

Physical activity surveillance in Australia: Standardisation is overdue

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The issue

- Physical inactivity continues to be a major contributor to chronic disease in Australia, but there is no national physical activity policy or plan, and efforts to address it in Australia remain fragmented.
- One important component of a prevention system focused on this health priority is to monitor population levels of physical activity and the factors that contribute to it. This supports policy makers and public health stakeholders to identify and monitor populations at risk of ill-health from physical inactivity, develop and evaluate physical activity prevention strategies, and plan for the future.
- A lack of uniformity in survey questions or methods reduces the comparability of trend data and its usefulness for informing policy and practice. If the World Health Organization targets for physical activity by 2025 and 2030 are to be realised, they must be monitored in a standardised way.

Policy relevant messages

- A long-term standardised surveillance system is necessary to monitor trends in physical activity. This provides essential information for assessing the magnitude of the problem and understanding its contribution to the burden of disease. Further, trends will be useful for understanding the impact of policies and programs to tackle the problem.
- There is little consistency in how states and territories measure population physical activity. While some jurisdictions have adopted comparable survey systems that used the same questions and definitions over time, others have used different definitions and questions that changed over time.
- While comparable and consistent national data are available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) National Health Surveys, the variations in state and territory health surveys make it harder to compare physical activity levels across jurisdictions, obtain reliable information about physical activity trends at the state and territory level and understand the real impact of policies and programs on physical inactivity.
- To redress this, Australia requires a coordinated and standardised approach to physical activity surveillance across states and territories.



Our research

- We conducted an audit of state and territory health sector surveys to compare how they have derived estimates of their adult population who were sufficiently active over time.
- We focused on the definitions and questions that each state and territory used to determine 'sufficient physical activity'.
- We compared these state-level measures over time with the state-level trends seen using the ABS National Health Survey's physical activity questions.

What we found

- The surveys used by the states and territories are either derived from, or are variations of, the Active Australia Survey – a survey designed to support nationwide standardisation of measures for self-reported physical activity in adults. This survey comprises questions on participation in moderate and vigorous physical activity, and walking for recreation, exercise, and transport.
- There has been sustained and comparable use of survey questions and definitions in New South Wales and Queensland, with minor modifications in Western Australia. In South Australia, the comparability of trend data was disrupted in 2018 with a change in reporting of adult age groups. Victoria, and to some extent Tasmania, have used different definitions and questions over time.
- The differences in state and territory survey systems have produced much greater variability than is suggested by the state-level analysis over time using the ABS National Health Survey. The variations that some jurisdictions have made to their survey questions and definitions may have also contributed to some of the observed changes in their trend data.

Why does it matter?

- The lack of standardisation has prevented any comparison of prevalence rates within and between jurisdictions. "Improving" questions may compromise policy-informing trend information. Standardisation and consistency across Australia are required if physical activity trends are to be reliably interpreted and useful for informing policy and practice. This could be achieved with physical activity coordination and leadership, and a clear physical activity strategic plan.
- Beyond this, there needs to be a broader national discussion about a comprehensive physical activity surveillance system that not only measures physical activity levels, but also assesses underpinning and antecedent changes within and beyond the health sector, and at the organisational and policy level; and integrates measures of the built environment and data from non-health sectors such as transport, education and sport.

Interested in finding out more? Contact Tracy Nau, Research Officer, Australian Systems Approaches to Physical Activity, University of Sydney, at: Tracy.Nau@sydney.edu.au



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