified (712 were removed as duplicates). The remaining 2,323 titles and abstracts were screened; with 2,195 removed, leaving 128 full texts for review, 25 of which were included for data synthesis (Figure 1).

The primary results identified a total of 9 policy areas, with 22 specific policy actions (Figure 2) for which there were 82 evidence codes that had a direct or indirect effect on PA within the school setting.

22 Policy Actions with varying quantity and quality of evidence

Frequency of evidence (Figure 3) was highest for sport/extracurricular PA (35%), 17% for physical education PA and 12% for whole school PA policy, with evidence for shared use agreements (SUA) between schools and local communities rarely reported (2%).

- Evidence supports the effectiveness of PA policy actions within the school-setting but cautions against a 'one-size fits all' approach.
- Further evaluation of policy implementation to maximise translation into practice is required.
- Greater clarity regarding terminology, measurement and methods for evaluation of policy interventions is needed, and suggestions provided.

Policy Recommendations

1. Strong support was found for a mandated minimum PE time. This policy approach is welcome due to its potential to reduce disparities across schools
2. Regulations requiring professional licensure of PE teachers is supported by our review and other research adding weight to the role of the PE specialist as a PA ambassador for schools.
3. The type of extra-curricular sport model may exacerbate sex-based sport participation disparities due to the element of self-segregation, since girls may be less willing to participate when boys are present.
4. Additional policy areas to promote PA include minimum duration of break times and using policy to provide youth with access to PA physical spaces that maximise the impact of the school's physical environment.
5. Opening school facilities to local communities through SUA resulted in more use of these facilities outside of school hours and was positively associated with PA in under-resourced communities.
6. Only a handful of studies included used measures to assess the extent to which policies were implemented as originally intended.

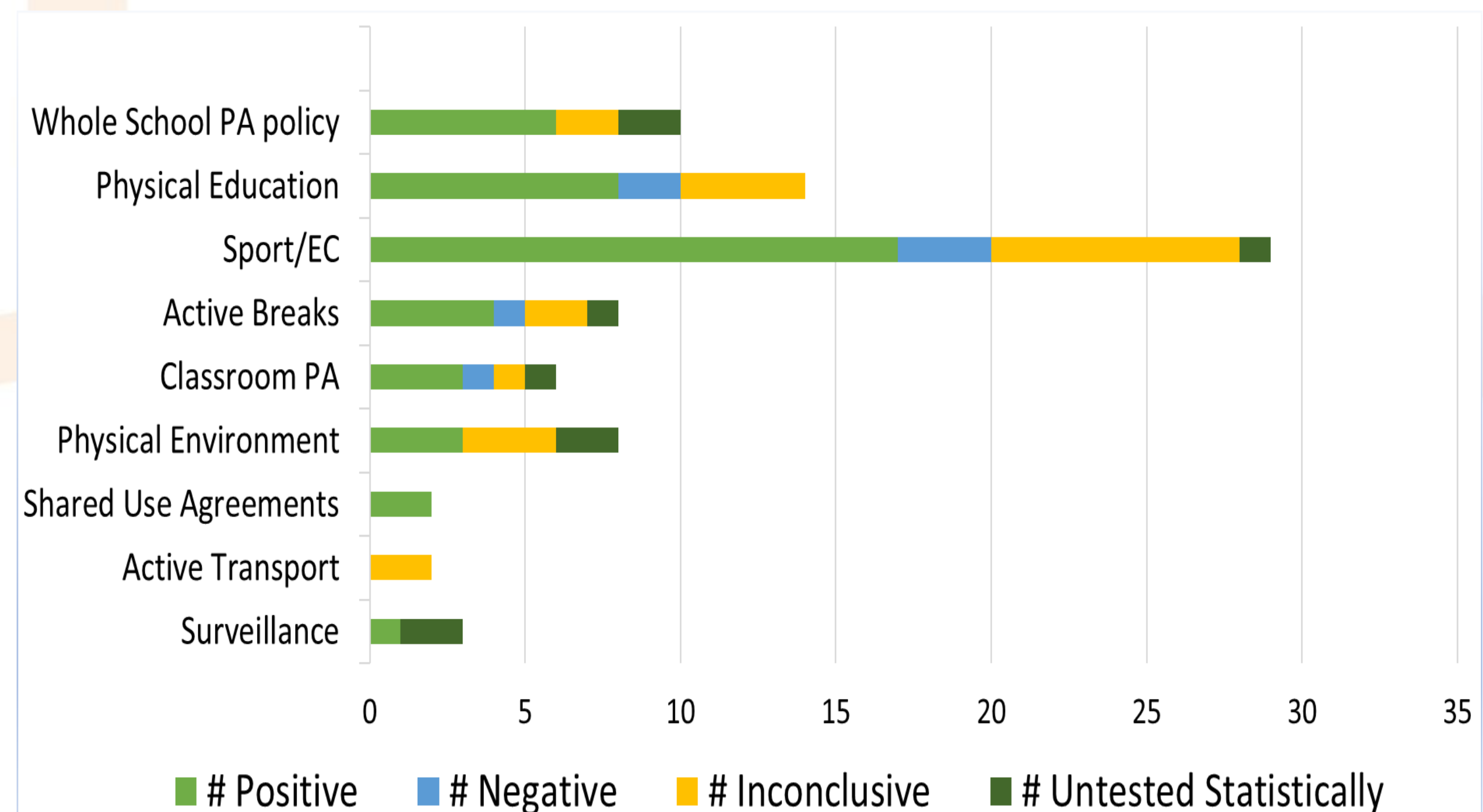


Fig 3. Evidence code frequency and strength by policy area. (EC = Extracurricular, PA = Physical Activity)

Literature references

Woods, C. B., Volf, K., Kelly, L., Casey, B., Gelius, P., Messing, S., ... Bengoechea, E. G. (2021). The evidence for the impact of policy on physical activity outcomes within the school setting: A systematic review. *Journal of Sport and Health Science*. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jshs.2021.01.006>