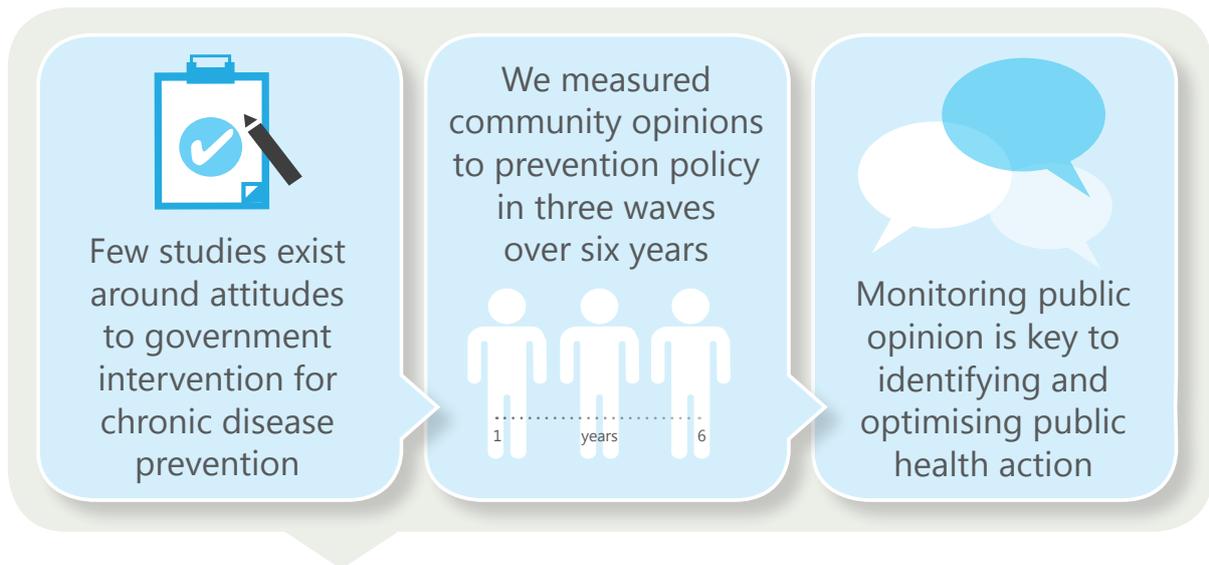




# AUSPOPS shows how measuring public opinion can drive public health action



## Key messages

- In Australia, there has been little research into the community's general attitudes towards policies and programs to prevent chronic disease.
- This project conducted three national population surveys (AUSPOPS) in 2016, 2018 and 2021 to quantify adult Australians' attitudes and values towards government intervention for chronic disease prevention.
- Our approach allowed us to monitor for change across the years highlighting those issues in community attitudes that were more, or less, supportive of intervention in general, and of particular policy options.
- We measured whether government intervention is commonly seen to be 'nanny state' and found that people's views are more nuanced than a simplistic 'nanny state vs freedom' argument.
- Although most people think personal responsibility for health is important, it does not preclude a role for government in helping people stay healthy.
- While people can simultaneously hold contradictory and complex views about specific interventions we observed a trend, from 2016 to 2018, towards greater polarisation in community opinion for how governments should intervene to support chronic disease prevention.
- Monitoring trends in community attitudes to government intervention could help public health regulators and advocates more accurately direct information and advocacy campaigns across different demographic areas and the conversation towards the cost benefit, equity, and vested interests in prevention.

**The project:** AUSPOPS – AUStralian Perceptions of Prevention Survey 2016, 2018, 2021

**Project lead:** Associate Professor Anne Grunseit, University of Sydney

**Project start:** October 2015 **Project end:** June 2022

## Why is this issue important?

Public opinion is an important driver of government action in prevention. However, population-level interventions are often branded as nanny state. What is unclear is what the Australian community's attitudes to prevention really are, or whether the idea of the nanny state truly reflects community attitudes. Determining the right balance of government intervention and personal choice is a challenging issue for complex problems such as the prevention of chronic disease.

Monitoring trends in community opinion can identify critical opportunities to implement health policies and interventions, or best buys for chronic disease prevention. Such actions could include introducing taxes on unhealthy products and subsidies for healthier options, restricting unhealthy advertising and promotion, or creating built environments that support physical activity.

However, calls to make these upstream changes through regulation and structural change can be met with community suspicion about the effectiveness and true purpose of such interventions with reluctance on the part of policymakers due to concerns of public acceptability, amongst other considerations.

Analysing trends in community opinion can help researchers, advocates and policymakers identify 'policy windows', or critical opportunities to build their case for policy change. These trends could also show social and political contextual factors which may influence public opinion.

## What did we do?

The AUStralian Perceptions Of Prevention Survey (AUSPOPS) aimed to determine how the public perceives government prevention initiatives, so we could give policymakers a clearer idea of how various policy options and government intervention for prevention may be received.

Much of the research was coproduced with researchers and policy makers working together to refine the questionnaire and interpret the analyses to develop policy-relevant and timely evidence that boosts knowledge translation.

2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
First AUSPOPS survey conducted 2,052 respondents		Second AUSPOPS survey conducted 2,600 respondents	Australian Government announce developing 10-year National Preventive Health Strategy	Third AUSPOPS survey delayed COVID-19 government public health interventions	Third AUSPOPS survey conducted 2,200 respondents National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030 released	AUSPOPS project completed

The first AUSPOPS in 2016 sampled 2,052 adults, aged 18 years and over, who were residents of private households across Australia.

In 2018, additional funding was secured to boost the sample size in Tasmania to a total of 2,601. The 2018 survey essentially replicated the 2016 survey, with some minor modifications to reflect stakeholder feedback and findings from the 2016 data analysis.

The third survey conducted in 2021 replicated much of the 2018 survey with a few additional questions to account for the COVID-19 pandemic. These questions were designed to capture and acknowledge this significant public health event that required considerable and prolonged government intervention for prevention, albeit for a communicable disease. A total of 2,200 respondents took part.

## What did we find?

Across all three surveys there was strong support for government intervention, both in general and regarding specific interventions. While people can simultaneously hold contradictory and complex views about specific interventions, such as the type of intervention, the risk factor being addressed or how the intervention is implemented, how government should perform its role in general is becoming more strongly held.

Community support for governments to help tackle lifestyle-related health issues strengthened over the three surveys with respondents overall agreeing that 'sometimes government needs to make laws that keep people from harming themselves'. The proportion of people who believed government has a large or very large role to play in maintaining health increased between the 2016 and 2021 surveys from 46% to 63%. This level of change is rarely seen in population surveys and demonstrates the community's support for government intervention in public health.



Also, more than half of the respondents (55%) indicated that the government is yet to go far enough with regulation and policies to help reduce the rates of specific chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and obesity. The proportion that disagreed with the statement that the government interferes too much in our everyday lives increased from 49% in 2016 to 62% in 2021.

Support for restrictions on alcohol advertising and policy action on salt limits in processed food decreased, despite strong evidence for how restrictions on alcohol advertising and salt limits in processed food can benefit health. Perceptions that the government has not gone far enough with restrictions on alcohol advertising decreased between 2016 and 2021 from 45% to 40% and support for further action on salt limits in processed food also dropped from 55% in 2016 to 50% in 2021.

The 2021 survey presented an opportunity to pose questions around COVID-19 and community perceptions of government's role in response. While it found the community was largely content with the response, these perceptions may have changed due to evolving public health advice after continued outbreaks of the virus.

## What did we produce?

AUSPOPS has produced evidence to support reframing the debate around the level of government intervention in prevention to focus on the cost benefit, equity, the influence of vested interests and the likely effects of both action and inaction.

Four papers published in peer-reviewed journals, seven media articles and three presentations at conferences.

## Why does it matter?

Our AUSPOPS research shows the public is more supportive of government intervention for prevention than perhaps thought previously highlighting the value of measuring community attitudes over time. This strong mandate from the community for government-led interventions could support efforts to focus the prevention conversation on the cost benefit, equity, the influence of vested interests and the likely effects of both action and inaction.

Monitoring changing perceptions on specific interventions, or government intervention more generally, could help policy makers and public health advocates more accurately pinpoint where to direct information and advocacy campaigns across different demographic subpopulations. It could also help identify where greater information may be required to garner support for further preventive action and the emergence of policy windows where public support is high.

The Australian Government's National Preventive Healthy Strategy 2021-2030 notes the importance for observing and monitoring trends to understand the effectiveness of preventive interventions and to observe trends and patterns in the data.

## Next steps

Surveys such as AUSPOPS produced in collaboration with policy makers are a valuable research translation tool. They provide policy-relevant and timely evidence that can build community support for policy change and ease the burden of chronic disease in Australia.

Future monitoring of trends in community attitudes identified over this project could investigate links between the type of information and exposure to information sources such as an individual's experience of chronic disease as well as health indicators, such as weight status, to help inform what information and advocacy is selected for interventions in chronic disease prevention.

Determining if social opinion is becoming more polarised due to the reinforcing nature of personalised news and information, especially through social media, could also further inform policy makers how best to reach different subpopulations with health information according to the issue and attitudes held.



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