

# Alcohol: Drinking patterns and harms in Australia and WA

**Alcohol-related harm is a whole-of-community problem; it is not an issue limited to a small number of 'problem drinkers'.**

The direct cost of alcohol-related problems to society in 2010 was conservatively estimated at \$14.35 billion (not including the cost of harms to others).<sup>1</sup> The costs of alcohol misuse are substantially greater when harms caused by others' drinking are accounted for, and have been estimated to be as high as \$36 billion.<sup>2,3</sup> Government revenue from alcohol taxation is estimated to be \$6.36 billion in the 2017-18 financial year.<sup>4</sup>

## Drinking patterns in Australia are on a slight downward trend, but are still high by world standards

Drinking patterns fluctuate over time. In Australia, for the past 25 years drinking levels have remained at around 10 litres of pure alcohol per person (aged 15+) per year. In 2015-16, Australians' per capita consumption (PCC) of alcohol was estimated at 9.7 litres.<sup>5</sup>

Despite a slight decline in overall alcohol use, drinking patterns in Australia are still a cause for concern:

- › Alcohol causes 15 deaths and 430 hospitalisations each day across Australia.<sup>6</sup>
- › The top 20% of drinkers account for 74.2% of all alcohol consumed each year.<sup>7</sup>
- › Over 1 in 6 (17.1%) Australians aged 14+ drank alcohol at a level that put them at risk of an alcohol-related disease or injury over their lifetime in 2016.<sup>8</sup>
- › Over 1 in 3 (37.3%) Australians aged 14+ drank alcohol at a level that put them at risk of injury from a single drinking occasion at least once in the previous 12 months; 1 in 4 (25.5%) had done so as often as monthly in 2016.<sup>8</sup>
- › Australia's alcohol use remains high by world standards; the OECD PCC average is 9.1 litres.<sup>9</sup>

## West Australians' alcohol use is high by national and world standards

Alcohol sales data from 2011/12 (the latest available) show the PCC of alcohol in WA was higher than the national average. In 2011/12, PCC of alcohol in WA (for people aged 15+) was 11.94 litres, compared to 10.04 litres for Australia.<sup>10</sup>

Compared to the national average, WA has a lower proportion of people who don't drink (18% in WA compared to 22% in Australia).<sup>11</sup>

People in WA were more likely to drink alcohol in quantities that placed them at risk of harm on a single occasion (at least monthly) than the national average in 2013 (31% in WA compared to 26% in Australia).<sup>11</sup>

West Australians were more likely to drink at risk of long term harm from alcohol than the Australian average in 2013 (22% in WA compared to 18% nationally).<sup>11</sup>

## Australians experience a range of harms from their own drinking

Alcohol use was responsible for 5.1% of the burden of disease in Australia in 2011, making it the third most burdensome risk factor for Australians' health.<sup>14</sup>

Alcohol use was the risk factor responsible for the most injuries in 2011, contributing to 21% of the overall injuries burden in Australia.<sup>14</sup>

Alcohol use contributed to 12% of the mental and substance use disorders burden in Australia in 2011.<sup>14</sup>

Alcohol plays a role in more than 200 different chronic health problems, including cardiovascular disease, cancers, diabetes, nutrition-related conditions, cirrhosis, and overweight and obesity.<sup>15</sup>

It is estimated that 3,208 cancers in Australian adults in 2010 could be attributed to long-term chronic use of alcohol.<sup>16</sup>

In 2013 in WA, 152 people died from alcohol-related cancer, 55 from alcohol-related liver disease, 32 due to other alcohol-related digestive conditions, and 17 due to alcohol-related stroke.<sup>17</sup>

Of all deaths from suicide globally, 22% can be attributed to the use of alcohol. This means that every fifth suicide would not occur if alcohol were not consumed in the population.<sup>18</sup>

44 people who drowned in Australia in 2015 (15% of all drownings) recorded positive readings for alcohol in their bloodstream.<sup>19</sup>

26% of all boating and watercraft drowning deaths in Australia from 2005/06 to 2014/15 involved alcohol. Of these, 59% were over the blood alcohol concentration (BAC) legal driving limit.<sup>20</sup>

Recent drinkers aged 14+ are more likely to experience verbal abuse, physical abuse and to have been put in fear by someone under the influence of alcohol compared to those who do not consume alcohol.<sup>11</sup>



## Alcohol affects people other than the drinker, including children

Over 2 in 5 (44%) Australians reported that they had been negatively affected by others' drinking in 2011.<sup>21</sup>

4.4 million Australians aged 14+ (22%) had been a victim of an alcohol-related incident in 2016, including physical abuse, verbal abuse or being put in fear.<sup>9</sup>

An estimated 367 Australians died and almost 14,000 were hospitalised because of the drinking of others in 2008.<sup>3</sup>

In a given year, 277 deaths of Australians aged 15+ are estimated to be due to another's drinking and driving (this represents three quarters of all deaths due to drinking of others).<sup>3</sup>

Over a million children (22% of Australian children) are estimated to be affected in some way by the drinking of others, and over 10,000 Australian children are in the child protection system because of a carer's drinking.<sup>22</sup>

Alcohol use during pregnancy is a leading cause of preventable birth defects, including Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD).<sup>23</sup>

Very few estimates of FASD rates are available in Australia. Australia's first ever prevalence study of FASD was conducted in Fitzroy Crossing in WA; 1 in 8 children born in the region has Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (the most severe form of FASD), a rate of 120 per 1000<sup>24</sup> and almost 1 in 5 (19%) has FASD, one of the highest prevalence rates in the world.<sup>25</sup>

## Alcohol places additional burdens on already stretched health resources

**In 2016, an average of 14 ambulances per day were called to attend to West Australians for the primary reason of alcohol intoxication (5,063 ambulance call-outs).**

- › In 2016, an average of 14 ambulances a day were called to attend to West Australians for the primary reason of alcohol intoxication (5,063 ambulance call-outs). Of these, 465 were called to treat children and young people aged 18 years and younger (an average of 9 ambulances a week). This does not include other alcohol-related harms such as falls, assaults and road crashes.<sup>33</sup>
- › Alcohol was involved in 17.5% of injury fatalities, 11.8% of non-fatal injury hospitalisations, and 32% of emergency department presentations due to injuries in WA in 2012. The overall cost of injuries involving alcohol was \$1.9 billion in WA in 2012.<sup>34</sup>
- › 1 in 5 (19.8%) of all trauma admissions to the Royal Perth Hospital in 2015 had documented alcohol and/or drug use in the 12 hours preceding their trauma event.<sup>35</sup>
- › At peak times, 1 in 8 presentations to emergency departments in Australia and New Zealand (NZ) is alcohol-related.<sup>36</sup> Half a million alcohol-related patients attend emergency departments across Australia and NZ every year.<sup>36</sup>
- › A 2am snapshot survey showed that over 1 in 5 presentations to WA emergency departments was due to alcohol. This was second only to the Northern Territory.<sup>37</sup>
- › Between 2005 and 2012, the rate of alcohol-related emergency department presentations for Australian women on weekends increased by more than 40%. For those aged 15 to 19 years, the increase was more than 60%.<sup>38, 39</sup>
- › 33 people are hospitalised each week in WA due to alcohol-related assaults.<sup>40</sup>
- › As many as 60% of the patients in the burns unit at Royal Perth Hospital are there because of alcohol.<sup>41</sup>
- › A survey of over 2,000 emergency department staff in Australia and NZ showed that over the previous 12 months, 98% had suffered verbal aggression from drunk patients, 92% had experienced physical threats from drunk patients, 88% said the care of other patients was negatively affected, and 87% said they felt unsafe due to the presence of a drunk patient while working in the emergency department.<sup>42</sup>

**In 2014, there were more than 19,400 hospitalisations in WA attributable to alcohol, representing 113,549 bed-days at a cost of over \$155 million.<sup>17</sup>**

## High rates of risky drinking are reported among Indigenous Australians

- › In 2014-15, more than one-third (38%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15+ did not drink or had less than 1 standard drink in the previous 12 months.<sup>12</sup>
- › Of those who drank in 2013, a higher proportion of Indigenous Australians drank at risky levels compared to non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>11</sup>
- › In 2014-15, more than 1 in 6 (15%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15+ drank alcohol at a level that put them at risk of alcohol-related disease or injury over their lifetime; almost 1 in 3 (30%) drank at a level that put them at risk of injury from a single drinking occasion at least once in the previous 12 months.<sup>12</sup> In light of hospital mortality data, these rates are likely to be an underestimate of actual alcohol consumption, particularly in terms of high risk consumption.<sup>13</sup>

## Alcohol continues to contribute to the road toll

In 2016  
**32%**

of all fatalities on WA roads were believed to involve alcohol.

- › Alcohol is suspected to be involved in an increasing proportion of fatal crashes on WA roads. In 2011, 18% of all fatalities were believed to involve alcohol; by 2016, 32% of all fatalities involved alcohol.<sup>26, 27</sup>
- › 62 people who died on WA roads in 2016 were in alcohol-related crashes (an average of 5 deaths per month); 76 people suffered critical injuries in alcohol-related crashes.<sup>27</sup>
- › In 2013-14, 11,679 WA drivers were tested by police and found to exceed the lawful alcohol limit.<sup>28</sup>
- › More than half (52%) of West Australian drinkers surveyed by the Road Safety Commission aged 17+ admit to ever drinking on or near the blood alcohol limit; 20% of these had done so at least once in the past 3 months. This proportion is higher among 25 to 49 year olds, males and those in remote areas.<sup>29</sup>

## Alcohol-related harms place a major burden on law enforcement resources



was spent responding to alcohol related matters, a cost of \$265 million in 2016.

- › In 2006, 19.8% of the WA Police budget was spent responding to alcohol related matters, a cost of \$126 million at that time. In 2016, 19.8% of the WA Police budget represented \$265 million.<sup>30, 31</sup>
- › Nationally, police use one quarter of their budgets responding to alcohol-related incidents.<sup>32</sup>
- › There were 5,092 alcohol-related domestic violence incidents reported to WA Police in 2011-12.<sup>22</sup> This represents almost half (47%) of all domestic assaults reported to WA Police in 2011-12, and is a 5% increase on the previous year. Police responses often reflect only the more serious incidents.



Curtin University

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McCusker Centre for Action  
on Alcohol and Youth

**Contact us:** Web [www.mcaay.org.au](http://www.mcaay.org.au) Web [www.alcoholadreview.com.au](http://www.alcoholadreview.com.au)  
Email [mcaay@curtin.edu.au](mailto:mcaay@curtin.edu.au) Phone (08) 9266 9079 September 2017

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