



Policy brief  
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# Alcohol and sport

*"Sports is one of the major things in Australia – our culture is sports."*

Sport is seen as an integral part of the Australian community and a significant part of many children and young people's lives. Children and young people consistently tell the Commissioner that involvement in sport is an important way to keep fit and healthy, stay connected to the community, and maintain social networks. Statistics support this, with the most recent figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) showing that more than 63 per cent of five to 14 year-olds are involved in organised sport outside of school in Western Australia.<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between sport and alcohol in the Australian community is strong and many children and young people are exposed to this from a young age, from witnessing parents and caregivers consuming alcohol within their homes and communities, to seeing advertising from alcohol companies on television, at sporting events and in other community spaces.

The association is consistently reinforced through alcohol companies' advertising and sponsorship of sporting events, consumption by spectators and in post-game celebrations.<sup>2</sup> Some evidence indicates that young people's exposure to alcohol promotions is associated with expectations and intentions to drink and with later drinking behaviour.

In 2017, there is still considerable concern across the community about the harms caused by alcohol consumption, particularly the impact on young people. Encouragingly, national data shows that fewer young people are drinking, with 82 per cent abstaining from alcohol in 2016, compared to 72 per cent in 2013.<sup>3</sup> Recent research conducted in WA<sup>4</sup> also shows that the proportion of students reporting they have never consumed alcohol has more than tripled over three decades (from nine per cent to 31.5 per cent). However, those who do drink are doing so at increasingly risky levels, and the upward trend is continuing.

These statistics are pleasing and show that public health campaigns promoting key messages and harm minimisation strategies are important and can have a positive impact. They also show

however that there is still more to be done to reduce alcohol-related harm on children and young people. This requires a multifaceted approach and understanding the link between alcohol and sport is an important part of addressing this harm.

## What do young people say about alcohol and sport?

In 2011 the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA consulted nearly 300 young Western Australians aged 14 to 17 years to find out their views on alcohol-related harm and the strategies they saw as likely to work in reducing this harm.

The young people who participated in the consultation had some clear views about the relationship between alcohol and sport and how it impacts on alcohol consumption.

There was a strong perception among those consulted that a culture of excessive alcohol use was pervasive in the WA community. This included alcohol as a normalised part of sporting events for both spectators and players.

*"[Alcohol is] part of the culture... you see drinking at all events, like footy games and races." male*

Involvement in sport was seen by some young people as a moderating factor in alcohol consumption, at least prior to participation so as not to affect performance.

*"Coach doesn't like us drinking before the game." male*

*"Got more important things to do than drink, like sport." male*

*"If you have a big game for sport coming up in the morning [you don't get drunk] 'cause you want to play well." female*

However, this also appeared to be counteracted by the broader club culture and post-game celebration rituals. Some young people reported that the sporting club environment encouraged under-age and, at times, excessive consumption of alcohol.

*"The thing about football clubs is after a win, or a game, everyone comes back to the club and has a drink... it's the way of football, it's like the norm." male*

*"Sporting clubs, like football clubs, setting the example and not encouraging under-age drinking – something I have personally been subjected to. There is a real pressure from the older people in the club to drink – it is encouraged." female*

Alcohol advertising and sponsorship was also closely linked to sporting events.

*"They show like in the ad the joy of drinking beer while watching the football – so beer I think is related to football." female*

Young people expressed a range of views about alcohol advertising and sponsorship of sport. Some did not think that advertising had much effect on young people's decisions to drink alcohol, although others thought this would be an important strategy to reduce alcohol-related harm. Some raised concerns about the impact on sport if they had to be without the funds that advertising and sponsorship raised and that it may reduce the sporting opportunities available to young people.

*"I reckon stopping advertising will work because now people are like, oh that must be a good idea because it's on the Footy Show!"*female

*"I don't think [banning advertising] will work for our generation because we have already seen it but for the next generation it will."*female

*"VB sponsors cricket and they're a major sponsor so [cricket] will lose lots of money if they stop."*female

*"Maybe sporting events where kids go, they shouldn't be allowed to sponsor them, but for events that kids don't go to, then maybe they can sponsor those."*female

## What does the research say about alcohol and sport?

Research endorses young people's views that 'alcohol permeates Australian culture... features heavily in our celebrations, successes, milestones and even commiserations'.<sup>5 6</sup>

The views expressed by young people were broadly consistent with existing evidence regarding the strong association between alcohol and sport and its influence on young people.

Research into how Australians spend their leisure time confirms that alcohol and sport are the two most frequently discussed subjects and were 'naturally aligned' with sport becoming a 'legitimate excuse to consume alcohol... whether the level of engagement is participation or spectating'.<sup>7</sup>

Conversely, in some research involvement in sport has been found to be a protective factor in terms of reducing some young people's engagement in 'risky behaviours', including consuming alcohol at 'risky' levels.<sup>8</sup>

However, as the young people in this consultation reported, the drinking culture associated with sporting clubs also has some negative impacts:

*"...underage drinking on premises, modelling of intoxication, drink-driving to and from the club and continued service to intoxicated patrons, as well as alcohol as a reward given to players who exhibit desirable athletic performances in the form of shouts or free drinks, are aspects of the drinking culture within Australian sport that pose risks to young people."*<sup>9</sup>

Evidence suggests that alcohol advertising and sponsorship of sport does affect children and young people, in a number of ways. Research has shown these messages encourage and reinforce under-age drinking and excessive alcohol consumption patterns in the community. It also suggests that exposure to alcohol advertising influences young people's beliefs and attitudes about drinking, increases the likelihood that they will start to use alcohol, and drink more if they already use alcohol.<sup>10 11 12 13 14</sup>

The association between alcohol and sport is heightened by the presence of alcohol-related sponsorship for professional sporting clubs. Sponsorship by alcohol companies is widespread, with many sports telecasts mentioning the major sponsor company or their products by name. Evidence shows that children and young people absorb sports sponsorship messages, with some research finding that 76 per cent of children aged five to 12 were able to correctly match at least one sport with its relevant sponsor.<sup>15</sup> Recently, the relationship between sport, alcohol promotion

and social media has been highlighted by researchers as a significant emerging issue, with the potential to impact disproportionately on vulnerable groups such as young people.<sup>16</sup>

## What needs to be done about alcohol in sport?

### Building on the benefits of participation in sport for children and young people

The benefit of participation in sporting and other healthy activities to reduce risk-taking behaviour, such as under-age drinking, has been well recognised. The WA Government's KidSport program enables eligible Western Australian children aged five to 18 years to participate in community sport and recreation by offering them financial assistance towards club fees.<sup>17</sup> Such support is essential if all children and young people are able to access the potential benefits of participating in sport and other recreation activities.

However, in encouraging children and young people to take up organised sporting activities it is important they are not exposed to increased risk. This might mean looking at how alcohol is promoted, supplied and consumed at sporting events, and ending alcohol-based rituals and traditions, such as having to buy rounds of drinks for dropped catches.

The Australian Drug Foundation has undertaken considerable research into the role of alcohol in sporting club culture and since 2000 has offered the Good Sports<sup>18</sup> program. The program has a three-tiered accreditation system to promote the responsible management of alcohol where clubs serve or consume alcohol. The Good Sports program also promotes the identification of alternative sources of revenue to alcohol sales, sponsorship and fundraising activities. There are more than 7,000 sporting clubs across Australia participating in the Good Sports program. Similarly, Healthway in WA has offered grants to sporting clubs to undertake specific activities to target alcohol and drugs, sport safety or healthy eating.

Such programs provide examples of strategies aimed at reversing the problems with the current club culture, particularly around alcohol consumption, and these strategies should be extended, promoted and evaluated to ensure they are achieving their intended aims.

### Addressing the impact of alcohol advertising and sponsorship in sport

A considerable and robust body of research has emerged from Australia and overseas that shows alcohol marketing influences alcohol consumption amongst young people.<sup>19</sup> Despite this, alcohol advertising and sponsorship of sport are significant revenue streams to the sporting industry. Therefore, the potential risk of harm to children and young people needs to be carefully considered, along with strategies to reduce this harm.

The advertising of alcohol relies on self-regulation by the alcohol and advertising industries. The Broadcasting Tribunal Standards in Australia do not permit the advertising of alcohol products during children's television program time unless it is during a live televised sporting event. However, these voluntary codes do not cover sponsorship of sport by alcohol companies, which is seen as an important strategy for alcohol companies to build a brand awareness and credibility:

*"At a basic level, sponsorship raises awareness of the brand, especially when it is associated with a major sporting or cultural occasion. More subtly, the expectation is that the favourable emotions and images which consumers have of the event itself transfer to the sponsoring brand, creating an unthinking association in consumers' minds between the event and the brand, positive attitudes, and emotional connections."*<sup>20</sup>

This exemption of sporting events reinforces the special nature of sport and alcohol where otherwise unacceptable behaviour is considered appropriate, and highlights the deficiencies of systems of self-regulation. Evidence suggests that self-regulation is not working<sup>21 22</sup> and that a more robust system is needed to reduce the impact of alcohol advertising and sponsorship on young people.

The World Health Organisation supports greater regulation of the "increasingly sophisticated advertising and promotion techniques" and recommends "a precautionary approach to protecting young people against these marketing techniques..."<sup>23</sup> as an important strategy in the global effort to reduce alcohol-related harm.

Nationally, the Australian Medical Association (AMA) is of the view that self-regulation is not effective, and has recommended that regulation of alcohol promotion should be statutory and independent of the alcohol and advertising industries. In relation to alcohol and sports advertising specifically, it recommends that "sponsorship of sport by alcohol companies and brands should be prohibited. Such sponsorship should be phased out, with organisations encouraged and assisted to source socially responsible alternative funding"<sup>24</sup> The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) has voiced a similar view, calling for an end to alcohol sponsorship in cricket and other popular Australian sports.<sup>25</sup>

The McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth (MCAAY) has ascertained through various community consultations that support for this and other related measures is strong<sup>26</sup>; further evidence that the issue is still a significant one that needs addressing.

## Priorities for policy and program development

Considerable good work is already being done by a range of agencies in WA to reduce alcohol-related harm on young people. Further efforts are needed to ensure that involvement in sport supports responsible drinking practices and eliminates the culture of excessive drinking. These include:

- supporting involvement in the Healthy Clubs Program and Good Sports Program in WA, both of which directly target the consumption of alcohol in sporting clubs
- strategies and alternatives to replace the widespread alcohol industry sponsorship of sport
- further consideration of the emerging relationship between sport, alcohol promotion and social media, and its potential impact on children and young people.
- Alcohol-related harm is a multi-faceted problem and requires a comprehensive long-term strategy based on the best available evidence. Strategies directed at reducing the availability of alcohol need to be complemented by other strategies that support broader efforts to reduce excessive alcohol consumption across the community. These include:
  - strategies to reduce the availability of cheap and discounted alcohol, such as volumetric taxation, introduction of a minimum floor price, and abolishment of the Wine Equalisation Tax (WET)

- legislation to restrict the advertising and promotion of alcohol, particularly where it is visible or exposed to children and young people.
- reform that includes a robust and effective regulatory framework that can sufficiently cover all forms of marketing and promotion, including social media
- the introduction of compulsory alcohol education in schools, and education and support for parents on alcohol and young people
- the provision of more alcohol-free events for young people and families.
- public health campaigns to address the culture of excessive alcohol consumption and tolerance of intoxication.

## Further information

For further discussion about these issues and the Commissioner's work on reducing alcohol-related harm, visit the website [ccyp.wa.gov.au](http://ccyp.wa.gov.au):

- Alcohol availability policy brief
- Education on alcohol policy brief
- Alcohol and the role of parents policy brief
- Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) issues paper

More information on the problem of alcohol-related harm:

- McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth [mcaay.org.au](http://mcaay.org.au)
- National Alliance for Action on Alcohol [actiononalcohol.org.au](http://actiononalcohol.org.au)
- National Preventative Health Taskforce [preventativehealth.org.au](http://preventativehealth.org.au)
- Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education [fare.org.au](http://fare.org.au)

## Endnotes

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- <sup>17</sup> *WA Department of Sport and Recreation Homepage* [website], viewed 17 May 2017, <<https://www.dsr.wa.gov.au/funding/individuals/kidsport>>
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