



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia



Caring for the future growing up today

Speaking out

about reducing alcohol-related harm on children and young people

The views of Western Australian children and young people

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Alternative Formats

On request, large print or alternative format copies of this report can be obtained from the office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

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“...views of young people expressed in these pages are important.”

Commissioner's message

As Commissioner for Children and Young People I am an advocate for more than 500,000 children and young people across our State. Among other things I work to give them a voice in decision making and, importantly, to turn the spotlight onto an issue where there is a need for improved policies, services and laws to enhance their wellbeing. Interestingly, on many occasions the views of young people also align with much of what the research and evidence tells us will lead to improvements in their lives.

In a great deal of my work, including my recent research into the wellbeing of children and young people and my many visits to metropolitan, regional and remote communities, the impact of alcohol-related harm on children and young people is raised as a critical issue. It has also been the subject of increasing attention in a recent parliamentary inquiry, the public health arena and media.

This publication, *Speaking Out About Reducing Alcohol-Related Harm on Children and Young People*, summarises the views of nearly 300 young people aged 14 to 17 years from a variety of backgrounds who participated in a consultation on what influences their decisions around drinking alcohol and what they believe would be effective strategies in reducing the harm associated with alcohol consumption.

It is clear from the views expressed by young people that they are concerned about alcohol-related harm to themselves, their friends and their families and want change, not only in policy and legislation concerning the consumption of alcohol by young people but also in the deeply ingrained presence of alcohol, and excessive drinking, in the WA community.

Change is possible – we have seen significant change within the community which we now take for granted in areas such as tobacco, seat belts and child restraints.

As a community we must believe and act on the basis that we can achieve the changes required to reduce alcohol-related harm.

This publication is an opportunity for the community and government to take a fresh look at the issue of alcohol in our community. The views of young people expressed in these pages are important and should be the impetus for more discussion and critical thinking about ways to improve policies, services and laws.

I would like to thank all of the young people who participated in this consultation, their families and the agencies who assisted in the process.

I will be using the views obtained through this consultation to inform my ongoing work in this area and I look forward to continuing to work with others towards creating a healthier Western Australian community and improving the health and wellbeing of our children and young people.



Michelle Scott
Commissioner for Children and Young People



Acknowledgements

In April 2011 the Commissioner for Children and Young People issued a Request for Tender for suitably qualified researchers to undertake a consultation project to obtain the views of young people aged 14 to 17 years regarding alcohol-related harm. Painted Dog Research was appointed to conduct the consultation on behalf of the Commissioner.

The Commissioner established a reference group to provide expert feedback on the development of the consultation and the Commissioner extends her thanks to the following individuals and organisations who generously gave their time to this project:

- Professor Steve Allsop, National Drug Research Institute
- Ms Sasha Casey, Drug and Alcohol Office
- Ms Catriona Coe, School Drug Education and Road Aware
- Ms Olivia Knowles, Youth Affairs Council of WA
- Ms Peta Nordberg, Mission Australia
- Ms Julia Stafford, McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth
- Ms Carla Vitale, Drug and Alcohol Office.

The Commissioner particularly thanks the many young people, and their supporters, who have generously contributed their time and views to assist in the development of this publication. This includes all the young people who participated in the consultation, their families and the staff of the agencies who assisted with the young people's participation.

Methodology

This report draws on a consultation undertaken by Painted Dog Research on behalf of the Commissioner for Children and Young People between June and August 2011. The consultation, which comprised small group interviews and an online survey, gathered the views of nearly three hundred Western Australian young people aged 14 to 17 years.

In total, 272 young people aged 14 to 17 years from a diverse range of backgrounds participated including:

- 128 (47%) males and 144 (53%) females
- 78 (29%) from regional WA and 194 (71%) from metropolitan WA
- 18 (7%) Aboriginal young people
- 38 (14%) young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The interviews and online survey canvassed young people's views on a broad range of topics. These included knowledge of standard drinks and the national alcohol guidelines, the main influences on their decisions about drinking alcohol, their concerns about harms that arise from alcohol consumption and their views and ideas on strategies to reduce these harms.

The small group interviews consisted of three to five young people separated by gender. Generally the groups were split into two age groups – 14 and 15 year-olds and 16 and 17 year-olds, although there were some groups of 14 to 17 year-olds.

Groups comprised young people with a range of alcohol consumption patterns and varied socio-economic backgrounds. Interviews were also undertaken with Aboriginal young people, young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

and young people who were considered at increased likelihood of engaging in high-risk¹ alcohol consumption.

Some issues specific to different groups have been noted and are identified in the following text. However, due to the low numbers of young people involved caution should be used in extrapolating the comments to the broader population of young people.



¹ Young people considered as 'high-risk' were recruited via inner city youth services that engage with young people considered at increased risk of engaging in problematic alcohol and drug use and experiencing homelessness and family conflict.

Summary of key findings

The intention of this consultation was to canvass a diverse range of young people as, like the adult community, young people are not a homogenous group. Consequently, the young people who participated in this consultation have expressed a range of views on all of the issues discussed. A number of key findings have emerged that provide particular insight into the issues young people face and the strategies which may be effective in reducing the impact of alcohol-related harm on their lives.

Views about the culture of alcohol use

There is a strong perception among the young people consulted that a culture of excessive alcohol consumption is pervasive in the Australian community. Many young people perceive that the majority of adults drink alcohol and that most would consume more than is considered an acceptable amount, even if they don't appear to 'get drunk'. Alcohol was seen as very widely available and strongly associated with most social, recreational and celebratory occasions.

Not all young people drink alcohol and those who don't drink want greater recognition from the media, the broader community and other young people. They particularly want their views and position to be respected by their peers.

A significant number of young people reported there is a culture of drinking among their peers with the sole purpose to become drunk. There is some confusion about how prevalent this behaviour is, with it appearing to be considered the 'norm', despite varying ideas about how many young people actually engage in this behaviour.

Concerns about alcohol-related harm

Many young people themselves are concerned about the impact of alcohol on their lives, particularly when it affects their family life, their enjoyment of social and recreational activities and their feeling of safety in the community.

Most young people were able to describe a comprehensive list of potential long-term and short-term harms caused by alcohol use including physical, social, financial and legal problems.

Of principal concern to young people were harms relating to:

- violence – mainly, but not exclusively, from strangers
- damage to their reputation – including the dissemination of gossip and images via social media
- the impact of drink driving.

Young people were also very concerned about looking after their friends who were intoxicated, often feeling scared about seeking help due to the prospect of getting in trouble with parents or authorities.

Family conflict and violence were of serious concern to some young people across all demographic groups.

Influences on alcohol consumption

A wide range of factors influence young people's decisions about alcohol consumption:

- Parents were considered a significant influence by more than half the young people who participated in the online survey, which was the most frequently nominated response.
- Friends were also a significant influence, particularly among the 16 to 17 year-olds.
- The availability of alcohol was the third most significant influence for young people who did drink alcohol.
- For young people who did not drink alcohol, 'morals' was the third most significant influence.

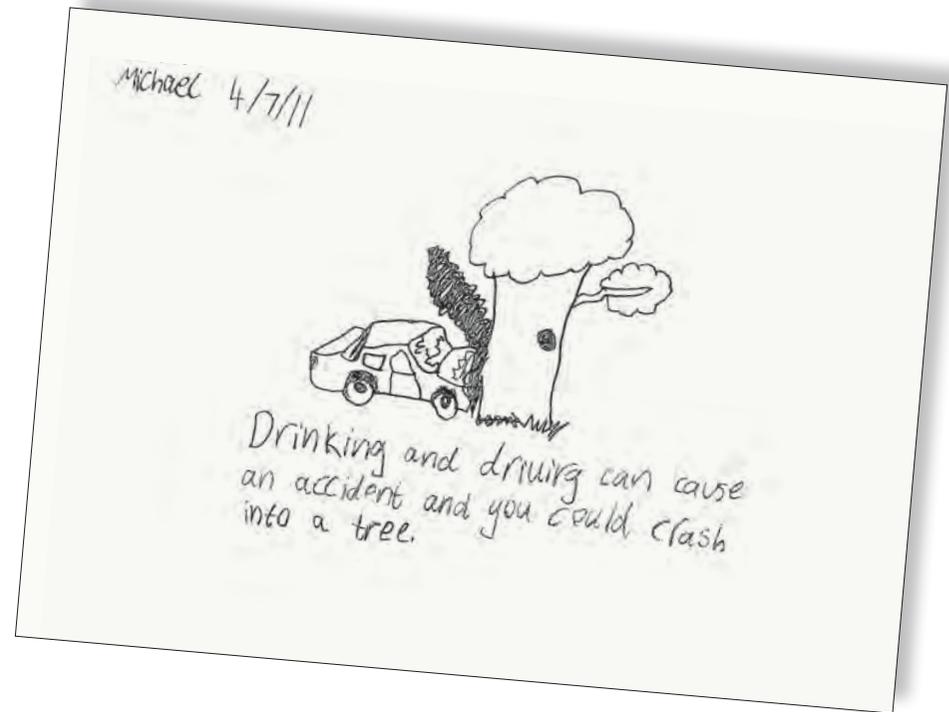
Strategies for reducing alcohol-related harm

Similar to the wider community, young people had mixed reactions to the variety of strategies suggested for reducing alcohol-related harm.

The most popular strategies among young people were:

- providing more alcohol-free activities
- harsher penalties for people who supply alcohol to underage young people
- increasing education about alcohol, particularly at school.

Young people were very specific about the need for alcohol education to be done in a way that resonated with young people.



They also said it needed to be taught by credible people and started at a young age, before young people started drinking. The alcohol-free activities need to be strongly policed, easily accessible and relevant to their interests.

An adult supplying young people under the age of 18 years with alcohol was opposed by most young people. Many young people thought that it was already illegal for parents or other adults to supply alcohol to young people under any circumstances – they generally thought this was a reasonable approach and supported the introduction of laws to enforce this. However, they still believed that it wouldn't necessarily stop young people from drinking as it would be difficult to police, given that alcohol is so readily available from other sources.

There was mixed support for restrictions on alcohol advertising and sponsorship, increasing the cost of alcohol and the provision of information on packaging about the harmful affects.

The least popular strategy was raising the drinking age. While some young people did support this strategy, those who were already drinking in particular did not think this would have any impact and would be unfair given the other adult responsibilities that come with being 18 years of age. Some young people did identify that it might raise the age of initiation to drinking and that this would be a positive outcome.

A significant number of young people were undecided about the effectiveness of certain strategies. This suggests young people are open to information about the potential benefits of such responses.

A number of young people commented that while they did not like the idea of some of the strategies being imposed they did believe that they would be effective in reducing alcohol-related harm.

Young people raised a number of concerns about the possible unintended consequences of various strategies to reduce alcohol-related harms. For example, it was suggested the strategy of increasing the cost of alcohol may result in increased stealing and increased financial pressure in households (meaning less money for food and other essentials) where parents drank heavily. There was also concern that some young people would drink in public places if secondary supply legislation stopped parents from allowing alcohol at parties in private homes, placing young people at increased risk of harm.



“Alcohol plays a massive role in everything...” female

The culture of alcohol consumption

Alcohol and the wider community

“Alcohol plays a massive role in everything, that is what our culture is made up on – our culture is beer!” female

Young people who participated in the consultation were asked for their views about alcohol consumption in the wider community.

Universally young people considered that alcohol was a big part of Australian culture and that drinking was the ‘norm’ from its prominence in social settings, the media, in advertising, at sporting events and in their own families and circle of friends.

Young people estimated that between nine out of 10 and all adults had tried drinking, and at least half would drink excessively at a party. Some young people considered 18 to 25 year-olds as the biggest drinkers and thought that older adults (60 plus years) didn’t drink at all.

“Every adult has drunk alcohol.” female

“The problem is with the culture. Australian is beer in one hand.” male

“Part of the culture... you see drinking at all the events, like footy games and races.” male

“Drinking is normal, see people drink at pubs, parks, houses.” female

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

“[Alcohol is] just about everywhere really... pubs... you see them on the street, at home... shopping centres... I’ve seen people walking along with beers in shopping centres.” male

“I think that at the moment there is a drinking culture in Australia, not drinking stands out and it shouldn’t.” male

Most young people also perceived that drinking alcohol is “the way we celebrate” with many reporting that it was their parents who had allowed them to try alcohol for the first time at a special family event or gathering.

“If we have a family function, my parents would give me a drink or a try.” male

“I reckon it’s part of the culture like especially you can see it on Australia Day a lot, everyone gets smashed.” female

“Australia Day, Christmas, celebrations.” female

At the same time, some thought that the adult drinking culture was different, and more moderate, from that of young people.

“I think the drinking culture in teenagers is different to adults... with adults it’s like have a glass of wine at a dinner party and a beer at the pub, that sort of thing... they would drink more than the standard probably, but it’s not like excessive, stupid.” female

“My parents have a casual drink.” male

Some Aboriginal young people, however, commented that drinking hadn’t always been part of their culture, that it was something that had been introduced by “white men”.

“I don’t think it’s in our natural culture... others started and it went from there.” female

“Not all of us drink and the media needs to give us a voice as well.” female

Alcohol consumption by young people

While most young people under the age of 18 years do not drink regularly, those who do are often drinking at levels that are likely to cause harm to their health and wellbeing.²

Encouragingly, there has been a small increase in the number of Western Australian school students aged 12 to 17 years who have never consumed alcohol (from 12.3 per cent in 2005 to 15.9 per cent in 2008), however, 84 per cent had consumed alcohol at some time. Of the 26 per cent who had consumed alcohol in the last week, almost one-third drank at levels that put them at risk of harm.³

Of particular concern is the increasingly earlier age at which young people are starting to drink alcohol. People who drink when they are under the age of 15 years are more likely to engage in dangerous and antisocial behaviour than older drinkers.⁴

Consuming alcohol and/or drugs at an early age is also associated with greater problems later in life including physical and mental health problems, poor educational attainment and chronic offending behaviour. There is also emerging evidence that suggests early drinking may affect how the adolescent brain develops, with national guidelines recommending

2 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

3 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

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

that young people aged 15 to 17 years delay drinking for as long as possible.⁵

Young people who participated in the consultation had varying ideas about young people's alcohol consumption. It is important to note that not all young people in this age group drink and that views about what was normal and acceptable were largely dependent on an individual's peer group or their exposure to alcohol. Some young people rejected the view that most young people wanted to be, and were, part of a wider drinking culture.

“I'm the odd one out and I will say that I'm allowed to drink but I just don't.” female

“Not all of us drink and the media needs to give us a voice as well.” female

Most 16 to 17 year-olds in the consultation estimated that at least eight out of 10 of their peers would have tried drinking, while for 14 to 15 year-olds it was lower.

Most young people who did drink alcohol said they drank with friends at a range of events from birthdays to random 'get-togethers'. For them, drinking was less about the occasion than who they were with. The most common reasons for drinking were to boost confidence and to have fun or relieve boredom.

5 Department of Health and Ageing, Alcohol and your kids, viewed 23 August 2011, <[http://www.health.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/Content/7BBD5DD3C0DD24E8CA257672007E883F/\\$File/parent.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/Content/7BBD5DD3C0DD24E8CA257672007E883F/$File/parent.pdf)>.



“Young people drink when they’re bored.”
female

Alcohol consumption by young people (cont.)

“Most people just drink for fun.” female

“Can’t have a good time without it!” male

“Young people drink when they’re bored.” female

“[Drinking] makes socialising easier.” male

“It makes you love everyone.” female

“People are more open when they drink.” female

Some of the young people said their drinking was because of peer pressure or to cope with pressures such as school, work or family problems.

“I guess I drink because of a peer pressure sort of thing.” female

“When [I am] depressed.” male

“It takes away your problems for the night but then they come back in the morning...” female

Some young people also talked about drinking because it was the ‘normal’ thing to do or they had a sense that it was expected.

“It’s just the done thing.” male

“Everybody drinks, it’s just a thing that happens.” male

“Yeah, everyone thinks it’s cool to drink.” female

“Every kid would drink at a party or gathering.” female

They also noted that young men and young women sometimes had different reasons for drinking.

“Girls get drunk to just put pictures on Facebook. Girls drink for the brag factor, boys drink for the social factor.” male

“They [girls] go on Facebook and tell you ‘I’m drunk’.” male

Overall young people clearly identified alcohol consumption with socialising and considered drinking alone as associated with problems.

“Don’t drink by yourself... only with friends.” female

“If they did [drink alone] they have some sort of problem.” male

For a significant number of those who did drink the intention was often to get intoxicated.

“[Drink to get drunk] isn’t that the whole point of drinking?” male

“Drink until you pass out... or it’s all gone.” male

“[We] don’t say we’re going to drink this weekend, we say we’re getting drunk this weekend.” male

“We drink with the intent to get drunk.” female

However, the decision on how much to drink was sometimes influenced by who was present and what might be happening the next day.

“If you’re like tired and stuff like from school you might just have a few and relax and stuff, or if you’re partying you’d just get smashed.” male

"Stay with a few responsible mates." male

Alcohol consumption by young people (cont.)

"Getting drunk being acceptable depends on the situation...where you are who you are with...you know you are safe with people you know...it wouldn't be ok with total strangers." female

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

However, many young people also said that while they wanted to get drunk, they did not necessarily want to be out of control.

"[You keep going] until you know it's time to stop." male

"You don't want to be that girl with her face in the garden." female

Young people also identified a range of strategies for mitigating the risks of intoxication including planning ahead around transport, having something else to do so drinking is not the focus and strategies to control how intoxicated they become.

"Stay with a few responsible mates." male

"Eat food while drinking or before as well." female

"Set up where you're going and how you're getting back before you go." male

"Eat bread to absorb the alcohol." female

"[Drink] cordial." male

"Follow how many you drink." female

"Like wait an hour before you take another drink." female

"Set a time for yourself that you are going to leave." male

Young people who were not drinking also played a role in reducing the harm of other young people's drinking by trying to help limit the amount their friends consumed and keeping an eye on them when they were drinking.

"Take their drink and fill it up with like lemonade or something." female

"Get your friends to sleep and watch them." female

"Stay with your mates – they look after you – stop you from drinking too much." female

"Always with my mates... my mates hold me back if I get angry and I hold them back if they get angry." male

However, the controlled drinking strategies were often undermined by other factors.

"You are having a good time so you keep drinking." female

"You are playing drinking games." male

"Friends egging you on." male

"Someone buys you a drink." male

"Want to fit in." female

“If they’re really drunk and they’re vomiting and stuff then you have to look after them...” female

Self	Other comments
Fights	* Vandilism / Damage
Record	* Theft (Met. Drive)
Loss of phoes etc.	Waste!
ail	* Violence
Friend	Public Urination.
stolen cars etc.	

Some of the strategies employed by young people were of concern as they are more likely to increase the risk of harm.

“Have a sleep.” female

“Put them in the shower.” female

“I’ve got drunk with my dad before... it was good until I didn’t know what I was doing... my dad drunk himself sober once!” male

“Drink milk. Eat bread. Cold shower. None of them work though, the best way to get rid of a hangover – have another drink!” male

However some young people understood that these strategies were dangerous.

“People learning myths associated with the drug, for example eating bread makes you sober up, having a shower because this can affect people by clogging up their throat and the shower may cause them to drown.” female

“If they’re really drunk and they’re vomiting and stuff then you have to look after them – you can’t just put them to bed and leave them there.” female

Young people’s concerns about alcohol consumption

“I worry about people getting overly drunk. I worry for their wellbeing and safety during and after the party.” female

The young people who participated in this consultation were able to identify a broad range of harms associated with both long-term and short-term drinking.

The harms identified included physical health effects, mental and emotional harm, financial consequences, legal consequences and damage to personal relationships.

“Coma, death from passing out, hangover, alcohol poisoning, carelessness, mess, can lead to accidents, memory loss, job loss, addiction, financial problems, damage to brain cells, rape, pregnancy, STDs.” female

“Indecent exposure, trespassing, graffiti on trains and buildings, damage to property, fights, death, putting people in hospital, injury to other people, road rage and drunk driving.” female

“We have drunken people walk past our house regularly late on Friday and Saturday nights – they smash bottles, swear, litter etc.” male

However they were principally concerned with a few specific issues. These concerns were generally shared by both young people who drank alcohol and those who didn’t. Of most concern were immediate issues relating to intoxication.

“Biggest issue for me is fighting.” female

Violence

Violence was the most frequently cited concern from young people. More than one in three young people who undertook the online survey nominated fighting, violence and physical or verbal abuse as one of their biggest worries about people drinking alcohol. This was particularly raised by young men in the focus groups, but young women were also concerned about this issue. There was no significant difference between males and females in regards to violence in the online survey. Violence or abuse from strangers who had been drinking was the principal concern.

“You could be just walking down the street and someone lashes out at you because you’re the closest thing and they’re angry.” male

“I am mostly worried about the violence that occurs due to the consumption of alcohol and how it affects the people around the individual.” female

“Also violence and gate crashing nowadays at parties... they go from a small group of friends to a large group of random people with weapons because someone mentioned the party on Facebook, that’s why I avoid them.” male

“Like a lot of young people want to fight when they have been drinking.” male

“Main thing is fighting.” female

“Biggest issue for me is fighting.” female

“You can get verbally, sexually and physically abusive towards other people.” female

Fights breaking out between friends was also an issue and apart from the risk of someone being hurt, young people were also concerned that this spoiled the event for everyone.

“[A fight] kills the party.” male

“Your friend can turn on you... get in to a fight with you or betray you.” female

“What it can do between you and your mates – can ruin friendships.” male

“Ruining friendships by saying something that you shouldn’t have said.” female

Drink driving and motor vehicle accidents

Drink driving was also frequently mentioned with the major concern about being involved in a motor vehicle accident but was also at times about the possibility of losing their licence.

“People don’t want to lose their licence once they get it.” male

“I was in a car when my mate was like, hell drunk and I was in the car with him.” male

“Drink driving and crashes.” male

Some young people raised the particular challenges around drink driving in country areas due to the long distances, remote locations and lack of alternative transport available.

“There are less options for taxis in the country so you have to drive drunk.” female

“It’s more dangerous in the country too – people driving around in cars.” female

“I’ve always had the confidence that if anything ever happened I could call my parents.” female

Damage to reputation

Young people who did drink were also concerned about doing things while intoxicated that would damage their reputation or harm their relationships with other people. This concern was particularly an issue for young women and was heightened by the prospect of comments or photographs being distributed via social media.

“They could end up completely embarrassing themselves.” female

“Your reputation getting ruined.” female

“Doing stupid stuff that you regret.” male

“Looking like an idiot, I’ve seen people look silly, bad, completely embarrass themselves and I don’t want to do that.” female

“Getting your photo or a video up on Facebook.” female

“Photos being passed around about you.” female

Some also raised being the victim of a violent assault, including a sexual assault, when they were too drunk to protect themselves.

“Being so drunk guys can stop us and start pushing us into a corner.” female

“I was drunk at a party and I don’t remember anything and I kissed 3 boys and they wanted me to do sexual acts for cigarettes.” female

Looking after friends

Looking after friends who were intoxicated was also a cause for concern. At times, young people reported being very scared about a friend but unsure about how to get help, worrying that they, or their friend, would get in trouble.

“We didn’t know what to do, we were really scared and we didn’t know whether to get the parents or what not, so it was really scary... she was acting like she was going to die or something, we were really worried.” female

“My friend gets really drunk and then can’t feel anything and it’s really scary and she just passes out then, like, starts vomiting. It’s annoying too, because it ruins your night, but it’s more scary to think she is dying.” female

“My mate he had to go in an ambulance like two weeks ago... he had a whole bottle of Jim Beam to himself and we thought he was going to die.” male

“One of my friends, her parents were so strict, they didn’t let her do anything, so she would lie and say she was staying at a friends house. She’d then go out and get really plastered to the point she’d start screaming, ‘I can’t feel my face, I can’t feel my face!’ and then we get put in a position of whether we call her parents and dob her in and she won’t be allowed out again or lie for her.” female

Some young people did feel that they would be able to contact their parents if they were in difficulties and this was reassuring to them.

“I’ve always had the confidence that if anything ever happened I could call my parents.” female

“It’s a genetic thing, I don’t want to be like that.” female

Family conflict and violence

The impact of parents drinking was also a serious concern for a few young people. This included witnessing family violence, fights and arguments, family members disappearing for several days, family members having accidents and health problems.

“My father is really abusive and that’s why my family split up.” female

“If your parents are drinking, they have a fight and they walk out and you don’t really know where they have gone.” female

My dad... he pretty much almost died, [after a fight while drinking] but he still drinks.” male

“Brothers have come home smashed and disappear for a couple of days before coming back home.” female

Some young people were concerned that their parent’s pattern of alcohol consumption would be passed on to them.

My father is very abusive, and I see him get angry off alcohol and worse. It’s a genetic thing, I don’t want to be like that.” female

Legal issues

Young people who were considered to be at ‘high risk’ were more likely to mention legal consequences.

“Getting locked up, getting into trouble... assault, street drinking.” female

“Like someone breaks into a house and someone’s there.” male

“Jail [from hitting a police officer]” male

“I find it really depends on the company and the occasion.” male

Influences on alcohol consumption

Young people reported a range of things that influenced their decisions around whether or not they drank alcohol and, if they did, when, what and how much they consumed.

In the online survey 'parents' were seen by young people as the most common influence with 51 per cent of young people nominating their parents as one of the most significant influences on their decisions around drinking alcohol. This was followed by 'friends' (46%) and 'morals' (23%).

Young people aged 16 to 17 years nominated parents (44%) and friends (45%) as close to equally significant influences. The 14 to 15 year-olds were more likely to nominate their parents (58%) than their friends (40%), suggesting a shift of influence as young people age. 'Morals' was more likely to be nominated by non-drinking young people (32%) than those that drank (11%).

The young people who had never tried alcohol or only ever had a few sips were also more likely to nominate parents (57%) as a significant influence than friends (36%). Friends played a stronger role for those young people who were currently drinking with 60 per cent nominating friends as a significant influence and 37 per cent nominating parents.

The least frequently nominated influences were religion (6%), alcohol promotions such as TV commercials and in-store promotions (6%) and media (TV, movies, radio) (4%).

Young people who decided not to drink alcohol had a range of reasons for doing so. These included:

- not wanting to lose the trust of parents
- choosing to be healthy
- not feeling the need to drink

- interference with other preferred activities such as music or sport
- wanting to stay in control
- religious values
- simply personal choice.

“The ones with the least confidence or the least social skills are the ones who go out and get plastered.” female

“I’m the odd one out and I will say that I’m allowed to drink but I just don’t.” female

“I don’t drink myself... as I don’t really see the point... why waste money on throwing up, feeling horrible in the morning and not remembering it when you can just do stupid stuff sober and still remain in control!” male

Young people who drink alcohol reported a similar range of factors which influenced their decisions about when, what and how much they drank. Motives for drinking included boosting confidence, creating a good atmosphere, having fun, the thrill and experience of it, sometimes to relieve stress or forget problems and sometimes for “something to do” or to relieve boredom.

“Confidence.” female

“Makes socialising easier.” male

“Approaching boys, a better atmosphere.” female

“Because it’s cool.” male

“I drink with family friends but I just do it politely with them.” female

Parents

The influence of parents was significant in both a positive and negative way. Often parents had introduced young people to their first drink.

“My dad’s like, you’ve got underarm hair you’re old enough to drink!” male

“Even when I was 12 I was drinking at like Christmas.” male

“The first music concert I went to, I was about 5, and my mum’s friend brought a watermelon full of vodka.” male

“My mum used to drink wine so that is what I used to drink.” female

“Having parents at home who drink responsibly really helps... I am lucky as I have great role models in my mum and stepdad.” male

“My parents are not big drinkers, so I am not really interested in alcohol.” female

“Well family has to be very strong. Nothing can beat the constant reinforcement of families.” male

Continued drinking with parental approval was also common although often young people modified their consumption when drinking with their parents.

“Wouldn’t obviously go and get smashed in front of my parents... I would have liked a drink, it’s just a different type of drinking.” female

“My dad lets me drink but my mum doesn’t.” female

“I drink with family friends but I just do it politely with them.” female

Parental disapproval was not enough to prevent some young people from drinking and for some it was seen as a challenge to ‘break through the boundaries’.

“I don’t drink in front of my parents because they don’t allow it.” female

Parental monitoring did have a significant effect on most young people’s drinking.

“If your parents are picking you up you don’t want them to know you have been drinking because they won’t let you go out again.” female

“If your parents are picking you up or what time you are going home.” female

“[I regret] Having my parents see me [drunk], losing trust in me.” female

Siblings

Older siblings were often involved in young people’s drinking and provided an easy source of alcohol.

“Brother and sister, she is older and always buys so that is cool.” female

Being a role model or having responsibility for younger siblings or other children did have some influence on young people not drinking, particularly for Aboriginal young people.

“If you don’t drink you don’t fit in.”
female

Friends

Drinking for young people was strongly grounded in socialising with drinking alone generally seen as pointless or only done by people with ‘problems’. It did not need to be a special occasion or celebration but any gathering of friends was potentially a drinking occasion. It was less about the event and more about who was there and the availability of alcohol.

This presented some problems for young people who did not want to drink who, while not necessarily excluded from social events, experienced some ‘nagging’ from their peers.

“You have to say no over and over again.” female

“You have to come up with excuses.” female

“If you don’t drink you don’t fit in.” female

“If you choose not to drink alcohol you are ridiculed. No one should be thought of as the odd one out because they choose not to drink.” male

Conversely, going out with friends who were not drinking had a positive influence on some young people who do drink as they “don’t want to be the only one drinking”.

Boyfriend and girlfriend relationships were also significant at times, both in moderating drinking behaviour (mainly for young men) but also in facilitating drinking for young women who found older boyfriends a source of access to alcohol.

“Quiet night in – with the missus and stuff.” male

Young people’s perception of what represented a normal drinking pattern for young people was of particular interest. Young people acknowledged that not all their peers

drank and that levels of consumption varied for those who did drink. However, they frequently commented that drinking to intoxication was expected and a normal thing for most young people. This was often cited by those who did drink as the reason they drank to intoxication.



“If someone offers you something... you’re out there to drink so you are not going to say no.” male

“The drinking culture is to get smashed, not everyone does, but it’s like the norm.” female

Recreation and activities

Having other things to do, such as sport, music, work or study commitments, played a significant role in moderating drinking behaviour for young people. Sporting commitments was nominated as a significant influence by 17 per cent of the young people who responded to the online survey. For some young people, focus on other activities was a reason for not drinking at all and for others was a reason for reducing consumption at certain times. This was for a variety of reasons including not wanting drinking to interfere with performance, not wanting to disappoint coaches and being preoccupied with the stimulation of the other activity and not needing to drink for fun.

“Coach doesn’t like us drinking the day before the game.” male

“Got more important things to do than drink, like sport.” female

“If you can get it, drink it.” male

“I think whether someone has time to drink, like I mean like the people in your group that didn’t drink were people that were really into sport... and people that were really studious they just didn’t go out because of their studies.” female

At times though the ‘culture’ of the recreational activity was pro-drinking and some young people described feeling pressure to participate in drinking as a part of other activities. This was particularly associated with sporting clubs where drinking was seen as a post-game ritual.

“Sporting clubs like football clubs setting the example and not encouraging under-aged drinking – something I have been personally subjected to – there is a real pressure from older people in the club to drink – it is encouraged.” female



Accessibility

Availability directly influenced when and how much young people drank.

“If you can get it, you drink it.” male

“If someone offers you something... you’re not going to say no!” male

“If it’s there, what are you going to do? But if it’s not... you don’t drink it.” male

For those young people who wanted to drink, alcohol was readily available. Older siblings and friends were a major source and parents commonly supplied alcohol on occasions. Other relatives, such as aunts and uncles, were also commonly cited as willing to purchase alcohol for them, particularly for Aboriginal young people.

“Mostly get an older friend or cousin to buy it for you.” female

“I have older friends – everyone has older friends that you can just get to buy it for you.” female

“Their [parents] rule is we’ll buy you a four pack but that’s all you’re allowed and if you drink anymore and if you get drunk then we won’t do it for you.” female

Young people also commented that friends who looked older or had false identification were common strategies used to buy alcohol. Having older boyfriends also facilitated access for young women. It was seen as fairly easy for young people to buy directly from bottle shops.

“Young people get served in bottle shops all the time – they never ask for ID.” female

"...people will drink anything if it's sweet."
female

"I can pass as 18, especially in the Kimberley... I can go to the pub by myself." male

Young people spoke about being able to take alcohol from their parents' supply without their knowledge, particularly if they had a lot of alcohol.

"Most parents have more than one bottle in their house, so [it's] hard to keep track of what goes." female

"I steal it off my dad." male

Some young people spoke about asking strangers outside bottle shops to purchase alcohol for them. This involved some high-risk strategies including young women 'flirting' with strangers and some young people being 'ripped off' with people taking their money and not providing the alcohol in return.

"Ask random people [outside the bottle shop] and give them money." male

"I reckon if you ask a guy he would be more willing to do it." female

"I gave someone money and they just kept it and they knew there was nothing I could do about it." male

While some young people stated that access to cheap alcohol was a factor in how much they drank, cost was not seen as a big barrier to drinking. This was partly because so much was freely available but also because many had a reasonably high disposable income and alcohol was relatively cheap.

"Drink whatever you can get, whatever is available, whatever is cheap. You can get cheap spirits, beer, pretty much anything cheap... it's not going to be the highest grade, but..." male

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

Similarly, promotional offers at point-of-sale were seen as having little influence on whether or not they decided to drink but did influence what and how much they drank.

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

Many also said that they liked to mix their alcohol with energy drinks for more of an effect or soft drinks to improve the taste.

"Lolly water – people will drink anything if it's sweet." female

"If you have it [wine] half and half [with lemonade], it will just taste like lemonade so that really helps with the alcohol taste." male

"She doesn't like the taste of it – eew Corona!" female

"And you get raspberry and orange flavours – I know it's a girl's drink... but it's awesome." male

**“Did you say guidelines?
There’s a guideline?” female**

Education and information

Young people on the whole had a very high knowledge of the different harms associated with alcohol consumption. However, this appeared to have little impact on their own drinking practices if they did drink. There was considerable confusion about standard drink information and guidelines to reduce harm from alcohol.

Young people who participated in the consultations had varied knowledge about standard drinks⁶. With visual aids, some correctly identified what they thought represented a standard drink however none of the young people could correctly define a standard drink by its unit of measurement (10 grams of alcohol).

“I have no idea about what’s a standard drink.” male

“This [identifying a standard drink size] is such a guess.” female

“I really don’t know.” female

The young people showed varying levels of knowledge about the number of standard drinks considered a risk to health and the Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol⁷.

“Two or three for women per day, no more than 8 per week.” male

“Men are meant to have four standard drinks a week and women only two.” female

6 Department of Health and Ageing, Number of Standard Drinks, [website] accessed 23 August 2011, <[http://www.health.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/Content/E9E12B0E00E94FD5CA25718E0081F1DC/\\$File/std0910.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/Content/E9E12B0E00E94FD5CA25718E0081F1DC/$File/std0910.pdf)>.

7 National Health and Medical Research Council 2009, Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol, Australian Government, p. 57.

“The general rule is 2 beers per day for guys and 1 and a half glasses of wine or women.” male

Some young people believed that the recommended number of drinks was related to blood-alcohol limit and considered standard drinks only in terms of what a safe driving level was, rather than as an indicator of the health risk. Others related it strongly to individual tolerance.

“Two for the first hour and then one every hour after that.” female

“For me 2 standard drinks in the first hour and 1 every hour after that to stay under .05 and for females 1 in the first hour and then every hour after.” male

“Depends on how good you are at handling it.” female

“It depends on how much of an alcoholic you are.” male

“Yeah it depends on what you’re drinking, some are stronger than others.” female

“Some people can drink more or less, doesn’t it depend on your own capacity?” female

“Well people think that they can get smashed on a Saturday they think it is okay because they haven’t drunk for the rest of the week.” female

“You know how there is all that stuff about certain drinks a day, I reckon we should all just save them up and have them on one night.” female

Some young people were surprised there were guidelines about alcohol consumption. In particular they were surprised that the guidelines weren’t stricter.

“Did you say guidelines? There’s a guideline?” female

“We know it, we just don’t like listening to it!” male

“They don’t have recommendations for under 18s because they’re not supposed to drink.” female

They were also surprised that the guidelines stated that if 15 to 17 year-olds chose to drink they should not exceed the levels considered low risk for adults, believing that an even lower level would be more appropriate. Most young people agreed that those under the age of 18 were more vulnerable and should therefore have stricter guidelines for them. The impact of alcohol on brain development was one of the main reasons for this thinking.

“Should be guidelines ‘cos it kills brain cells and not right for young kids to be drinking.” female

“There has to be an age limit you can start drinking... its not like you can start at one!” female

However, for young people who did drink most said that neither stricter guidelines nor a better understanding of them would elicit a change in their drinking behaviour.

“We all think it is illegal now, and we still drink.” female

“Young people ignore them anyway.” female

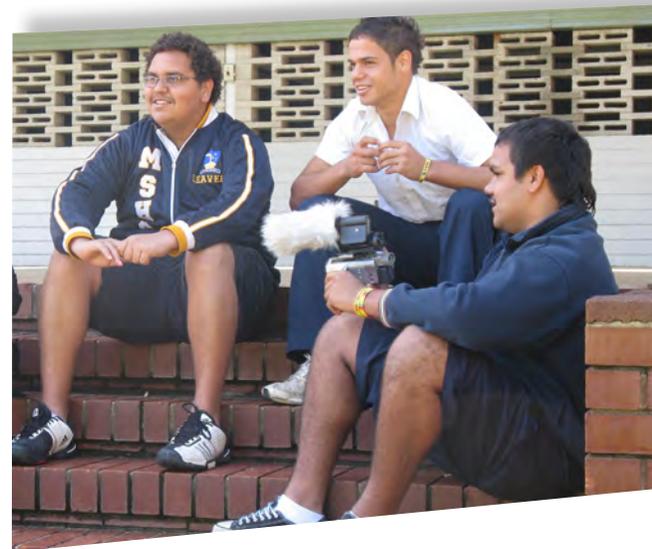
“They should have a recommendation, but even with one [recommendation] people are still going to drink.” female

“The guidelines are reasonable... they’re obviously scientifically proven that... it is reasonable but I don’t like it.” female

“We know it, we just don’t like listening to it!” male

“We are going to drink, so there needs to be a recommendation on the safe limit – but we are not going to stick to it.” female

Understanding more about what influences young people’s decisions about consuming alcohol can provide important insight into the strategies that may be effective to reduce alcohol consumption by young people and the harm they can experience as a result.



“Convince teens that you don’t have to get drunk to be cool.” male

Strategies for reducing alcohol-related harm

“Convince teens that you don’t have to get drunk to be cool.” male

Young people were asked their views on a range of strategies to reduce alcohol-related harm and for their own ideas on other strategies that they thought might be effective. Reflecting the diversity of young people, a range of views were received on the different strategies. Young people also had their own ideas on what would be effective.

Overall young people strongly supported increased alcohol-free activities, stronger enforcement of laws prohibiting the sale of alcohol to intoxicated people and to people under the age of 18 and improved education at school. Approximately 70 per cent of young people who participated in the online survey rated these strategies as highly or extremely effective.

Restricting the number of licensed venues, reducing opening hours and raising the drinking age were the strategies least likely to be seen as effective, although a significant number appeared undecided about the potential effectiveness of these strategies.

Providing more alcohol-free activities

Overall there was strong support for this among young people – 53 per cent of the online survey respondents believed this to be an extremely effective option. Young people believed that less drinking meant less fighting and less people getting hurt from ‘silly’ behaviour.

“I think they should provide more alcohol-free events in the community.” female

“Provide alternative entertainment options that don’t involve alcohol.” male

“Having more alcohol-free events will minimise harm because you’re not going to get as drunk, you’re not going to do stupid things, not as much violence.” female

“They’re good [underage clubs] because you can go there and not worry about anyone getting too psychotic.” male

However, they did believe that it needed to be strongly enforced or young people would just get around it, and that it might not be appealing to all young people.

“But then no-one would go!” male

“People will just drink somewhere else and not go to the place or they will sneak it in.” male

“If the artists themselves at the festivals were like, ‘yeah, it’s an alcohol free event and it’s a good day...’ then yeah that would convince people not to drink.” female

“Maybe like plan something, when I have people come to my house I say, ‘let’s play cards or listen to music’ but just to have something to do rather than drink.” female

Education and information strategies

Generally there was a high level of support from young people for strategies that increased people’s knowledge about the harms associated with drinking alcohol. Strategies included school education and health campaigns but also included education for parents and older siblings. Young people had a range of ideas about how education needed to be delivered in order for it to be effective, recognising

“Definitely effective, so long as they don’t lecture us.” female

that simply giving people information was not enough. It needed to be done in a way that resonated strongly with people.

For young people who were already drinking, education on the harms was seen by some as having a limited value – as they had not experienced any of the harms, the information did not match their reality.

“If they get wasted every weekend and nothing happens to them they’re not going to care.” female

“I’ve had no bad experiences when I’m drunk.” female

School education

Overall young people thought this was important and would be more likely to have an impact if it was started at a young age, focused on relevant issues and delivered by people they respected.

“I think the best possible way to reduce the amount of young people drinking would be to educate them about alcohol. You will never be able to stop people obtaining alcohol and drinking, the best option is to educate people.” female

“Make people more aware at a much younger age – at primary school level – of the health dangers of excessive alcohol. Targeting high school-age kids may already be too late.” male

“If they do it at a younger age – when you’re not so, ‘I know everything about it’, should start in year 8 or year 9 before they get into that drinking culture.” male

“I think educating young people in a casual and supportive approach early on might help them make the right decisions concerning alcohol and then hopefully they will spread the message to other young people. My idea would be that if younger spokesman (such as their peers) were to educate and spread the message of the harm caused by drinking to young people then they may be able to relate more, rather than feel like they’re being lectured by adults or others that don’t understand them.” male

“Depends if they get the message through or not.” male

“Definitely effective, so long as they don’t lecture us. If it’s like, ‘don’t drink, don’t drink, don’t drink’, then we will – we need tips.” female

“They [school] say do an assignment about the effect of alcohol... kids just copy and paste and say it’s their own work.” male

Some young people who drank did not think that more education would make them change their drinking practices.

“I learnt all about alcohol at school, the dangers and things like that, and it hasn’t really changed my views.” female

Young people also wanted practical information on what to do to help keep a friend who was drunk safe.

“To help us with strategies so like when your friends are drunk how to sober up and like what to do before you drink.” female

“More relevant advertising – to my age group.” male

“We want strategies to solve things, hints on what we can do like if this happens, lay the person down or if this happens here is how you deal with it.” female

“I think that the government should stop trying to reduce it and start teaching people how to deal with it when you have those situations.” female

Education for parents

Consistent with the view that parents had a significant influence on young people's drinking choices, young people also considered it important for parents to have more support and information.

“Some kids drink ‘cos they see their parents drink...give parents counselling and hand out leaflets on how to not get your kids to drink. Educate them.” female

“Parental education. Half of my friends are allowed to drink because their parents let them. They are allowing the problem to occur. Education and perhaps penalties to parents.” female

Warning labels on alcohol products

There was some positive support for this initiative but other young people thought that the strategy would be ineffective as people did not believe bad things would happen to them and that after a while they would take no notice.

“If they put really graphic pictures then that would freak people out and they would drink less.” female

“Won't make a difference, they want what's in the packet not what's on the packet.” female

“No-one reads it, they are too busy drinking it to read it!” male

Education campaigns on TV

Young people were somewhat supportive of this strategy particularly if they were aimed at young people and the scenarios resonated with young people. Some young people thought that most people, older and younger, were already aware of the harms of alcohol but chose to drink anyway.

“More relevant advertising – to my age group.” male

“Campaigns don't have a role in how much you drink... I've never seen a government campaign on alcohol.” female

“Increase ads on TV about responsible drinking and how drinking affects school and health.” male

“The drink driving ads... but it's the same message again and they lose meaning after a while.” female

“It’s already illegal... isn’t it already illegal?” male

Raising the drinking age to 21

Overall there was a negative response to this strategy. Young people generally thought that it wouldn’t have any effect on underage drinkers now and would in fact prolong and possibly increase the numbers of underage drinkers. This was thought to be particularly true for those young people who were seen to drink as an act of rebellion.

In addition, many young people thought that it might encourage those currently willing to wait until they are 18 to drink at an earlier age because they thought waiting until 21 was unreasonable.

“Up-ing the age to 21, that would just be the worst thing ever – it’s not going to stop anything, it would probably make it worse – people just drink to go against them.” male

“If you make the drinking age higher it will just make kids drink earlier because they have to wait so long to drink legally.” female

Young people also considered it unfair that they could be considered an adult for some purposes but not for others.

“Raising the age you can drink is silly, especially if they make it 21 as you can already drive, vote and go to war and get killed so what is the point of having it at 21?” male

Some young people did think it might raise the age of initiation into drinking – even if young people were still drinking underage they might start later if the legal age was higher.

“I think that to lower the amount of young people drinking the government should raise the legal age to drink alcohol to around 21. Although many people will be upset by this I think that people of this age are more responsible and can handle themselves better.” female

“I believe that the drinking age should be raised to 21, and although many young people would disagree, as a 16 year old I have made the choice never to drink even when I reach the age of 18.” female

It was also thought that a comprehensive public health education campaign would be required to explain how this strategy would be introduced if it was employed.

Raising the age at which takeaway alcohol can be purchased to 20

There was moderate support for this strategy although some young people believed it would be ineffective as it was generally very easy to get other people to purchase for them. Overall, they thought this would be confusing and they couldn’t see the point of such a law.

“How are they going to police that?” male

Secondary supply legislation⁸

Most young people were surprised that supplying alcohol to minors wasn't already illegal, being under the general impression that it was illegal for young people to drink in any circumstances.

“It’s already illegal... isn’t it already illegal? It sort of makes sense.” male

“Crack down on the parents and those that supply the alcohol.” male

“I thought that was already illegal? I don’t like the idea of it being illegal, but I think it should be – parents are responsible for you.” male

Others thought that it was important for parents to teach their children how to drink responsibly.

And it’s much better if your parents know you drink and they teach you how to drink responsibly.” female

“Fifteen and sixteen year-olds should be able to drink under their parent’s supervision, only one or two a week but they should be allowed.” female

Most young people believed that it should be illegal to give young people alcohol and supported the idea of the legislation. However, they did not believe that it would make much difference and would be hard to enforce such a law.

“How are they going to police that?” male

“Very hard to stop or police. We will always want to experiment.” male

⁸ To make it illegal to supply a person under the age of 18 with alcohol on private property without the young person’s parent or guardian’s consent.

There was also some concern that it would change where young people drank, possibly moving them into more dangerous situations such as parks and other remote public places away from adult supervision.

“There is more chance of them getting hurt because they try to do it secretly where no one is around.” female

Restrictions on alcohol advertising and sponsorship of sports and other events

Young people expressed a variety of views about this strategy. Some were very supportive while others believed that advertising and sponsorship had little impact and banning such things would be detrimental to sports teams and others who relied on the money. Interestingly, young people were surprised to learn that smoking had once been advertised widely as the restrictions on tobacco advertising had been introduced before they were born.

“VB sponsors cricket and they’re a major sponsor so they will lose lots of money if they stop.” female

“They show like in the ad the joy of drinking beer while watching the football – so beer I think is related to football. You think ‘Oh I’m gonna go and sit down and watch the footy’.” female

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

“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

“If you don’t want to drink no advertisement can make you drink.” male

“I don’t think it will work for our generation because we have already seen it but for the next generation it will.” female

Restricting alcohol availability through reduced opening hours and reduced number of licensed venues

There was mixed support for these strategies. Some young people thought this might have a positive effect on some people. Many Aboriginal young women (and some others) commented that it might stop adults from drinking so early in the day. A common view against this strategy was that people would just stock up at other times or transfer their drinking to private venues with takeaway alcohol rather than drinking at licensed venues.

“Firstly I don’t think it would be at all effective because I know people as young as 13 that have access to alcohol and drink on a regular basis. Also I don’t think it would influence many people by restricting the opening hours because it will just influence the people to get more alcohol at the one time.” female

“Stopping alcohol being sold during certain times is a good thing so you can’t buy heaps all day long.” female

“Restricting alcohol availability such as reducing opening hours, the number of licensed premises [is an effective strategy].” male

“[make a law that means people] Can’t buy more than one item in a bottle-shop.” female

“Restricting the places of alcohol purchase and by increasing the age of alcohol buying will do nothing. This will only [create a] culture of resentment among the people against any government which tries to control them.” male

Young people thought that reducing opening hours and the number of outlets would have little impact on underage drinking as they were rarely at licensed venues anyway.

“Young people wouldn’t want to stay in the pub and drink with old people and stuff” male

Increasing the cost of alcohol through higher taxes

Although some young people did support this strategy this was not seen as an effective strategy for reducing underage drinking and was seen to punish the whole community for the misdemeanours of a few. Young people reported that a lot of the alcohol they got was free and they generally believed that they would always be able to buy cheap alcohol.

“I think cost might affect it, because if you don’t have much money you are not going to buy it.” female

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

“They are doing it [increasing prices] to smokes and people are still buying it.” male

“Young people need more resources of people that can help them...” female

Some young people were concerned that it would have negative consequences with more stealing and less food for kids in households where alcohol was used to excess.

“It will put stress on families that are alcoholics, it will be less food for the kids!” male

“Having the price up just makes mum lose more money.” male

“If you do raise the price of it, they will buy other drugs.” male

Strategies raised by young people

Young people raised a number of their own ideas for what they thought would be effective in reducing alcohol-related harm. These included increased punishments and penalties, more education and opportunities to see the effect of drinking on your health, greater clarity around what is illegal and what isn't and focusing on changing the culture of excessive drinking generally across the community. Other ideas included:

- *“Not letting people get over a certain [blood-alcohol] limit at all.”* male
- *Have a drinking licence – like a car licence with points. “Seriously, best thing I’ve ever heard come out of my dad’s mouth – a drinking licence.”* male
- *Increasing fines to retailers and others who sell or supply alcohol to underage people. “Put the rules on the older people so they don’t get it for the younger people.”* male
- *“Can’t they just make it completely illegal for anyone under the age of 18 to drink?”* male
- *“Take their car keys. Like when they go into a club or something, leave*

their keys... if you are too intoxicated you don’t get your keys back.” male

- *“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.”* female
- *“More clinics for check-ups like blood tests for kidneys, blood pressure and more clinics for alcohol awareness for the community.”* male
- *“More community policing with police handling drunken young people differently because too many like myself don’t realise what too much alcohol will do to you until it happens – I learnt because the police bought me home safely but I had to go back the next day and wash the police cars while the police talked some sense into me – not lectured but as a mate kinda.”* female
- *“Showing what they could buy instead of alcohol – messages on the inside of the cap.”* male

Some young people also talked about the need to be able to access sources of support and information when they were experiencing problems and in emergency situations.

- *“Young people need more resources of people that can help them and keep it confidential because parents are a bit hard, I think we just need more help and support with dealing with problems from alcohol and stuff like that, that are reliable and you know, because if something is wrong with our friends like we don’t want to just call an ambulance and have all of that hoo ha...you know it is not that bad but it is bad enough you need someone to help.”* female

Conclusion

The young people who participated in this consultation have provided a rich source of practical advice as well as important insights into their views of alcohol consumption in Western Australia and the strategies needed to reduce alcohol-related harm across the community. Clearly a range of factors influence alcohol consumption, both in young people and in the adult community and consequently a multi-faceted response is required.

The culture of alcohol consumption

Young people almost unanimously identified excessive drinking as an established part of Australian culture and many said that a key to reducing alcohol-related harm is to address this culture and educate people more around the associated harms.

In particular though, there are serious concerns across the community about young people's alcohol consumption. Importantly, not all young people engage in underage drinking and the majority do not drink in a harmful way. These non-drinking young people said they would like their decisions to be acknowledged by the broader community and respected by their peers.

Young people who do drink alcohol identified a range of influences that affect their decisions about drinking. Clearly parents play a central role. Young people identified the need to increase education and support for parents to set appropriate limits and develop effective relationships with their adolescent children as a central strategy to reducing the amount of underage drinking that occurs.

Availability and accessibility was also a significant influence on young people who are consuming alcohol. Efforts to increase the availability of alcohol-free activities and reduce

accessibility to alcohol could play an important role in reducing underage drinking and alcohol-related harm across the community.

Some of the issues raised in this consultation by young people, such as the importance of quality preventative education, are relatively well understood and simply require resourcing for the implementation of existing evidence-based strategies. However, ongoing monitoring, evaluation and development of strategies to ensure continued relevance and effectiveness is essential to achieve the best results for young people.

Other issues require further investigation to improve our understanding and evaluate relevant intervention strategies. One such issue is the need to address what is considered 'normal' in terms of drinking behaviour in young people and the role of intoxication as a desired state. Further exploration is needed to establish whether myths about what is considered normal behaviour are contributing factors in risky drinking behaviour for some young people.

Strategies to reduce alcohol-related harm

Young people are clearly concerned about the harms arising from alcohol use, particularly violence, family conflict and motor vehicle accidents, and believe there should be more efforts made to reduce these harms. Similar to the adult community, young people had varied responses to the different strategies proposed.

While not necessarily liking the nature of some strategies, young people recognised their potential value in reducing harm and the need for parents and other adults to take necessary measures to protect them from the harmful consequences of alcohol.

To achieve positive cultural change, further discussion and education on the potential effectiveness of these strategies is needed across the community to increase the level of community support from both young people and adults.

The implementation of positive strategies, such as increasing access to alcohol-free activities as well as legislative options, is also critical. The views of young people in this consultation clearly indicate the role alcohol has for many young people in socialising, having fun and relaxing. In many ways this is clearly a reflection of the adult community. We need to invest more in making alcohol-free recreational and social activities available to young people and in modelling such behaviour across the adult community as well.

Importantly, the implementation of any strategies needs to be careful to not unintentionally increase the risk of harm to young people. Young people in this consultation identified a number of areas where this may occur. Incorporating the views of young people should be an integral part of the ongoing development and implementation of strategies to reduce alcohol-related harm.

Clearly some young people struggled with problems that either resulted in them drinking alcohol to reduce or escape, albeit temporarily, these problems. At times some young people also discussed anxieties around managing friends who were intoxicated and being very concerned for their safety but unsure of how to manage the situation. Strategies need to be cognizant of the realities confronted by young people and appropriate, accessible avenues of support need to be provided.

Particularly we need to carefully consider the needs of vulnerable populations of children and young people where the risk of alcohol-related harm is increased and ensure that strategies address their needs.

The Commissioner will be using the views obtained through this consultation, in combination with other research findings, to progress the development of strategies that effectively contribute to reducing the impact of alcohol-related harm on children and young people and the broader community.



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

Children and young people depicted in this publication did not take part in the alcohol-related harm consultation. They are Western Australian young people who have provided permission to the Commissioner to use the images. Some of the artwork in the publication was produced by young people who participated in the consultation.

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