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Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS)
(Information gathered from www.cdc.gov)

Overview: Established in 1984 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) is a state-based system of health surveys that collects information on health risk behaviors, preventive health practices, and health care access primarily related to chronic disease and injury. For many states, the BRFSS is the only available source of timely, accurate data on health-related behaviors.

Currently, data are collected monthly in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam. More than 350,000 adults are interviewed each year, making the BRFSS the largest telephone health survey in the world. States use BRFSS data to identify emerging health problems, establish and track health objectives, and develop and evaluate public health policies and programs. Many states also use BRFSS data to support health-related legislative efforts.

A Brief History: By the early 1980s, scientific research clearly showed that personal health behaviors played a major role in premature morbidity and mortality. Although national estimates of health risk behaviors among U.S. adult populations had been periodically obtained through surveys conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), these data were not available on a state-specific basis. This deficiency was viewed as critical for state health agencies that have the primary role of targeting resources to reduce behavioral risks and their consequent illnesses. National data may not be appropriate for any given state; however, state and local agency participation was critical to achieve national health goals.

About the same time as personal health behaviors received wider recognition in relation to chronic disease morbidity and mortality, telephone surveys emerged as an acceptable method for determining the prevalence of many health risk behaviors among populations. In addition to their cost advantages, telephone surveys were especially desirable at the state and local level, where the necessary expertise and resources for conducting area probability sampling for in-person household interviews were not likely to be available.

As a result, surveys were developed and conducted to monitor state-level prevalence of the major behavioral risks among adults associated with premature morbidity and mortality. The basic philosophy was to collect data on actual behaviors, rather than on attitudes or knowledge, that would be especially useful for planning, initiating, supporting, and evaluating health promotion and disease prevention programs.

To determine feasibility of behavioral surveillance, initial point-in-time state surveys were conducted in 29 states from 1981-1983. In 1984, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) established the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), and 15 states participated in monthly data collection. Although the BRFSS was designed to collect state-level data, a number of states from the outset stratified their samples to allow them to estimate prevalence for regions within their respective states.

CDC developed standard core questionnaire for states to use to provide data that could be compared across states. The BRFSS, administered and supported by the Division of Adult and Community Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, CDC, is an ongoing data collection program. By 1994, all states, the District of Columbia, and three territories were participating in the BRFSS.

Related Information

[Health Risks in the United States: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System](#)

The annual At A Glance report on the activities of CDC's comprehensive state-based surveillance system tracks major health risks among Americans. Find out how data are collected, then learn how those data are used by people and organizations to measure risk behaviors for a nation.

[How the BRFSS Data Are Used](#)

See how states and territories use BRFSS data to create policies and initiatives to meet health-related goals and measure their success.

[Training: BRFSS Overview](#)

This comprehensive overview provides a useful introduction to BRFSS, and includes information on history of BRFSS, survey techniques, data utilization, a comprehensive Operational and User's Guide, and more.