



Original research

Population estimates of Australian children's exposure to food and beverage sponsorship of sports clubs

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Sponsorship by manufacturers of unhealthy food can undermine the health promoting goals of sport. This study aimed to describe Australian children's exposure to organised sport, and compare time spent in specific sports with patterns of sponsorship of children's sport identified in previous studies.

Design: Cross-sectional survey on children's sport participation collected by proxy report using a random-digit-dialling survey of 3416 parents.

Methods: Data from the 2009/10 Australian Sports Commission's Exercise, Recreation and Sport Survey were used to calculate weekly total person-time exposure to sports for Australian children, as a product of median weekly exposure (minutes) and the number of children participating. Exposures for children in NSW were calculated based on population distribution. Based on a previous survey of sport clubs in NSW, cumulative weekly exposure to food/beverage sponsorship at sports clubs was estimated for children living in NSW.

Results: 77.3% of Australian children aged 5–14 participated in organised sport. In NSW, weekly total person-time exposure for children was highest for outdoor soccer (91,200 children × median frequency of 2 sessions per week of 1 h duration = 182,400 h/week). Considering rates of sponsorship at different sports, children would be exposed to food/beverage sponsorship to the greatest extent for rugby league and outdoor cricket.

Conclusions: Children's high frequency of participation in organised sport and time spent engaging in these activities highlights the potentially huge reach of food/beverage sponsorship promotions. Policy interventions to limit children's exposure to this sponsorship should target those sports that have both the highest levels of children's participation and food/beverage sponsorship arrangements.

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1. Introduction

Australian data indicate that 1.7 million children aged 5–14 years (i.e. 63% of that age-group) participated in at least one organised sport outside of school hours in 2009, whereby organised sport refers to activities that are played outside of school hours and are organised by a school, club or association.¹ While sport is typically considered to promote healthy ideals, mostly related to social engagement and participation in physical activity,² some aspects of sports clubs can be less health-promoting^{3,4} and health-related policies in the sport setting appear to be largely lacking.⁵ In particular, the sponsorship of children's sports clubs by companies that produce and promote unhealthy food and beverages, and alcohol, contributes contradictory health messages to children. The creation of health-promoting sports clubs has clear benefits from a

population health perspective, and it may also positively impact on sports participation through increased engagement.⁶

Sport sponsorship is recognised as a significant component of the marketing environment to which children are exposed.⁷ While systematic analyses of the scope of food and beverage company sponsorship of children's sport are limited,^{8,9} research from Australia indicates that this sponsorship is widespread. In interviews with 108 sports clubs officials, 347 sponsors were identified, 17% of which were food and/or beverage companies and 6% were businesses that sold alcohol, including pubs and clubs.¹⁰ Half of these food and beverage company sponsors and 85% of alcohol-related businesses were deemed to be inappropriate to sponsor children's sport, based on independently developed criteria using a Delphi Survey.¹⁰

Surveys of children participating in organised sport in Australia have identified that children have a high recall and awareness of sponsors of their own sports clubs, and that children perceive sport sponsors to have positive brand attributes.^{11,12} In an online survey of 243 10–16 year old children, 41% of children who had previously

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bought a product from a company sponsoring their own sport or their favourite elite sports team or person said that this sponsorship had encouraged them to buy the sponsor's product more. Further, 57% believed that other children thought about sport sponsors when buying food and drinks.¹²

Children's exposure to food and beverage company sponsorship of community level sports clubs is a function of both the extent of sponsorship arrangements at these organisations as well as children's participation in organised sports. For those sporting activities where children's participation is highest and where food and beverage company sponsorship is most prevalent, the potential for children's exposure to sponsorship promotions is the greatest.

Since 2001, the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) has conducted the Exercise, Recreation and Sport Survey (ERASS) annually to assess participation in sport for people aged 15 years and older.¹³ ERASS is a joint initiative of the ASC and the state and territory government agencies responsible for sport and recreation. For the first time, in 2009/10 the ASC conducted an extension of the ERASS survey to include information on children aged 5–14 years. This survey collected national information on children's participation in specific organised sporting activities by parent proxy report, and is unique in providing information on the frequency and duration of children's participation for individual sports. Data collection for the 2009/10 ERASS Children's Survey was funded by the Australian Sports Commission, performed in conjunction with data collection for ERASS.

The aim of the current study was to describe children's participation in organised sporting activities using data from this extended ERASS survey. Data on the frequency and duration of participation in sporting activities by Australian children were used to determine those sports for which sponsorship arrangements would lead to the largest exposure to these marketing promotions for children. This information on children's sporting behaviours was interpolated to the NSW population and compared to patterns of sponsorship of children's sport identified in previous studies to estimate children's exposure to this marketing in NSW.¹⁰

2. Methods

Survey participants were parents and guardians living in private dwellings in Australia with at least one child aged 5–14 years. One person per household was invited to participate in the survey. Where there was more than one eligible person, the individual with the most recent birthday was selected. Parents/guardians were asked to provide a proxy report of physical activity participation for children aged 5–14 years living in sampled households. Again, where more than one eligible child was available a reference child was randomly selected. All personal details were removed from the response database following the interview.

Participants were asked to list a maximum of five organised sports in which the reference child had most frequently participated outside of normal school hours during the preceding school term. For each of these sports, the nature of the sporting organisation was determined, including: fitness, leisure or indoor sports centres; sports clubs; schools; after school care; or another type of organisation. Parents also reported the frequency of children's participation in each activity per week (number of occasions) and the length of each activity session (duration of occasions). Demographic data were collected, including participants' age and sex, the reference child's age and sex, and household postcode.

A market research company was commissioned to conduct the surveys using Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). Households were randomly sampled using random digit dialling and stratified by Australian states and territories. The survey was conducted between February 2009 and February 2010, to account

for seasonal differences in sport participation. Interviews were required to comply with market and social research industry standards; however the ASC does not request human ethics committee approval for ERASS surveys.

Data were analysed using SPSS version 18.0 for Windows (SPSS Inc., Chicago IL.). Children's weekly exposure to sporting activities was calculated as a product of the frequency of their participation per week and the duration of each session. As data were skewed, the median and inter-quartile range (IQR) were reported. The proportion of sporting activities that were arranged by sports clubs was also determined. Data were weighted by state/territory, region (capital city and rest of state) and child sex. Population estimates used were Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) population projections based on the 2006 census for persons in occupied private dwellings.¹⁴ Weekly total person-time exposure (referred to as person-hours) to popular sporting activities was calculated as a function of median weekly exposure in minutes multiplied by the number of children participating in that sport. Data were interpolated to the NSW population, the most populous state in Australia, to compare to an earlier study from NSW on the extent of food and beverage company sponsorship in children's sport.¹⁰ As child population weights were only available for Australia overall, population data for NSW were estimated based on the proportion of Australian children aged 5–14 years living in NSW.

Weekly total person-time exposure for selected popular sporting activities were divided by the proportion of sports clubs for these sports identified as having food and/or beverage company sponsorship from the earlier survey of sports club officials in 2009.¹⁰ In this survey, 12 randomly sampled clubs for each of the nine most popular sports for children in NSW (excluding ballet and dancing) were selected, based on the ABS 2006 Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities Survey.¹⁵ Clubs were randomly sampled from a list of all community sports clubs from randomly selected Local Government Areas in the Sydney and Illawarra Statistical Divisions and the Canberra/Queanbeyan Statistical District, stratified by socio-economic status based on the ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas.¹⁶ The survey included questions relating to the nature and extent of sponsorship arrangements and was based on previous surveys on sport sponsorship and consultation with relevant researchers. Identified sponsors included any companies that were promoted at the club level, but may have been associated with regional sporting associations or state or national sporting organisations. All surveys were conducted by two trained interviewers and a sample of interviews was checked for quality and consistency. The response rate for club officials was 99%.

3. Results

Overall, 3416 parents of children aged between 5 and 14 years participated in the survey, including 886 respondents from NSW. More women than men completed the survey (60.2% vs. 39.8%). The largest proportion of survey respondents were aged between 40 and 44 years (31.2%), followed by 35 and 39 years (25.6%). Respondents ranged in age from 21 to 77 years. For Australia overall, the mean age of selected children was 9.5 years (S.D. 2.96 years) and there was an even distribution of boys and girls. Ninety percent of sample children were reported to have participated in any physical activity outside of normal school hours in the preceding school term and of these children 87.1% participated in organised sport.

Population estimates of children's organised sport participation were calculated using sample weights provided in the ERASS database for the Australian population. ABS census data indicate that there were 2763,079 children aged 5–14 years living in Australia in 2009.¹⁷ Based on the weighted ERASS data, 89.3% of these children participated in physical activity outside of school

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