



Policy brief
February 2018



Alcohol availability

"Drink whatever is available really... you can get cheap spirits, you can get cheap beer, you can get pretty much cheap anything..."

In 2017, there is still considerable concern across the community about the harms caused by alcohol consumption, particularly the effect 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 2013.¹ Recent research conducted in WA² 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 effect. They also show however that there is still more to be done to reduce alcohol-related harm on children and young people.

This policy brief examines in more detail the concerns young people expressed about how the availability of alcohol influenced how much and how often young people drink. It also discusses some of the strategies that may be successful in reducing alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm on children and young people, and the wider community.

What do young people say about alcohol availability?

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.

Overall, young people who participated in the consultation reported that alcohol featured heavily in all aspects of the Australian lifestyle and was regularly present in their everyday life.

"Every Australian thing you see is either a guy with a beer in his hand at a BBQ [or in] the outback, laid back setting." male

"Yeah, drinking is just part of everyday life – nothing unusual about it." female

Consistent with other research^{3 4 5}, the young people who participated in this consultation said that mostly young people drank at private parties or smaller gatherings where alcohol was often made available, usually by parents, friends, or older siblings.

"At our after-ball [party] there was pretty much every single kind of alcohol that you could buy." male

"[My] parents buy me drinks, they let me have a four pack and that's it." female

"..we don't normally have to pay for it a lot of the time..." female

Despite young people at times not having to pay for alcohol, the price of alcohol was also a significant factor in young people's drinking and often affected how much they consumed. Cost was also a key factor in how much young people drank on any one occasion.

"Look for spirits that are on special, cheap drinks and try and get more of it." male

"If there is a good deal, you buy more of it." female

Strengthening laws

At the time of the Commissioner's consultation, the introduction of secondary supply laws in WA was being debated across the community. Young people participating in the consultation rated it as the most effective strategy in reducing the availability of alcohol, and it had widespread support among other groups.

In November 2015, new laws came into effect regarding the secondary supply of alcohol. Under this law it became an offence for anyone to supply a young person under the age of 18 with alcohol in a private setting, without parental or guardian permission. The offence carries a maximum penalty of \$10,000.⁶

Reducing opening hours and outlet density

Strategies aimed at reducing opening hours and density of licensed venues were not seen as particularly effective by young people as most young people's drinking was done at private parties rather than on licensed premises.

However some young people, particularly Aboriginal young people and young people in regional areas, did value the impact of restrictions on the sale of alcohol in reducing the amount of time adults could spend both purchasing and drinking alcohol.

"Schedule days for no drinking. Only sell Friday and Saturday so during the week other people don't get drunk and cause hassle for everyone else." Aboriginal female

"Restricting alcohol availability such as reducing opening hours, the numbers of licensed premises." Aboriginal male

Increasing cost

Increasing the cost of alcohol had mixed support among young people. Those who thought it would be ineffective cited young people having a high disposable income, getting alcohol supplied for free by parents and others, and the availability of cheap discount liquor.

"They can put the prices up but there is always going to be cheap stuff." male

"Well people our age generally, like a lot of people, have jobs or they get pocket money from their parents and alcohol is not that expensive like Passion Pops are like seven bucks." female

Some young people were also concerned that increasing the cost would have unintended negative consequences, such as using other cheaper drugs, stealing to obtain alcohol or, where a parent had an alcohol dependence, families having less to spend on food and other essential items.

"It will be less food for the kids." male

"It would just increase stealing, more violence, more break-ins." male

Other young people thought that it would be effective.

"If you increase the cost of alcohol then in terms of parties, yeah, it would make you buy less." female

"A couple of my mates, they didn't drink as much because they couldn't afford it." male

What does the research say about alcohol availability?

It is now widely understood that alcohol availability and consumption are strongly linked. Research has demonstrated that increasing trading hours and alcohol outlet density significantly increase alcohol consumption^{7,8}, which can be observed across the country as alcohol becomes more widely available – in a variety of settings and at a lower cost. It can be assumed therefore, that decreasing the availability of alcohol will have a positive effect on reducing alcohol-related harm.

The Foundation for Alcohol Research & Education ((FARE) and the McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth (MCAAY), and others, suggest that governments can restrict availability and contribute to a decrease in alcohol consumption by:

- introducing trading hour restrictions to reduce the availability of alcohol
- preventing areas from becoming saturated with liquor outlets
- reducing excessive availability of alcohol in areas already saturated with liquor outlets
- increasing the price of alcohol by introducing
 - volumetric taxation
 - a minimum floor price (preventing sale of very cheap alcohol)
 - removal of the Wine Equalisation Tax (WET) (which supports the production of very cheap wine)
- curbing alcohol advertising, promotion and sponsorship, with a robust regulatory framework and legislated controls that penalise non-compliance.^{9,10}

Importantly, research demonstrates that young people in particular are very sensitive to measures that impact on price^{11 12}, making it a worthwhile strategy to reduce alcohol consumption and therefore alcohol-related harm.

The effectiveness of these measures is recognised internationally, with a World Health Organisation (WHO) international review of alcohol-related research finding that regulating the physical availability of alcohol and taxation and pricing were the two most effective types of intervention for reducing alcohol-related harm.¹³

What needs to be done to reduce the availability of alcohol in the community?

There is now a wide body of research and solid evidence-base that can pave the way for effectively reducing alcohol-related harm on children and young people, and the wider community. Addressing the culture of excessive alcohol consumption in our community is a shared responsibility, and cannot be achieved without widespread support and a genuine desire for change.

Increasing cost

The research consistently demonstrates that cost has a significant effect on the consumption of alcohol, particularly for young people. The introduction of a volumetric tax, a minimum floor price, and abolishment of the WET would help to reduce the amount of very inexpensive alcohol in the marketplace, leading to a significant reduction in the consumption of alcohol and, consequently, the impact of alcohol-related harm.

Strengthening and enforcing existing laws

The *Liquor Control Act 1988* (WA) (the Act) and the *Liquor Control Regulations* (1989) control the sale, supply and consumption of alcohol in Western Australia, including the density of alcohol venues and outlets, trading hours and the imposition of alcohol restrictions on specific areas or communities. The primary objects of the *Liquor Control Act 1988* need to be strengthened to ensure that the paramount objective is the minimisation of harm or ill-health caused by alcohol. This will ensure the Act works, first and foremost, to protect children and young people, and the wider community, from the effects of alcohol-related harm.

Young people were particularly supportive of greater controls and enforcement of laws to prevent the sale and supply of alcohol to people under the age of 18 years. Enforcement of existing legislation to control sale and supply to young people is essential if these laws are to have the necessary impact.

Curbing alcohol advertising, promotion and sponsorship

A considerable and robust body of research has emerged from Australia and overseas that shows alcohol marketing influences alcohol consumption among young people.¹⁴ Recently, there has been a call to end alcohol sponsorship of sporting events in particular. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see the Commissioner's Alcohol and Sport policy brief.

Priorities for policy and program development

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. This includes:

- legislation to restrict the advertising and promotion of alcohol, particularly advertising to which children and young people are exposed (e.g. billboard and sport advertising)
- compulsory education on alcohol in schools and education and support for parents
- 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:

- Alcohol and sport 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 and its impact on children and young people:

- McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth mcaay.org.au
- National Alliance for Action on Alcohol actiononalcohol.org.au
- National Preventative Health Taskforce preventativehealth.org.au
- Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education fare.org.au

Endnotes

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017, *National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) 2016 Key Findings*, Australian Government

² Mental Health Commission 2014, *2014 Australian School Students Alcohol and Drug (ASSAD) Survey*, Government of Western Australia

³ *ibid*

⁴ McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth (MCAAY) 2014, *Alcohol and Young People: What works to prevent harm?*, McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth (MCAAY)

⁵ WA Alcohol and Youth Action Coalition 2013, *Alcohol Availability Position Statement*

⁶ Alcohol Think Again, *Young People and Alcohol* [website], viewed May 2017, <<http://alcoholthinkagain.com.au/Parents-Young-People/Young-People-and-Alcohol-Laws>>

⁷ Preventative Health Taskforce 2009, *Technical Paper 3: Preventing Alcohol-related harm in Australia: a window of opportunity*, Commonwealth Government

⁸ 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*, National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction, Adelaide

⁹ *Foundation for Alcohol Research & Education (FARE) Homepage* [website], viewed May 2017, <<http://fare.org.au/>>

¹⁰ *McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth (MCAAY) Homepage* [website], viewed May 2017, <<https://mcaay.org.au/>>

¹¹ Preventative Health Taskforce 2009

¹² McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth (MCAAY) 2014, *Alcohol and Young People: What works to prevent harm?*, McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth (MCAAY)

¹³ Babor, T, Caetano, R, Casswell, S, Edwards, G, Giesbrecht, G, Grube J, et al. 2003, *Alcohol: no ordinary commodity*. New York: World Health Organisation and Oxford University Press, cited in Preventative Health Taskforce. 2009, *Technical Paper 3: Preventing Alcohol-related harm in Australia: a window of opportunity*

¹⁴ Australian Medical Association 2012, *Alcohol Marketing and Young People: Time for a new policy agenda* , p.31