AUSTRALIA’S HEALTH TRACKER
BY SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

A report card on the relationship between socioeconomic status and risk factors for preventable chronic diseases and poor health. Tracking progress for a healthier Australia by 2025
This report card looks at the health of adult Australians by socioeconomic status in relation to preventable chronic diseases, the major risk factors for chronic diseases and premature deaths from those diseases and suicide.

Australia’s Health Tracker by Socioeconomic Status 2021 updates the first report, published in 2017. These reports track progress towards achieving targets for improved health among Australians by 2025.

An additional target for participation in employment by people living with mental ill-health is included in this edition.

Socioeconomic status has a major impact on people’s health. Families and individuals with limited resources not only have more chronic disease, they are at greater risk of dying prematurely as a result of chronic health conditions. People living with mental ill-health are less likely to be participating in employment.

### Physical Inactivity

Rates of physical inactivity, defined as less than 150 minutes of exercise per week, are higher in low socioeconomic areas. Physical inactivity is a significant risk factor for developing preventable chronic diseases including heart disease, arthritis and diabetes.

### Daily Tobacco Use

People in the most disadvantaged communities are 2.8 times more likely to smoke than people in communities with higher socioeconomic status. Smokers in disadvantaged communities are equally likely to attempt to quit but their success rates are significantly lower than among more advantaged groups. Tobacco smoking is responsible for 46 medical conditions and is the leading cause of preventable disease and death in Australia.

### Lifetime Risky Alcohol Consumption

Risky drinking, defined as two or more standard drinks per day on average, occurs at a higher rate in the most advantaged communities. However, people in lower socioeconomic communities experience higher rates of harm from alcohol consumption. Over 200 medical conditions are causally linked with harmful alcohol consumption.

### Employment Among People Living with Mental Health Conditions

Socioeconomic disadvantage is associated with increased prevalence of mental ill-health. The positive impact of employment participation on mental health is well established. Less than half of the people living with mental illness in most disadvantaged areas are employed compared to almost 3 in 4 people living with mental illness in the most advantaged areas.
This report card illustrates the importance of addressing the influence of socioeconomic status on the health of the most disadvantaged in our society.

The ten million people living in the 40% of communities with lower and lowest socioeconomic status have much higher rates of preventable cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes or chronic respiratory diseases than others in the population. These communities also have the highest rates of suicide throughout the nation.

Five million Australians in the lowest socioeconomic communities are 50% more likely to die prematurely due to chronic diseases than those living in the wealthiest parts of Australia. Premature deaths are potentially avoidable deaths from disease between the ages of 30 and 70. The rate of premature deaths is persistently high in the most disadvantaged communities while the risk decreases markedly in socioeconomically advantaged areas.

**SUICIDE**

Per 100,000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socioeconomic Status</th>
<th>2010-14</th>
<th>2014-18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most advantaged</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most disadvantaged</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
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Socioeconomic inequality is evident in suicide rates. The suicide rate is highest in the most disadvantaged communities and is 1.8 times that of the most advantaged communities. High suicide rates are linked to factors including intergenerational poverty, stigma and discrimination and built environments with poor amenities contributing to social isolation.
These health disparities within the Australian population are persistent despite considerable policy reform and efforts to improve services in recent decades.

The targets for a healthier Australia in this report were developed by the Australian Health Policy Collaboration, a national network of leading health experts and organisations. The Collaboration has worked with the support of the Mitchell Institute, Victoria University since 2014 to influence public and policy awareness and action to reduce high rates of preventable chronic disease in the Australian population.

Failure to reach these health targets adversely affects not just individuals but their communities and our economy.

The effects of disadvantage need deliberate and urgent attention to give all Australians a better opportunity for improved health – and to prevent and reduce the impact of preventable chronic diseases and death on health services and health expenditure.

### OBESITY

**TARGET 2025: 24.6%**

Obesity rates are rising in most socioeconomic groups. People in the most disadvantaged communities are 57 per cent more likely to be obese than the most advantaged areas. Obesity is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, asthma, back pain and some cancers.

### DIABETES

**TARGET 2025: 4.1%**

People in most disadvantaged communities now are more than twice as likely to live with diabetes than the most advantaged. Hospitalisations and deaths related to diabetes are, respectively, 2 and 2.3 times as high in the lowest socioeconomic communities compared to the highest.

### HIGH CHOLESTEROL

**TARGET 2025: 24.6%**

High levels of low-density lipoprotein cholesterol are a risk factor for heart disease. National data from 2011-12 is the most recent available data and indicated that close to one-third of all socioeconomic groups were estimated to have high cholesterol levels.

### HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

**TARGET 2025: 16.1%**

Rates of reported high blood pressure are relatively consistent across socioeconomic groups and over recent years. High blood pressure is often caused by poor diet, physical inactivity, obesity and excessive alcohol consumption. It is a risk factor for chronic conditions including stroke, heart diseases, and chronic kidney disease.
Low socioeconomic status is a major risk factor for chronic disease and premature death.

Australia should have a healthy population. We can and we must invest now and substantially to protect and improve the health of all.
The Australian Health Policy Collaboration (AHPC) is led by the Mitchell Institute for Education and Health Policy and is a national collaboration of Australia’s leading chronic disease experts and organisations. In 2019, the Collaboration produced the second edition of a national report *Targets and Indicators for Chronic Disease Prevention in Australia*. These Australian targets align with 2025 global targets for prevention and reduction of chronic diseases set by the World Health Organization.

**Australia’s Health Tracker** editions 2016 and 2019 and *Getting Australia’s Health on Track* editions 2017 and 2021 are the policy focused reports compiled by AHPC.

**Australia’s Health Tracker by Socioeconomic Status** editions 2017 and 2021 are part of the Australia’s Health Tracker series. The reports present a national level snapshot of the impact of socioeconomic status on risk factors for common chronic diseases, and on premature deaths from those diseases and suicide.

**Technical note**

**Acknowledgement of Country**
Mitchell Institute acknowledges, recognises and respects the Ancestors, Elders and families of the Boonwurrung, Wadawurrung and Wurundjeri of the Kulin who are the traditional owners of University land in Victoria.

**Suggested citation**

**References (refer to the Technical Report for full details)**
1. AIHW. Chronic conditions and multimorbidity. AIHW, 2021.
17. Shiell A, Jackson H. How much does Australia spend on prevention and how would we know whether it is enough? Health Promotion Journal Australia, 2018.