

Who smokes in Australia? Reducing stigma and informing tobacco control through population profiling

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Background: The National Preventative Health Strategy outlines 2030 targets of reducing the adult daily smoking prevalence to $\leq 5\%$ in the general population, and $\leq 27\%$ in the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population¹. No studies – globally – have provided a comprehensive quantitative national profile of the population of current, ex and never smokers. Existing research has been comparative, finding people who smoke are more likely than non-smokers to be male, middle aged, of lower socioeconomic status and living remotely²⁻⁴. There is also disproportionate tobacco use in Indigenous populations, resulting from colonisation, racism and structural disadvantage⁵. Without an accurate population profile, stereotypes of people who smoke have been perpetuated as racialised, socially disadvantaged and suffering from mental illness. A quantitative profile would provide a more accurate understanding of people who smoke to better target interventions, reduce stigma and promote smoke-free norms.

Aim: To provide a sociodemographic and health profile of current, ex and never smokers in Australia.

Methods: Study population included Individuals ≥ 18 years from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2017-18 National Health Survey ($n=16,156$) and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identifying individuals ≥ 18 years from the ABS 2018-2019 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey ($n=6,203$). Absolute proportions of sociodemographic and health factors were quantified for current daily, ex and never smokers in Australia. Indigeneity according to smoking status and intersectionality of age, sex, remoteness and socioeconomic status were quantified.

Results: In 2017-19, 58.8%(95%CI,56.2-61.4) of current daily smokers in Australia were male, 61.3% were aged 25-54 years, 92.4%(92.2-92.6) were non-Indigenous, 72.5%(70.0-70.4) were Australian-born, 65.4%(62.8-67.8) lived in major cities, and 54.3% were in the two most disadvantaged socioeconomic quintiles; 69.0% of working-age completed year 12 and 68.5% were employed. 75.9% of current daily smokers reported good-to-excellent health and 73.0% reported moderate-to-low psychological distress.

Conclusions: While smoking is more common among people experiencing disadvantage and in certain priority populations, this first quantitative national profile demonstrates that, contrary to popular impressions and media portrayals, most people who smoke are in paid employment, non-Indigenous, in good physical and mental health, and have completed year 12. Accelerated, comprehensive, supply and demand based tobacco control approaches are required to achieve the National Preventative Health Strategy 2030 targets – informed by priority population needs and the overall profile of people who smoke.

References:

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