CHRONIC DISEASE PREVENTION & HEALTH PROMOTION

WEBINAR SERIES

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Alaska Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS)

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BRFSS Background

• The Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) is a national system of health-related telephone surveys.
BRFSS Background

• Supported by the CDC (Standard BRFSS)
  – General health and wellness
  – Core questions are required by CDC
  – States can add limited number of optional questions

• Additional questions are asked on a parallel survey in Alaska (Supplemental BRFSS)
  – Largely tobacco-related survey
The Survey Process

• Households are chosen randomly from within regions. Within a household, one adult is randomly chosen to complete the survey.
• Surveys take about 20 minutes to complete and are administered by an external contractor.
Alaska BRFSS

- Alaska started collecting data in 1991 and has collected data every year since then.

Landline 1991 → Cell phones introduced 2009 → (Expected) 100% cell phone 2021
BRFSS Process: General

- The CDC provides a list of phone numbers.
- Alaska’s contractor uses this list (or “sample”) to make phone calls.
- The contractor provides data to Alaska and CDC for processing.
- The CDC does basic data processing.
BRFSS Process: Alaska

• Alaska does further processing.
  – BRFSS Program Manager and/or Public Health Data Analyst will combine questions across several years where this makes sense.
  – State-added questions have to be cleaned and coded in house. The CDC does not process these questions at all.
    • Example: For an open-ended question, Alaska staff have to combine multiple misspellings into one answer category.
BRFSS Weighting

- BRFSS results attempt to represent all Alaskans—not just the people who happen to receive a phone call.
- To make the data more representative, data are “weighted” to account for age, race and ethnicity, sex, and geographic region within a population.
  - To do this, CDC uses the American Community Survey population estimates.
  - Alaska prefers to use the Alaska Department of Labor population estimates.
Annual BRFSS Data Release Timeline

- **January:** Data collection for previous year ends
- **January-August:** Processing of state variables
- **Early Fall:** DOL releases population estimates
- **Fall:** Alaska raw data are reweighted
- **Late Fall:** Data are checked and released by Alaska BRFSS

- Early Fall: CDC releases weighted data.
BRFSS Administration

• The CDC mandates that the BRFSS be administered by telephone. No other medium is currently permitted.

• Declining rates in telephonic survey participation continue to be a challenge for BRFSS.
  – CDC is monitoring this and looking at alternative/additional modes of administering the survey.
BRFSS Administration

• The BRFSS core set of questions is required by CDC and cannot be amended without written permission from CDC.

• This core is asked by all states, and the data are comparable across the United States.
BRFSS Administration

• Core consists of annual questions and biannual rotating questions.

![Total Survey Time Pie Chart]

- Core
- State Added
Optional State-Added Questions

• A small number of questions from states may be added to the core BRFSS survey.
• These questions can come from a list of CDC Optional Modules or can be state-added questions (SAQ).
• Optional modules are processed by CDC.
• SAQ must be coded and analyzed by the Alaska BRFSS program.
BRFSS Strengths

• Alaska BRFSS has nearly 30 years’ worth of data and can track trends over time.
BRFSS Strengths

Core BRFSS questions can be compared across and among states.
BRFSS Strengths

• BRFSS data are routinely used to measure progress on a number of federal grants.
  – Chronic Diseases
  – Behavioral Health and Substance Abuse
BRFSS Strengths

- Alaska can ask a limited number of state-specific questions to address topics that may be unique to our state.
BRFSS Strengths
The BRFSS core collects basic information (e.g. sex and race) that can be compared with disease information. This can help us find groups more likely to face health challenges.
BRFSS Challenges

- Only individuals with a working telephone can be surveyed.
- BRFSS cannot be weighted until the state Department of Labor releases population estimates. That means BRFSS is not well-suited to real-time trend monitoring.
- Alaska struggles to reach more rural areas of the state, in part due to high cell phone turnover rates.
  - We are continuing to work with our partners to address this.
Percent of Disconnected Cell/Landline Numbers
BRFSS Limitations

• BRFSS can only collect self-reported data.
  – Respondents must know that they have a condition/behavior AND be willing to report it.
  – Many are wary of reporting illegal behavior on a government administered survey.
BRFSS Limitations

• Extremely rare conditions/behaviors are difficult to collect.
• If collected, they may be subject to data sharing rules that protect respondents’ confidentiality.
  – We cannot publish very small numbers because they could be used to identify individuals.
Guidelines to Protect Confidentiality

• In order to protect the respondents’ confidentiality, BRFSS does not allow sharing numbers that could be used to identify individuals:
  – If the numerator is <5 (e.g. fewer than five people say that their favorite physical activity is Kung Foo)
  – If the denominator is <50 (e.g. fewer than 50 people have a favorite physical activity).
Accessing Alaska BRFSS Data

- Both Standard and Supplemental BRFSS Data are available on AK IBIS.
  - Static Indicator Reports
  - Searchable Query Modules
- Some data are also available in the form of maps on InstantAtlas.
- We are also exploring additional data sharing platforms at this time.
Accessing Alaska BRFSS Data

• For researchers who wish to analyze data themselves, please fill out the New Data Request/Data Use Agreement posted online and return it to the AK BRFSS program

  – http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Chronic/Documents/data/DataRequest_BRFSS.pdf
Additional Questions?

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