

Sex Surveys in Europe: Reflections on over Four Decades of Sexual Behavior and Sexual Health Surveillance

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ABSTRACT

Sexual expression is fundamental to human existence and an important topic of enquiry in its own right. Understanding sexual behavior is also essential to establish effective sexual health prevention activities (e.g., education), services and policies, and to assess the progress of policies and action plans. Questions on sexual health are rarely included in general health surveys, and therefore dedicated population studies are required. Many countries lack both funding and sociopolitical support to conduct such surveys. A tradition of periodic population sexual health surveys exists in Europe but the methods used (e.g., in questionnaire construction, recruiting methods or interview format) vary from one survey to another. This is because the researchers within each country are confronted with conceptual, methodological, sociocultural and budgetary challenges, for which they find different solutions. These differences limit comparison across countries and pooling of estimates, but the variation in approaches provides a rich source of learning on population survey research. In this review, survey leads from 11 European countries discuss how their surveys evolved during the past four decades in response to sociohistorical and political context, and the challenges they encountered. The review discusses the solutions they identified and shows that it is possible to create well designed surveys which collect high quality data on a range of aspects of sexual health, despite the sensitivity of the topic. Herewith, we hope to support the research community in their perennial quest for political support and funding, and ongoing drive to advance methodology in future national sex surveys.

Introduction

Sexual expression is fundamental to human existence and an important topic of scientific enquiry. Monitoring sexual behavior and attitudes and sexual health outcomes is essential to establish effective prevention activities and policies, to adapt services to population needs, to inform sex education curricula, to promote sexual wellbeing and to assess the progress of policies and plans of action (World Health Organization [WHO], 2016). Despite its private nature, sexual behavior has profound public health consequences, including Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancy, and is connected to sexual wellbeing and (mental) health (Field et al., 2013; Gianotten, 2021; Johnson et al., 2001). Furthermore, sexual expression is integrally related to the position of men and women and sexual and gender minorities, as well as socioeconomic disadvantage and inequality (Higgins et al., 2022). The relevance of sexual health to population wellbeing and need for analysis of these concepts and trends thus cannot be underestimated.

Little information about sexuality can be obtained from routinely collected data (i.e., data collected for purposes other than research, e.g., health records or disease registries), largely because questions about sex are rarely asked. Therefore, many European countries conduct periodical sexual health surveys, using population based samples. Inventories of the scientific and “grey” literature suggests that population based adult sexual health surveys have been conducted in more than 30 European countries (Matthiesen et al., 2017). Most of these studies were initiated because of public health challenges, such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic and unintended pregnancies in the 80s and 90s. Over the decades since these surveys began, they have provided a rigorous evidence base for sexual and reproductive health policies, education, and interventions.

The methods used (e.g., in questionnaire construction, recruiting methods or interview format) within these countries are very different. This is because research teams in each setting are confronted with challenges, for which they find different solutions. First of all, sexual health is a multidimensional concept and