Authors' objectives
To explore the effectiveness of community action as a strategy for health promotion, through a critical review of five years of community action evaluation literature.

Searching
MEDLINE and PsycLIT were searched from 1990 to 1995 using the search terms given. Only publications in the English language were included. The years prior to those searched were excluded by the authors, as earlier reviews had already identified methodological deficits in the primary studies.

Study selection
Study designs of evaluations included in the review
Randomised and non-randomised controlled studies were included.

Specific interventions included in the review
Community action, defined as health promotion programmes that involve the community in implementation and control of the process of the programme. The included programmes addressed a range of health issues such as smoking, diet, alcohol consumption, cancers, obesity and hypertension.

Participants included in the review
The participants were communities rather than individuals. The number of communities in the included studies ranged from 1 to 11.

Outcomes assessed in the review
A range of outcomes were assessed depending on the programme. The outcomes assessed in the cardiovascular disease prevention programmes included smoking, diet, exercise, blood-pressure, blood cholesterol, body mass index, mortality, pulse rates, and hospital morbidity records. The outcomes assessed in the cancer prevention programmes included smoking, diet, cancer registrations, and breast self-examination.

How were decisions on the relevance of primary studies made?
The authors do not state how the papers were selected for the review, or how many of the authors performed the selection.

Assessment of study quality
A range of quality criteria were applied to the primary studies. The criteria, which were tabulated, assessed randomisation, validation of outcome measures, and analysis procedures. The authors do not state how the papers were assessed for quality, or how many of the authors performed the quality assessment.

Data extraction
The authors do not state how the data were extracted for the review, or how many of the authors performed the data extraction.

Methods of synthesis
How were the studies combined?
The studies were combined in a narrative review.
How were differences between studies investigated?
Differences between the studies were investigated narratively.

Results of the review
Thirteen studies were reviewed: 7 relating to cancer and 6 relating to cardiovascular disease. There were 3 randomised controlled studies and 10 non-randomised controlled studies.

None of the seven community action studies examining cancer prevention strategies fulfilled all the criteria for rigorous scientific evaluation. The most methodologically sound study had only a moderate rate of success in reducing community smoking rates. This showed no difference in the quit rates for heavy smokers between the control and intervention groups. However, it did show a modest difference for light-to-moderate smokers. None of the six cardiovascular disease prevention studies fulfilled all the methodological criteria.

Authors’ conclusions
The finding that none of the reviewed studies met all of the evaluation criteria was due to several factors, including political considerations, feasibility, and the continued evolution of the science of evaluation in health promotion.

CRD commentary
The quality checklist seems appropriate for the study designs included. However the partial nature of the review makes its validity difficult to assess. In addition, non-English language literature was excluded and studies before 1990 were subject to a blanket exclusion.

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This is a critical abstract of a systematic review that meets the criteria for inclusion on DARE. Each critical abstract contains a brief summary of the review methods, results and conclusions followed by a detailed critical assessment on the reliability of the review and the conclusions drawn.