



Opinion piece

Michelle Scott, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

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We can act on alcohol issues now

Recently I commissioned research which asked a broad range of young people throughout WA for their views on reducing alcohol-related harm.

What is clear from this research and other evidence is that a comprehensive long-term approach is required to tackle issues concerning alcohol in the community, but we also need to address deficiencies in alcohol regulation and education right now to better protect our young people.

Young people who participated in the research reported that alcohol is cheap and easy for underage drinkers to access, and these factors are a major influence not only on their decision on whether to drink, but also how much.

There are many factors that influence access to alcohol and one area which we can and should address immediately is young people accessing alcohol from retailers.

Young people reported that underage drinkers purchase alcohol from some outlets reasonably easily either because one of their peers looks older or because they know that some stores often do not ask for proof of age.

Further, they said it was quite common for underage drinkers to use others, both people they know and strangers, to purchase alcohol for them.

The Health and Education Standing Committee, the Police Commissioner and experts including the McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth have all recommended amendments to our current legislation giving the police powers to run controlled purchase operations, as they can in countries like New Zealand and the UK.

Without these powers, effective enforcement of legislation on sales to minors, especially from bottle shops, is impossible.

Similarly, WA lags behind other Australian States including New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland that have legislation on 'secondary supply' – unauthorised provision of alcohol to minors.

Without that it will remain perfectly legal in WA for adults to supply other peoples' children with any amount of alcohol in private settings, regardless of their parents' wishes.

The other big influence on impressionable young people identified in this research was the general community acceptance of an excessive use of alcohol.

Young people said alcohol is omnipresent in Australian culture including sporting events, festivals, Australia Day celebrations and regular family and community activities.

It will be difficult to effectively address young people's increasingly risky drinking behaviour without tackling the community's cultural norms around alcohol.

Young people said education is essential to address this issue, not only for young people but also for adults including parents and older siblings.

Parents were identified by young people as key role models who have a marked influence on their decisions about drinking, both positively and negatively.

Some young people reported parents have influenced their decisions not to drink but others said alcohol is often sourced from parents. A separate 2008 survey found that 45 per cent of 12 to 17 year-olds have obtained alcohol from their parents.

We must ensure parents know the scientific evidence that shows alcohol damages young people's developing brains and that the earlier young people start drinking the more likely they are to develop significant health problems later in life.

Another thing young people said about education is that it must start early before opinions about alcohol develop. They also said they have had limited alcohol education in school and their responses to technical questions about alcohol (such as standard drink measures) indicate this is correct.

As the Police Commissioner and others have pointed out, while education and action on illegal drugs is important, the overriding usage of alcohol and the social and financial consequences of the associated harms do not seem to be reflected in the education priorities.

If Western Australia were a nation it would be the tenth-highest consumer of alcohol in the world but we are still not taking this issue and its impacts seriously.

Young people involved in the research had a lot to say about other strategies, including more alcohol-free activities, increased penalties for adults who supply alcohol to young people and restrictions on alcohol sponsorship and promotion.

We should be listening to these views and working closely with young people and others to deliver better strategies.

Alcohol and young people is a complex issue and it will require a multi-faceted approach based on the best available evidence to make improvements, but we know from smoking, seat belts and child safety restraints that cultural change is possible.

We must be prepared to act and protect our children and young people.

The Commissioner's research report, *Speaking Out About Reducing Alcohol-Related Harm on Children and Young People* is available from ccyp.wa.gov.au

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