



Australian perceptions of prevention



Key messages

- In Australia, there has been little research into the community's perceptions of policies and programs to prevent lifestyle-related chronic disease.
- We conducted a survey and focus groups to find out how the community perceives government action on prevention and whether it's commonly seen to be 'nanny state'.
- We found people's views are more nuanced than a simplistic 'nanny state vs freedom' argument. People can simultaneously hold contradictory views, depending on the target of the intervention, the risk factor being addressed and how the intervention is implemented.
- A majority reported the government had not gone far enough in restricting advertising of unhealthy foods to children, setting salt limits on processed food and putting health ratings on packaged food.
- Although most people think personal responsibility for health is important, it does not preclude a role for government in helping people stay healthy.
- Alternative ways of conceiving the government's role in health, other than the nanny state, include as a wise investor of taxpayer money, leader for healthy behaviour, and a partner in prevention.
- These findings show it is important not to let debate about new policy and legislation to be hijacked by nanny state arguments.
- To align better with community perceptions of prevention, it would be more helpful to reframe the debate to focus on the cost benefit, equity, the influence of vested interests and the likely effects of both action and inaction.

The Project: AUSPOPS – AUStralian Perceptions of Prevention Survey

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Project start: October 2015

Project end: Ongoing

Why is the issue important?

Government action on prevention carries the risk of being branded 'nanny state'. There is regular debate about the role the government should play in people's health, and whether regulation diminishes individual choice and personal freedom. However, we did not know previously what the Australian community's attitudes to prevention really were, or whether the idea of the nanny state truly reflected community attitudes.

This study aimed to determine how the general public perceives government prevention initiatives, so we could give policy makers a clearer idea of how their policies may be received.

What did we do?

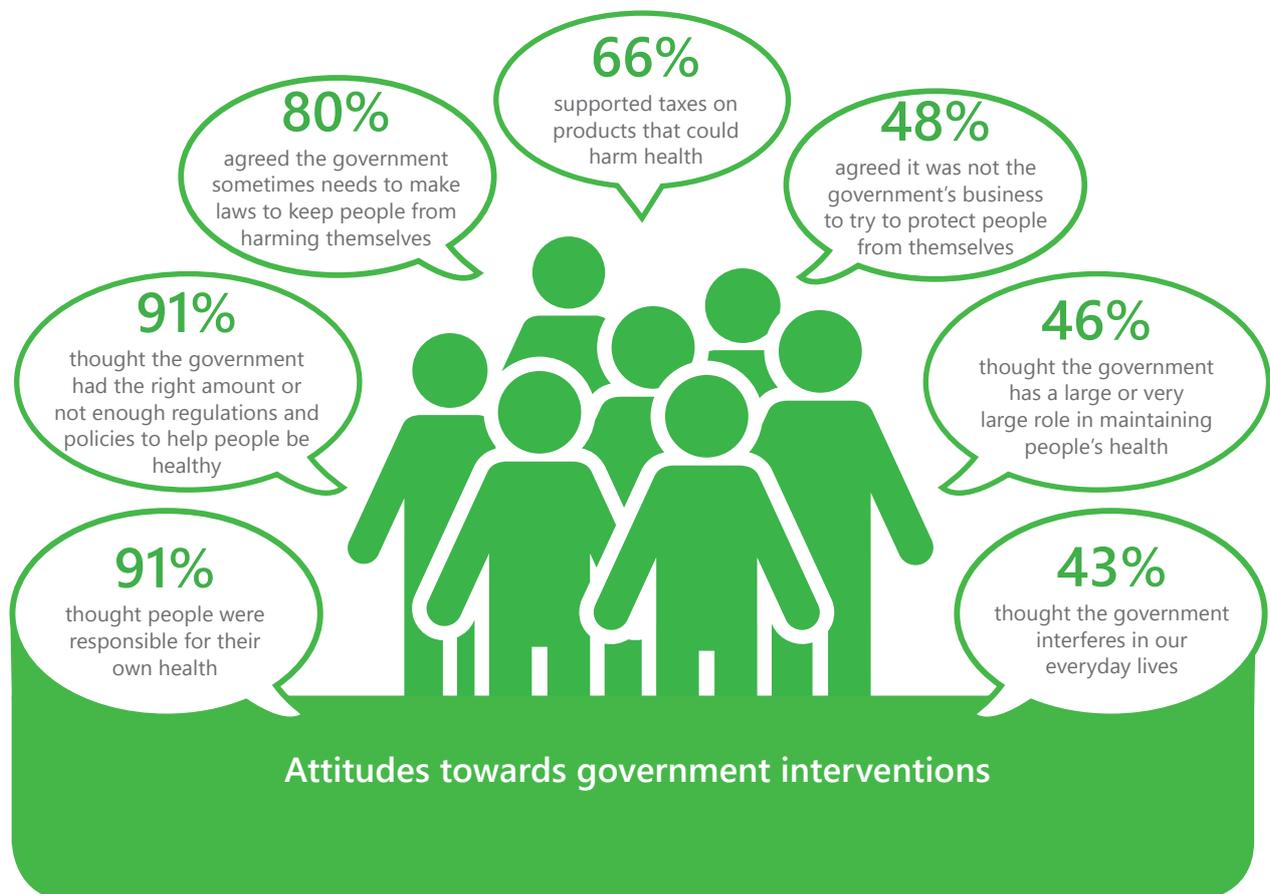
We collected data through a national survey in 2016 (n=2052) and focus groups (n=49).

What did we find?

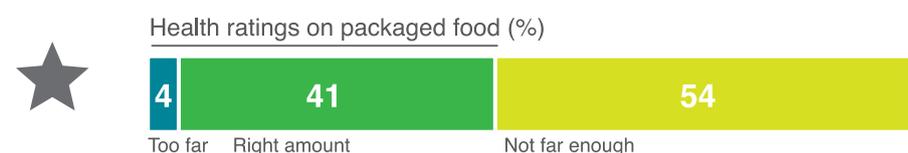
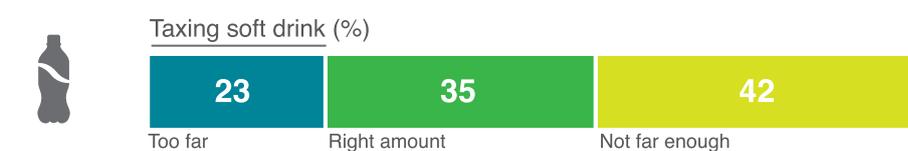
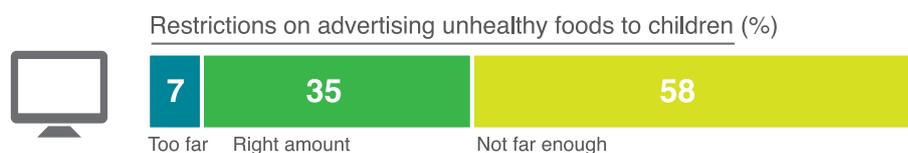
We found the public's thinking about government intervention is more nuanced than the simplistic idea of a nanny state that contrasts personal freedom with paternalism. People can hold differing views at the same time about how far governments should intervene, depending on the target of the intervention, the risk factor and the type of intervention (for example, tax or regulation).

Most people were supportive of government regulation and incentives to support better health, including taxes, especially if the revenue raised is directed towards other health initiatives, despite an overwhelming majority saying that people themselves have a large role in maintaining their own health.

Some participants saw good population health as a shared responsibility and a canny investment of taxpayer money. But they had mixed views about continuing to invest public money for individuals who persist in acting in unhealthy ways despite knowing the risks and consequences.



Has government gone too far, not far enough or does it have about the right amount of involvement in helping people be healthy?



What did we produce?

Grunseit A, Rowbotham S, Crane M, Indig D, Bauman A, Wilson A. Nanny or canny? Community perceptions of government intervention for preventive health. Crit Public Health. 2018. doi: [org/10.1080/09581596.2018.1468020](https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2018.1468020)

Why does it matter?

This study shows the public is more supportive of government intervention for prevention than perhaps we previously thought.

It is important not to let debate about new policy and legislation to be hijacked by nanny state arguments. To align better with community perceptions of prevention, it would be more helpful to reframe the debate to focus on the cost benefit, equity, the influence of vested interests and the likely effects of both action and inaction.

Next steps

We are continuing to analyse the baseline AUSPOPs survey data. A second survey is being planned for late 2018 and a third survey will follow in 2020/2021.



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The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre

Findings brief: Australian perceptions of prevention

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