



Young people and alcohol

The excessive consumption of alcohol in Western Australia is a serious concern. It can cause harm to both the individual and the broader community. Research shows that young people's drinking is influenced by a combination of four factors – family, peers, school and the media.ⁱ

Per capita consumption of pure alcohol in Western Australia is 12.66 litres per annum per person, equating to 3.3 standard drinks per day for every person aged 14 years and over.ⁱⁱ

Alcohol consumption is a problem for the whole community. It impacts significantly on children and young people's sense of safety and wellbeing, and can lead to poor role modelling. Risky* drinking by young people is also of concern. Brain development is still occurring throughout adolescence and into early adulthood. Emerging evidence indicates that alcohol may have an effect on the development of memory, decision making and emotions, which can lead to problems with learning, problem solving and mental health.ⁱⁱⁱ

Young people are concerned about alcohol consumption. In research conducted on behalf of the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA^{iv} alcohol was identified as an issue that impacted on young people's safety, wellbeing and enjoyment of recreational activities. This is consistent with other research, such as Mission Australia's National Survey of Young Australians 2010^v, in which alcohol was rated as an issue of serious concern, particularly for males.

Facts about young people and alcohol^{vi}

46,957 (approximately 28%^{vii}) of Western Australian 12 to 17 year-old school students **consumed alcohol** in the past week.^{viii}

24.3% of Western Australian 12 to 17 year-old school students who drank in the last week report **drinking at levels** considered to place adults **'at risk' of short-term harm**.^{ix}

Rates of **alcohol-related harm** in young people have **increased significantly** over recent years, particularly in those aged 16 to 24 years.^x

Approximately **five young Australians aged 15 to 24 years die every week** due to alcohol-attributable injury or disease. Another 200 are hospitalised.^{xi}

Attitudes of young people towards alcohol may be contributing towards alcohol-related problems.

In a survey^{xii} of 16 to 17 year-old Western Australian school students:

43.3% reported **'One of the main reasons I drink is to get drunk'**

66.3% reported **'It is ok to get drunk occasionally'**

50.1% reported **'Drinking is the best way of relaxing'**

What are the effects of alcohol consumption on young people?

While research indicates that the proportion of 14 to 17 year-olds who report recent consumption of alcohol is falling, more than 60 per cent of this age group still report being a recent drinker.^{xiii} Further studies^{xiv} indicate that of those aged 14 to 17 years who drank in the week prior to being surveyed, 26.5 per cent of males and 32.5 per cent of females drank at levels which put them at risk of harm.

Regular alcohol consumption above recommended levels increases the risk of chronic ill health. The intoxicating effects of alcohol are also associated with greater risk-taking behaviour, impaired problem solving and increased aggression. The most common causes of harm to young people in Australia from drinking are road injury, suicide and violent assault. Alcohol accounts for 13 per cent of all deaths of 14 to 17 year-olds.^{xv}

Of concern is that young people are starting to drink alcohol at a younger age. Evidence indicates that an earlier age of initiation is associated with heavier consumption and increased risk of physical, social and mental health problems later in life.^{xvi}

What influences young people's drinking?

Family, peers, school and the media all play a role in influencing the way young people consume alcohol. Forty-six per cent of 12 to 17 year-olds obtain alcohol from their parents and 23 per cent obtain it from their friends.^{xvii} Research indicates, however, that parents and family reduce the impact of these influencing factors where certain processes and structures within the family are present.^{xviii} These include parental modelling, high levels of supervision and monitoring, high family cohesion and cooperation and family support.^{xix}

Alcohol consumption is also influenced by broader factors such as the regulatory framework that governs the availability, price and marketing of alcohol. Recent analysis of the cultural influences on young people's drinking concluded "*Australia's alcohol culture is shaped by the regulatory framework that governs it. To-date, the framework does not act to adequately protect young people from risky drinking.*"^{xx} It is estimated that the elimination of alcohol advertising would reduce monthly alcohol use by adolescents by about 25 per cent and 'binge-drinking' by nearly 42 per cent.^{xxi}

The recent review^{xxii} into Australia's taxation system concluded that the current tax arrangements for alcohol were ineffective in addressing the social costs of alcohol consumption and recommended introduction of a volumetric tax to better target these costs.

What needs to be done to reduce risky drinking by young people?

The Australian National Health and Medical Research Council^{xxiii} recommends that:

- **For children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.**
- **Parents and carers should be advised that children under 15 years of age are at the greatest risk of harm from drinking and that, for this age group, not drinking alcohol is especially important.**
- **For young people aged 15 to 17 years, the safest option is to delay the initiation to drinking alcohol for as long as possible.**

To effectively implement these guidelines, and to help prevent the uptake of hazardous or harmful patterns of drinking by young people, it is necessary to have an integrated approach that both addresses the culture of drinking in the broader community and improves efforts to

reduce overall alcohol consumption. With 13.2 per cent of children exposed by at least one adult to 'binge drinking' in the household^{xxiv}, the importance of parental and community modelling cannot be underestimated.

Prevention strategies directed at young people, such as school drug education programs and targeted advertising campaigns, need to be complemented by other strategies that support broader efforts to reduce excessive alcohol consumption across the community. **This includes further development of:**

An effective regulatory framework

Recommended strategies include:

- strengthening the Liquor Control Act 1988 to make the best interests of children and young people and the minimisation of harm to them the priority
- imposition of a volumetric tax on alcohol
- banning alcohol advertising and sponsorship of sporting and cultural events
- consideration of legislation in WA to restrict the supply of alcohol on private property to young people under 18 years of age.

Support for families and parents

Recommended strategies include:

- providing clear messages to parents and young people on the harmful effects of alcohol and appropriate strategies to help them manage young people's consumption of alcohol
- assisting parents to develop effective parenting and family management skills that reduce the risk factors of problematic alcohol use later in adolescence.

Participation of children and young people

Recommended strategies include:

- involving children and young people in the development of strategies to address alcohol consumption, such as public education programs, to ensure this occurs with an understanding of the factors that influence young people's drinking behaviour.

For more information on this topic go to:

[Commissioner's Submission to the Inquiry into the Adequacy and Appropriateness of Prevention and Treatment Services for Alcohol and Illicit Drug Problems in Western Australia.](#)

www.ccyp.wa.gov.au > what's the Commissioner doing? > submissions

[Supporting the families of young people with problematic drug use](#)

www.ncd.org.au > publications and reports > ANCD research paper 15

[Young People and Alcohol: The role of cultural influences](#)

www.nceta.flinders.edu.au > Projects > young people and alcohol

*7 or more standard drinks for males and 5 or more for females on any one day.

ⁱ Velleman R (2009) Influences on how children and young people learn about and behave towards alcohol: A review of the literature for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (part one). www.jrf.org.uk

ⁱⁱ Drug and Alcohol Office Transcript of evidence to the Education and Health Standing Committee. 11 May 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Australian Drug Foundation 2009 Fact sheet: Young People and Alcohol. Number 7.11
www.druginfo.adf.org.au

^{iv} Commissioner for Children and Young People (2010) Speaking out about wellbeing: the views of Western Australian children and young people. www.ccyp.wa.gov.au

^v Mission Australia (2010) National Survey of Young Australians 2010: Key and emerging issues.
www.missionaustralia.com.au

^{vi} Adapted from information on the McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Young People website
www.mcaay.org.au

^{vii} Based on 2006 ABS census data of WA population aged 12 – 17 years

^{viii} Haynes R, Kalic R, Griffiths P, Gunnell A, McGregor C. Australian School Student Alcohol and Drug Survey: Alcohol Report 2008 - Western Australian results. Drug and Alcohol Office Surveillance Report: Number 10. Perth: Drug and Alcohol Office; 2010

^{ix} op cit Haynes et al 2008

^x op cit Livingston et al 2008

^{xi} Chikritzhs TN, Pascal R. Trends in Youth Alcohol Consumption and Related Harms in Australian Jurisdictions, 1990–2002. Bulletin No. 6. Perth, Western Australia: National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University of Technology; 2004.

^{xii} op cit Haynes et al 2008

^{xiii} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2010) Drinking patterns in Australia 2001 – 2007. Cat No.PHE 133 Canberra

^{xiv} op cit Haynes et al 2010

^{xv} op cit Chikritzhs_T et al 2004

^{xvi} Roche A, Bywood P, Borlagdan J, Lunnay B, Freeman T, Lawton L, Tovell A & Nicholas R (2007) Young People and Alcohol: The Role of Cultural Influences. NCETA. Adelaide.

^{xvii} op cit Haynes et al (2008)

^{xviii} op cit Velleman (2009)

^{xix} op cit Velleman (2009)

^{xx} op cit Roche et al (2007)

^{xxi} op cit Velleman (2009)

^{xxii} Henry K (2009) Australia's Future Tax System: Report to the Treasurer. Commonwealth of Australia.

www.taxreview.treasury.gov.au

^{xxiii} National Health and Medical Research Council (2009) Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol. Australian Government. Canberra.

^{xxiv} Dawe S (2007) Drug use in the family: impacts and implications for children. Australian National Council on Drugs. Canberra.