

Why we need tobacco sales data for good tobacco control

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Good-quality data on tobacco sales are vital for evaluating tobacco control interventions

The prevalence of smoking in Australia is among the lowest for high-income countries. In 2007, 17.9% of Australians aged 14 years or older were current smokers, compared with 23.6% in 1998. Yet tobacco remains Australia's leading risk factor for premature death and disability, accounting for 7.8% of the total disease burden,¹ nearly twice the combined burden caused by alcohol (2.2%) and illicit drugs (2.0%).

Tobacco is still big business in Australia. In 2004, an industry-commissioned report estimated that the retail value of the Australian tobacco market was about \$9.3 billion, and tobacco products accounted for 4.7% of retail sales through about 35 000 retail outlets.² The federal government also derived an estimated \$5.6 billion in tobacco excise taxes for the financial year 2008–09.³

Despite the substantial harm that smoking causes, the sale of tobacco products is minimally regulated in Australia. There are few restrictions on where tobacco can be sold — some states (Queensland and Victoria) do not require tobacco sellers to obtain a tobacco retail licence, or even maintain a register of tobacco sellers.⁴

Governments increasingly demand good evidence that proposed tobacco control policies will work. National and state-based population surveys are the main source of smoking prevalence data, which are needed to determine whether tobacco control policies are having the desired impact. Although the information that these surveys provide is valuable, it has serious limitations.

The collection of self-reported smoking status data in population surveys is costly, and is also increasingly hampered by low response rates caused in part by the uptake of unlisted mobile phone use and the proliferation of call screening and answerphones.⁵ In addition, self-reported smoking data may have become less reliable as smoking has become increasingly stigmatised in Australian society — fewer people, especially those who smoke occasionally, may be willing to disclose that they smoke. Furthermore, tobacco control interventions are likely to have small, but nonetheless important, effects on smoking in whole populations, which are difficult to detect in yearly or less frequent surveys because of statistical power problems.

At the same time, ever greater sensitivity is needed to satisfy the requirement for evaluation of effectiveness of tobacco control interventions at the population level. A comprehensive ongoing data series on tobacco sales would facilitate evaluation of tobacco control policies at national, state or regional levels by taking into account variations in the timing of policy implementation.

As suggested in the National Preventative Health Taskforce's final report,⁶ state and territory governments or the federal government should require Australia's three major tobacco manufacturers — Philip Morris (Australia), British American Tobacco Australia and Imperial Tobacco — to provide auditable, postcode-identified monthly data on all tobacco products supplied for retail sale. Data on supply of tobacco products are collected by manufacturers on a daily basis as retailers place tobacco orders. The three manufacturers supply almost all cigarettes sold to Australian retailers.⁷ Several small importers supply "boutique" brands, but these have negligible brand share.

Tobacco sales data would be extremely valuable in monitoring trends in tobacco use and in evaluating the effectiveness of current and proposed tobacco control interventions, such as "quit" campaigns, pack warnings, retail display bans and mandatory plain packaging for tobacco products. Because of its geographic isolation, Australia has a relatively small illicit tobacco market compared with most other countries (Euromonitor International estimates that 3.5% of cigarettes consumed in Australia in 2007 were illicit).⁸ Therefore, retail data are likely to provide a reasonably accurate estimate of total tobacco consumption in Australia and an unbiased benchmark against which household survey data can be evaluated.

Data on tobacco products supplied to retailers on a month-by-month basis are not the same as data on the volume of tobacco excised because of the common habit of manufacturers warehousing large amounts of excised tobacco. This was demonstrated in 2006, when pictorial pack warnings were introduced from March. After this time, it was illegal for any company to manufacture tobacco packaging with the old text-only warnings; but old stock was being sold by retailers 6 months later because manufacturers had over-produced the old packaging and warehoused it.⁹

The tobacco industry is highly effective at mobilising retailers to lobby against tobacco control strategies, so moves to require provision of tobacco sales data will be opposed. There are no good reasons for opposition. These data are already collected by commercial market research companies on behalf of the tobacco industry and are available for purchase; however, researchers have been denied access to this information when they have attempted to purchase it. The tobacco industry should be legally required to provide governments with data on the sales of a commodity which is more addictive and harmful to population health, and much less regulated, than alcohol.

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