

Actions on the climate crisis offer major and immediate health benefits

Jonathan Patz

While the Climate Crisis is a human health emergency that demands rapid improvements in preparedness and resilience, transition to a low-carbon economy offers opportunities for substantial health benefits, especially reducing non-communicable diseases. According to the 2022 report of the Lancet Countdown, if nine major countries abided by their Paris Agreement commitments to reduce greenhouse gases (GHGs), by 2040 improved air quality could prevent 1.2 million deaths, increased active transportation (walking or biking) could prevent 5.9 million deaths, and healthier diets could prevent 1.2 million deaths annually. Our own U.S. analysis found that economy-wide decarbonizing – across the electric power, transportation, building, and industrial sectors – would reduce emissions of fine particulate matter (PM2.5), sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen oxides, subsequently leading to 53,000 avoided premature deaths annually in the contiguous United States.

As timing is running out for nations to majorly cut GHGs, health organizations have become more vocal in calling for emissions reductions (primary prevention). For example, in 2021, the World Health Organization led a partnership establishing a “fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty.” National Academies of Medicine are also calling for system-wide transformation. It’s become clear that cross-sector policies are likely those that may have the greatest health impact, and that low-carbon societies offer opportunities to become those that are also the healthiest.

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