

OCCASIONAL PAPER 2

**A CRITICAL COMMENT ON THE 5TH NATIONAL SURVEY OF
AUSTRALIAN SECONDARY STUDENTS AND SEXUAL HEALTH
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the 5th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2013. This paper lists methodological concerns related to the survey. It was considered that there were (a) omissions in the reporting; (b) inadequacies in the sample of schools; (c) the infection of the school survey cohort by the inclusion of an online survey; (d) the unrepresentative demographic nature of the sample; (e) problems with the validity of online survey responses; (f) concerns about the quality of the data; (g) very low school participation rates; and (h) the effects of non-response to the survey. It is possible that any inferences from this survey relating to (a) the proportion of students in Australia who are same-sex attracted are demonstrably invalid or (b) policies relating to sexuality education are decidedly questionable.

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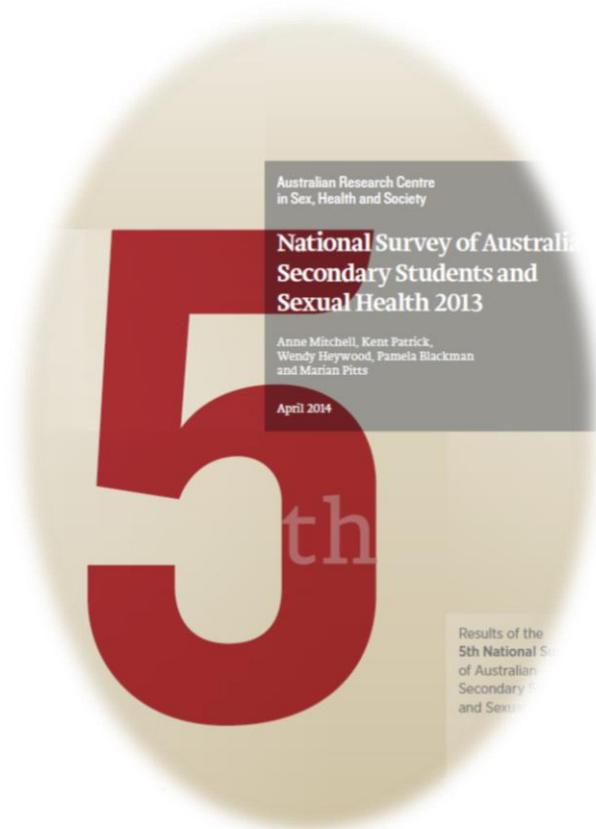
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CRITICAL COMMENT ON THE 5TH NATIONAL SURVEY OF AUSTRALIAN SECONDARY STUDENTS AND SEXUAL HEALTH 2013.



BACKGROUND

The purpose of this report is to examine the methodology and technical quality of the *5th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health* (Mitchell, Patrick, Heywood, Blackman, & Pitts, 2014). This survey was conducted in 2013 and involved Year 10, 11 and 12 students.

The survey was comprehensive in its aim. The content related to (a) knowledge of sexually transmitted infections, (b) sexual behaviour beliefs and perceptions, (c) fertility, (d) drinking and drug taking, (e) Internet technology and social media, and (f) sexuality and relationship education.

The aims and scope have been described elsewhere as:

...to provide accurate information to guide the work of health and education personnel... to gain an accurate picture of the sexual attitudes, knowledge and experiences of Australian young people. This is research has been widely used in the past and will be relied upon again to guide curriculum and program development in this important area of health education, particularly resources

supporting the new Australian Curriculum in Health and Physical Education. (Mitchell & Blackman, 2014, p. 13)

For instance, the findings of the study have been cited as the basis for social policies and educational programs (e.g., Ollis & Harrison, 2016). For example the *Safe Schools Do Better* publication cites this report as the basis for the number of students who are same-sex attracted (Safe Schools Coalition, 2013).

The following section considers the methodology of the study. It outlines a key feature of the study and this is then followed by a comment.

METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

1. Students from government, Catholic and independent schools completed the survey.

Comment - the break-up of Government, Catholic and Independent schools was not provided in order to determine whether this was a representative sample. This is not a trivial omission.

2. Increasing difficulty obtaining cooperation from schools

Comment - The *5th National Survey* had major problems recruiting schools.

The process and difficulties in the extent of participation are outlined in Figure 1.

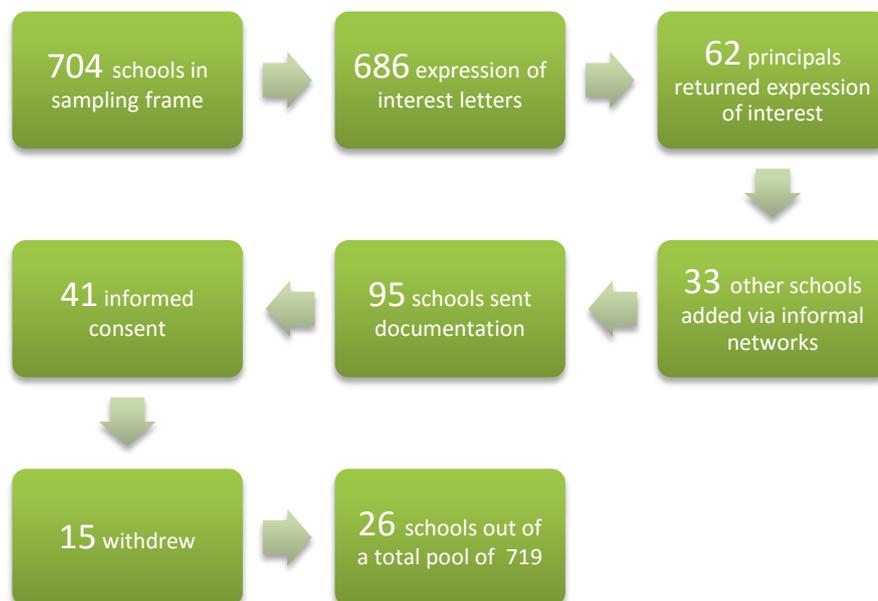


Figure 1. Extent of participation in the 5th National Survey.

The schools that were surveyed directly in the study represented only 26 out of the 2672 secondary schools in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015 *Schools Australia*, Catalogue No. 4221.0, Table 80a. Summary Tables 2005-2015).

The sample of 26 schools that were surveyed directly was only 3.6% of the 719 schools that were approached (even after the original list was supplemented). This is not a representative sample.

3. In August 2013, a decision was made to recruit additional Australian secondary students in Years 10 to 12 via a 'recruited online survey'

Comment - 36% of the final sample was recruited on line through "informal networks, expressions of interest via the Ansell newsletter, and via targeting of schools with large populations of young men" (p. 4).

There are challenges of school-based recruitment for such surveys. The school based survey comprised only 1361 out of the 2136 students. The investigators were required to "beef up" the sample size by outside recruitment of a further 775 students from other sources.

This means that the 5th National Survey comprises two vastly different cohorts.

Moreover, there is no evidence that that combining two very limited and unrepresentative samples provided "a much broader representation of Australian school students" (p. 5).

4. Unrepresentative national sample

Comment - This is not a nationally representative sample of school students.

(a) The sample is biased decidedly in favour of Victoria, for example, 558 out of the 1,361 students (41%) in the school-based survey were from Victoria

(b) There are far more female than male students who participated.

This is especially the case in the school survey - 40% males and 60% female (p. 8).

It is not representative of the general population aged 16-18 years. For those aged 16-18 years, the proportion of males is 51% and 49% rounded (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011, Table B04).

(c) the religious background of the sample is not representative (55% indicated "no religion or faith" compared to one-fifth in the general population) (p. 9) The number of people reporting no religion in Australia

in the 2011 Census was 22.3% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011, Basic Community Profile, Table B14).

5. Online surveys

Comment - those who completed the school survey may differ in significant ways from those who were recruited for the online survey. Relatively little is known about the specific characteristics or motives of those who participated in the online survey. Possibly there is some self-selection bias (Wright, 2006).

6. "...both the paper-and-pencil and online survey were designed to be completed under exam conditions. Students were required to be seated at separate desks and asked not to talk or discuss the questionnaire while completing the survey. Students were made aware that they could withdraw from the survey at any time should they wish" (p. 5)

Comment - one can imagine that it would have been daunting for a student to withdraw from the survey under the "exam conditions" described. There was no indication of the proportion that chose to withdraw.

Accordingly, there are concerns about the quality of the data. For example, there were 36 students who did not even provide a valid answer when asked their gender (p. 7).

7. Participation rates in the survey were very low

Comment - The participation rates in the survey were very low. Overall 26 schools participated in the school-based survey with an overall sample size of 1,361. This averages out at 52 students per school. This is a low participation rate for "all Year 10, Year 11 and Year 12 students at their school" (p. 4).

Even at a small high school, 52 students on average from Years 10-12 is hardly sufficient.

In Queensland this average dropped to 17 per school across Years 10-12. This was a highly selective sample. It is not a basis for inferences about the general adolescent population.

8. Effects of non-response

Although the authors used "multiple recruitment strategies" and acknowledged "sampling biases" (p. 5) they were not able to demonstrate the effect of non-response. This is considered a serious omission for a national survey.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The completion of any surveys on sexual behaviour and health is fraught with difficulties.

Firstly this is a topic of great sensitivity. It is intensely personal and it is not clear that traditional large-scale surveys are the best means of providing answers. In another context, Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett (1982) reacted against this type of survey research:

Very often researchers had never even laid eyes on the people being researched; at best they saw them briefly while handing out questionnaires. Normally they communicated only via ticks on answer sheets handed in by research assistants or part-time interviewers, then processed through computers. Such research was more like manufacturing margarine than like meeting people and learning about their problems (p. 29).

Secondly, participating in such research on sexual health is not a trivial matter. There are problems of understanding that will affect accuracy, such as the meaning of “attracted”. There are variations in the level of sexual knowledge. This means responses may not be as accurate as might appear at first glance.

Thirdly, sexual knowledge, behaviour and attitudes vary considerably over the life span. It must not be assumed that any results are invariable. There was no check on the stability or test-retest reliability of the responses.

Fourthly, the survey itself may produce responses that are not verifiable by actual behaviours. There is no validity check that the answers are indeed true.

Regrettably the results of this study have been used to make policy decisions and implement educational programs. The evidence base from this study was not convincing.

If one returns to the opening quote from the authors (Mitchell & Blackman, 2014, p. 13) that is cited on page 1 of this report, there is reference to accuracy. This panegyric was not demonstrated. To say that this research should be relied upon “to guide curriculum and program development” is at best questionable.

The acknowledged purpose of the survey is to document changes in the social and sexual worlds of young people” (p. 2) .The survey is a largely atheoretical study. At best it was a survey based on whoever would respond. When asked, most people preferred not to participate. It was not appropriate to add to the sample by indirect recruitment. This produced some amorphous answers. Disturbingly, there is no complexity in the rationale other than a simple description of what people said. It is not clear

that it advanced knowledge, provided meaningful explanations or led to valid insights that will stand the test of time.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

None declared.

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OCCASIONAL PAPERS

1. *A Critical Analysis of Writing Themselves In 3*. March 2016

Available at <http://www.lulu.com/shop/james-athanasou/writing-themselves-in/ebook/product-22704186.html>

2. *A Critical Comment on the 5th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health*. March 2016

Available at: <http://www.lulu.com/shop/james-athanasou/fifth-national-survey/ebook/product-22704194.html>

3. *The Practices and Behaviour of Men who have Sex with Men: A Summary of "Sexual Health and Behaviour of Men in New South Wales 2013-2014"*. April 2016