

The “Best of 2025 List” of Health Promotion Researchers

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Paul E. Terry, PhD¹

Abstract

Each year the editorial team of the *American Journal of Health Promotion* selects our “Best of the Year List” of health promotion studies from the prior year. This editorial features the *Editor’s Picks Award*, the *Editor in Chief Award*, the *Michael P. O’Donnell Award* and the *Dorothy Nyswander Award* for the best research and writing published in 2025 in this journal. Our criteria for selection includes: whether the study addresses a topic of timely importance in health promotion, the research question is clearly stated and the study methods are well executed; whether the paper is often cited and downloaded; if the study findings offer a unique contribution to the literature; and if the paper is well-written and engaging. Awardees in 2025 offered new insights into health literacy, gun violence, social determinants and youth fitness, the effectiveness of health coaching in weight management and factors that affect access to GLP-1’s. This “best of 2025 list” featured studies based in health systems, workplaces and communities and includes case studies and qualitative and quantitative research methods that enable researchers to better explain what amplifies or hampers well-being.

Keywords

best studies, health promotion, health disparities, best science, best practices, research methods

This editorial features five awards presented annually by the *American Journal of Health Promotion* (AJHP). Eleven “Papers of the Year” from 2025 are being recognized for excellence in research and writing. Six studies received the *Editor’s Picks Award*, a systematic literature review received the *Editor in Chief Award*, two studies received the *Michael P. O’Donnell Award* and two studies received the *Dorothy Nyswander Award*. These “best of” papers honor some of health promotion’s best scientists and, in particular, recognize those who bring outstanding humanity to their field of inquiry and bigheartedness to their writing. Reviewing the best science on these pages gives us an opportunity to consider what research questions scholars in our field are pursuing and how the results of their research can catalyze new thinking and continuous improvement in our field.

In recent years this journal has fielded a wide variety of research questions directed at understanding the impact of COVID-19. In 2025 we returned to a much more eclectic range of research as is the norm for our discipline.

I am mindful that 2025 has been a year of tumult in the scientific community with federal health agencies being steered toward ever more ideologically driven new priorities. In particular, research that examined equity, diversity and inclusion has been restricted by the policies of major federal research funders. These changes have not deterred this journal from proudly recognizing stellar studies aimed directly at

ameliorating those factors that create health disparities. This year’s award winning scholars tested strategies that directly or indirectly confronted biases as they researched the impact of policies and interventions on increasingly specific subgroups.

As usual, we published extensively about mental health, chronic condition management, and lifestyle issues. The independent variables examined in these studies included social determinants of health, diversity, race and racism and social inclusion.

Though much of this research is about individual level interventions, in these award winning papers you will see that health systems, large private sector organizations, schools and communities all served as settings for testing novel study questions and for employing precise research methods. Studying the effectiveness of a variety of behavior change initiatives has been a mainstay of this journal and examining factors that could improve reach continues to drive hypothesis testing.

Related to this preference for publishing studies that contribute to continuous improvement in our field, Dr Kerry Redican, a professor who is one of this journal’s Associate Editors in Chief, brings a pragmatic lens to his

¹Editor in Chief, *American Journal of Health Promotion*, Senior Fellow, HERO (The Health Enhancement Research Organization), Waconia, MN, USA

recommendations for our annual awards. Relating to two of the papers he nominated he noted that: “I use both papers in my classes and students have enjoyed and learned from them.”

Selecting the best studies and papers from the past year from this journal is inspiring as well as humbling. Inspiring, because the quality of our submissions seems to get better every year, still, our acceptance rate is relatively low. That is, these papers are the best of the best. But we’re also humbled by the fact that we have likely neglected to feature a paper from 2025 that may prove to be among our most influential in years to come. This concern is corroborated by our journal’s rising ‘impact factor’, an indicator of how often our authors are cited by other researchers, making AJHP one of the most influential journals in our field.

Our wholehearted gratitude goes out to these authors for bringing this journal new ways of thinking about our discipline by taking risks and testing unique and provocative research questions. We invite you to re-read the papers featured below because they impressed our editors as studies that are advancing our field via inspiring research questions and exemplary research methods. We also found these papers had vibrant discussion sections that had us considering best practices alongside potential next practices.

Neil deGrasse Tyson said: “The very nature of science is discoveries, and the best of those discoveries are the ones you don’t expect.”¹ Indeed! When I review studies for this journal, there is nothing more satisfying than being surprised and sitting back and asking whether I’m reading about an altogether new discovery.

2025 Papers of the Year Award Criteria

The award criteria our journal editors considered were applied to both the study and the paper such that the:

1. Study addresses a topic of timely importance in health promotion.
2. Research question is clearly stated and methodologies are well executed.
3. Paper is often cited and/or downloaded.
4. Study findings offer a unique contribution to the literature.
5. Paper is well-written and engaging.

Editor in Chief Award 2025

“A Systematic Literature Review of the Relationships between Social and Interpersonal Factors and Physical Activity among Older Adults.” Park J-H, Prochnow T, Vigil JA, Smith ML.²

Editor’s Picks Awards: The Best of 2025 List of Health Promotion Researchers.

“Gun Violence as a Source of Anxiety and Stress in the US Population.” Kottke TE, Palmer BA, Hooker SA, Pronk NP, Arena R, Woodard C.³

“Disparities in Cancer Health Literacy by Race/Ethnicity, Education, Income, Age, Sex, and Marital Status.” Dumenci L, Riddle DL.⁴

“Access to GLP-1s: Where Do Employers Fit in?” Imboden MT.⁵

“Behavioral Design Strategies Improve Healthy Food Sales in a Military Cafeteria.” Kimmons J, Nugent NB, Harris D, Lee SH, Kompaniyets L, Onufrik S.⁶

“Moving With the Times: Updating the National Physical Activity Plan’s Media and Communication Strategies to Increase Population-Level Physical Activity.” Mailey EL, Olscamp K, Aguiar EJ, Maddock JE, Levan ML, Segar M.⁷

“The Effect of Intervention Preference Matching on Outcomes and Engagement in a Post-cessation Weight Management Trial.” Day K, Solomon E, Zoellner J, Bursac Z, Krukowski RA.⁸

Michael P. O’Donnell Awards 2025

“Anecdotes are Data: Demystifying Qualitative Research.” Masvawure TB.⁹

“Multi-Family Housing Environment and Physical Activity: A Systematic Review of the Literature.” Hegde MV, Park S, Zhu X, Lee C.¹⁰

Dorothy Nyswander Awards 2025

Volunteering in Young Adulthood: Complex Associations with Later Health and Well-Being Outcomes. Nakamura JS, Wilkinson R, Nelson MA, Suzuki E, VanderWeele TJ., Volume 39, No. 1.¹¹

Social Determinants of Health and Parent and Child Physical Activity: A Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Exploration among Socioeconomically and Racially and Ethnically Diverse Families. Tschida L, de Brito JN, Sapkota S, Fertig AR, Trofholz A, Berge JM.¹²

‘Editor in Chief Award’ Goes to an Exemplary Review Article

My Editor in Chief Award for 2025 went to authors who conducted an exemplary systematic literature review to examine the relationship between social factors and engagement in physical activity among older adults.¹³ Literature reviews are often the research method that garners the most citations in scientific journals, and I have every expectation that this thoughtful analysis of 34 scientific articles, from 1560 papers initially identified, will help to inform future research.

Led by Jeong-Hui Park, these researchers considered social support, social networks, loneliness, social environment and other social factors as they might influence physical activity in older adults.

Not only were these authors impressively thorough in parsing between papers that did and did not satisfy their

inclusion criteria, they were also highly detailed and disciplined in citing dozens of papers that reinforced or contradicted their overall findings. The authors observe: “Considering practical implications, our findings suggest that physical activity (PA) promotion or exercise intervention programs can buffer negative emotions, such as social isolation and loneliness, among older adults. Regularly participating in aerobic and/or anaerobic PA may be used to alleviate mild and moderate symptoms of loneliness and social isolation based on psychosocial mechanisms such as distraction from aversive stimuli, fostering efficacy, and instilling beliefs of control.”

This paper is open access so our faithful readers should feel free to share this with your professional networks.

Michael P. O’Donnell Paper of the Year

In reviewing winners of the O’Donnell Paper of the Year award in years past, I noted that they have largely used quantitative research methods including randomized controlled trials. It comes as no surprise that the gold standard research method would be most affiliated with O’Donnell who, among many distinctions, previously led the Health Management Research Center at the University of Michigan.

Two papers won the O’Donnell award this year and both depart from quantitative methods. Dr Tsitsi Mavawure is recognized for her paper arguing that “anecdotes are data” and her commentary aimed at “demystifying qualitative research.”⁹

Soon after the paper was published, O’Donnell emailed me to say:

“In my opinion, this article was the most impactful article I have read all year because of the compelling case it makes for the value of qualitative research. It is a perspective I required myself to intellectually embrace when I was Editor in Chief, but did so only with great discipline. This paper reminded me that qualitative research is valuable when it tells a story, and it follows prescribed methodology.”

Mavawure is one of this journal’s Associate Editor’s in Chief and this O’Donnell Award is not only fitting for the excellent arguments she advances in her paper, but it also provides an opening to recognize her hard work in recruiting and editing contributions for the special collection she led on qualitative methods in health promotion.¹⁴

In Mavawure’s “introduction” to this special collection she notes that:

“Many public health journals like the *American Journal of Health Promotion* have increased the proportion of qualitative research papers that they publish and there is relatively less push back from reviewers regarding the “problem” of small sample sizes and “lack of generalizability” of this type of study design. We hope that this collection of papers—which spans all aspects of qualitative

research, from study design to data collection and finally to data analysis—will address and allay some of these concerns by clarifying what the primary goals of qualitative research are.”

I can attest to Mavawure’s deservedness of high honors and her fidelity to excellence in qualitative research, given I have had the pleasure of collaborating with her in research and writing in the past.^{15,16} I have also profiled Mavawure’s extraordinary leadership in fighting the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Southern Africa.¹⁷ To my knowledge, O’Donnell had no foreknowledge of these aspects of Mavawure’s background when he nominated her for this latest of her high honors.

A second paper won the O’Donnell award. A systematic literature by Dr Manasa Hegde and her colleagues was recognized for a timely and original study concerning whether and how multi-family housing environments influence residents’ physical activity.¹⁰ This paper is open access so readers are encouraged to share this study with their professional networks. Soon after the paper was published O’Donnell emailed me to commend the paper and he noted that “the methodology is strong and the topic is important and under reported.”

O’Donnell is this journal’s Founder and Editor in Chief Emeritus and author of the “AMSO Framework”, an acronym that features the role of awareness, motivation, skills and opportunity in behavior change.

Hegde’s findings align squarely with the “opportunity” construct in O’Donnell’s model that stresses how environmental factors are influential determinants of health. Hegde and colleagues left no stone unturned in their descriptions of the opportunities that need greater policy and programming attention. They conclude:

“Design strategies such as incorporating smaller green spaces with well-lit walking paths, outdoor fitness zones with exercise equipment, interactive public art and installations, resident-maintained community gardens, seating and shade, and health promoting signage or prompts can encourage residents to participate in healthy behaviors. Policy recommendations such as incentivizing active design through tax incentives for developers and partnering with local fitness programs or trainers to provide on-site fitness classes are helpful. Implementing zoning regulations that promote mixed-use development, establishing inclusive design standards to create an environment that is safe for all ages and abilities, and collaborating with local schools to establish safe walking and biking routes for children have shown to promote healthy behaviors.”

Dorothy Nyswander Paper of the Year Award

Like most working in public health with a commitment to reducing health inequities, I strive to bring race issues to the fore when reviewing research studies and deciding on moving

studies forward for peer review and publication. Publishing high quality research is, of course, the primary goal. After that, I consider the diversity of the study sample, including race and gender, as well as that of the principal researchers as variables that should inform what gets published in this journal. I am confident that the foremother of our field, Dorothy Nyswander, would support this discriminating approach.

We honored Julia Nakamura and her colleagues for their sophisticated investigation into “whether changes in volunteering for adolescence to young adulthood are associated with subsequent health and well-being outcomes in adulthood.”¹⁸ This journal has fielded studies about the role of volunteerism in health promotion for decades. The civic engagement movement and non-governmental service organizations have much to teach health promotion practitioners looking to expand the reach of public health practice.¹¹

A unique and striking aspect of this study of volunteerism relates to the thorough review of both positive and negative outcomes that are associated with volunteering. On the negative side, for example:

- “Volunteering in community centers was associated with an increased risk of PTSD.”
- “Volunteering in solidarity/ethnic support groups was associated with an increased risk of prescription drug misuse and sleep disturbances.”
- “Volunteering in hospitals/nursing homes was associated with an increased risk of high cholesterol.”

Nakamura’s paper is open access so readers are encouraged to share this study with their professional colleagues. Nakamura and colleagues conclude:

“Volunteering organizations, policymakers, and interventionists should carefully consider the ramifications of volunteering in young adulthood and carefully curate volunteer opportunities that promote health and mitigate adverse outcomes associated with volunteering.”

Nyswander is considered the pioneer of the field of health education and she called for an “open society” which was a society “*where diversity is respected; where pressure groups cannot stifle and control the will of the majority or castigate the individual; where education brings upward mobility to all; where the best of health care is available to all; where poverty is a community disgrace not an individual’s weakness.*”¹⁹

Consistent with Nyswander’s philosophy about the impact of a supportive community, we recognized the stellar work of Lauren Tschida and her co-authors who showed that “social determinants of health (SDOH) may shape the physical activity habits of parents and children in a racially/ethnically diverse population.”¹² Tschida mapped 25 SDOH factors and reviewed them in the context of domains such as social capital, living in high walkability areas, family functioning and opportunities for recreation. The authors conclude that: “To

advance health equity and support engagement in physical activity, researchers and clinicians should take into consideration SDOH factors related to a family’s educational, social, home, family functioning, and neighborhood environments.”

Editor’s Picks for 2025 Papers of the Year

Six studies earned our “Editor’s Picks” honors in 2025. What several of our Editor’s Picks share in common is the impressive ambition behind the research questions posed and the timeliness of their studies as they are responsive to current events garnering national discourse and debate. To wit, the increasing use of GLP-1s in obesity management has raised challenging questions about over medicalizing conditions with lifestyle antecedents alongside concerns about equitable access, cost and sustainability. Dr Mary Imboden confronts these issues with her review of the employer’s role in guiding populations toward a cost effective, science informed approach to the use of GLP-1s.²⁰ Recognizing the excellence of Imboden’s paper also creates an opening to commend her for her leadership in recruiting experts and editing a special issue on GLP-1s in this Journal’s June issue (Volume 39, Number 5) of “Knowing Well/Being Well.” Imboden’s paper summarizes “strategies that organizations are taking to control the cost of GLP-1s” and she previews three other papers in her special issue that address the “deepening health equity divide”, “the critical role of lifestyle” in medication management of obesity and the “building of comprehensive care networks” for patients using obesity medications.

Another timely public health issue is being felt by communities across the country that are grappling with how to confront the underlying issues behind violence and mass shootings. Minnesota, where I live, is among the more recent high profile cases of shooting incidents. Our Governor, Tim Walz, came to my community, Waconia, and hundreds of attendees came to the first in a series of “gun violence prevention town halls” hosted by Walz and gun violence survivor Gabby Giffords.²¹

Should any policy makers doubt the despair and mental health consequences of shootings, such as Minnesotans’ witnessed at our Annunciation Catholic School, they should review the research of Dr Tom Kottke and colleagues who elucidate the prevalence of anxiety and stress associated with gun violence. The powerful and distinctive contribution of Kottke’s research relates to his findings that “the impact of gun violence is not limited to individuals who have experienced a shooting” and he and colleagues go on to “enumerate, for the entire US population, the prevalence of anxiety and stress about gun violence.”³ I didn’t change plans I had that prevented me from attending the town hall in part because I felt it was a venue that might attract a shooter. This worry is consistent with Kottke’s finding that 37% of respondents to his surveys stated that “they had avoided going somewhere over the past 6 months due to fear or anxiety about gun violence.”

Artificial intelligence, new media and the rampant, too often negative, influence of social media are all ensconced in timely national debates about how to balance free speech with accountability for disinformation.²² Another of our award winning papers was led by Emily Mailey from Kansas State University who partnered with co-authors from the University of Alabama, Texas A&M, NYU and the University of Michigan to tackle nothing less than revamping the mass media content of the “National Physical Activity Plan.” With their intent to recognize “the rapid pace at which the media landscape is evolving”, Mailey and this team of experts described the new branding strategies for “Move Your Way®” the campaign brand of the media plan. It is heartening, to be sure, to feature an exemplary case of media used, in particular, to protect and boost the well-being of our youth when so much of the media they consume does the opposite.

In Times of Fear

The questions these “best papers” are asking are vital to our national self-image and community self-esteem as they relate to cancer health literacy, social determinants of physical activity, gun violence, obesity management and access to healthy foods. In a prior editorial I expounded on the variation in definitions for wellness, health promotion and lifestyle medicine.²³ In particular, I reflected on questions concerning the training and credentials needed for providing health education and counselling. To what extent, I wondered, are current approaches moving us further down-stream into the sick care system rather than remaining upstream and more within the purview of public health.

Such concerns have been profoundly exacerbated by the credentials of newly appointed governmental leaders and their ideologically driven changes to the priorities of our federal health agencies. Marie Curie is thought to have said:

“Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.”

We dedicate our selection and publishing of these “best papers” to all health promotion scientists who are confronting the fear that comes with focusing on health disparities and who continue working to achieve equity in families, communities and workplaces.

Congratulations to these first authors and co-authors. The leaders featured here show us how judiciously chosen study methods, accessible scientific writing and fearlessness can be intentionally employed toward a deeper understanding of ways to achieve better health and well-being for all.

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