
Appendix C: Background

The Rapid Risk Factor Surveillance System (RRFSS) is an ongoing telephone survey used by many public health units to gather public health-related information from residents of their communities.

In 2011, the RRFSS partnership undertook a pilot project to collect data from across Ontario and produce, for the first time, provincial estimates from RRFSS data.

An evaluation of that Provincial Sample Pilot Project (PSPP) is now underway, supported by Locally-Driven Collaborative Project funding through Public Health Ontario.

Rapid Risk Factor Surveillance System (RRFSS)

The Rapid Risk Factor Surveillance System (RRFSS) is an ongoing telephone survey which has been used by many public health units to gather surveillance data on key public health indicators, to monitor public opinion on public health issues and to collect information on emerging issues of importance to public health. Eighteen health units across Ontario currently participate in RRFSS. Costs associated with RRFSS are paid for by RRFSS-participating health units.

The purpose of RRFSS is to provide timely data relevant to local public health needs. The results are used to support program planning and evaluation, to advocate for public policy development and to improve community awareness regarding the risks for chronic diseases, infectious disease, and injuries. RRFSS data has also been the platform for research projects related to fruit and vegetable consumption, parenting, the Ontario Tobacco Strategy, lawn care and pesticide use, air quality and climate change, and comparison of self-reported results to those obtained through biological assessment.

Provincial Sample Pilot Project

RRFSS-participating health units and other groups have consistently identified the lack of a provincially-representative RRFSS sample as a key limitation of RRFSS. Accordingly, in 2011, RRFSS implemented a pilot project to collect a provincial sample which included data from all 36 health unit areas in Ontario. Sampling for the provincial data stream was proportionate to the size of the respective health units' populations. Data collection for the pilot project was funded by RRFSS-participating health units.

The intent of the provincial sample pilot project was to provide reliable and representative RRFSS estimates for Ontario as a whole, and in so doing:

- provide a valid comparator for local health unit results for selected indicators;
- allow for a reduction in RRFSS “core” content, thereby increasing the flexibility of RRFSS at the local level;
- provide a more flexible, timely system by which to collect provincially-relevant risk factor surveillance data than is currently available; and
- allow RRFSS to explore revenue-generating opportunities of a possible ongoing provincial survey component.

Evaluation of the RRFSS Provincial Sample Pilot Project

Provincial RRFSS data collection may yield significant benefits to RRFSS-participating health units and to current and future provincial and research partners. However, it is also a significant undertaking, requiring no small expenditure of both funds and effort. Thus, an evaluation of the implementation and results of the PPSP is being conducted to inform any future decisions regarding ongoing implementation of a RRFSS provincial data stream.