

Alcohol and Young People: What works to prevent harm?

Harm from alcohol is preventable.
Good evidence is available about what works to prevent harm.

Many of the approaches that will reduce alcohol harms among young people will also be effective in reducing harm among the whole population. There is no single magic bullet to address harm from alcohol. A comprehensive approach is needed to have the greatest impact on alcohol-related harm.^{1,2}

only
15%

of WA adults think that governments are doing enough to prevent alcohol-related harm.³

What Works?

Making alcohol more expensive

When alcohol is more expensive, people drink less.^{1,4} Young people are particularly responsive to price.¹ Even small increases in the price of alcohol can have a significant impact on consumption and harm at the population level.⁵ There is a consensus among health experts that increasing the price of alcohol through taxation is one of the most effective ways of reducing harm from alcohol.⁶⁻⁸ Australia's alcohol tax system is flawed; products are not consistently taxed according to their alcohol content, nor their propensity to cause harm.⁷

A comprehensive approach to addressing the price of alcohol would include:

- › Volumetric taxation, with tax increasing for products with higher alcohol volumes⁹;
- › A minimum price per standard drink, which would prevent the sale of very cheap alcohol¹⁰; and
- › Removal of the Wine Equalisation Tax (WET), which supports the production of very cheap wine. The Henry Tax Review noted that "The wine equalisation tax, as a value-based revenue-raising tax, is not well suited to reduce social harm".¹¹

only
25%

of Australians oppose taxing alcohol products in proportion to the volume of alcohol they contain.¹²

Making alcohol less available

The availability of alcohol refers to “the ease or convenience of obtaining alcohol”.⁶ Alcohol outlet density, days and opening hours are strongly related to alcohol consumption and harms, including assaults.^{13,14} Liquor licensing provides the opportunity to control these to reduce harm from alcohol.¹⁵ Local initiatives to respond to harmful drinking can be supported through community-driven restrictions and conditions on licences.¹

Approaches to reducing young people’s access to alcohol include secondary supply laws, which require parental permission for the supply of alcohol in private settings,¹⁶ and controlled purchase operations to support police to monitor and enforce existing laws which regulate sale to minors.¹⁷

88%

of WA adults support secondary supply laws to prevent the supply of alcohol to minors without parental consent (only 5% oppose).¹⁸

76%

of WA adults support controlled purchase operations to ensure liquor outlets do not sell to minors (only 9% oppose).³

64%

Almost two-thirds of Australians support restricting late night trading of alcohol.¹⁹

Curbs on all forms of alcohol advertising, promotion and sponsorship

Exposure to alcohol advertising influences young people’s beliefs, attitudes and decisions about drinking.²⁰ Self-regulation has consistently failed to protect young people from exposure to alcohol promotion.^{21,22} All forms of alcohol advertising, promotion, marketing, and sponsorship should be independently regulated²³ and phased out from times and placements with high exposure to young people.¹ Legislated controls, with strong codes and enforceable deterrents, would more effectively respond to concerns about alcohol promotions.²²

71%

of WA adults support legal controls on alcohol advertising to reduce young peoples’ exposure (only 6% oppose).³

only
18%

of WA adults oppose phasing out alcohol sponsorship of sporting events if governments provided replacement funding.¹⁸

Education approaches

Comprehensive, sustained, well-funded social marketing campaigns can build awareness of the risks of harmful alcohol use and drink-driving, and de-normalise intoxication.^{1, 24, 25} The introduction of health information and warning labels on alcohol products can contribute to raising awareness of alcohol-related harms, within a comprehensive approach.²⁶ Well-supported alcohol and other drug education should be mandatory within the school curriculum to ensure all school students receive quality alcohol and other drug education.²⁷

94%

of WA adults support regular, well-resourced alcohol and drug education for all school students (only 2% oppose).¹⁸

74%

of Western Australians support public education showing the effects of excessive alcohol consumption (14% oppose).²⁸

66%

of Australians support the introduction of national drinking guidelines on alcohol containers.¹⁹

Legislation to reduce drink-driving

There is strong evidence to support reducing the Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) drink-driving limit to reduce social costs from alcohol.^{29, 30} Alcohol interlocks, as part of a comprehensive approach to reducing drink-driving, separate the acts of drinking and driving and are better at preventing drink-driving recidivism than license suspension alone.³¹ Strong enforcement of drink-driving legislation is essential, including through random breath testing.^{24, 30}

Monitoring, enforcement and strengthening of liquor laws

Compliance with liquor laws, including Responsible Service of Alcohol guidelines, must be effectively monitored and enforced.³² WA liquor laws can be strengthened by introducing secondary supply laws and controlled purchase operations (see 'Making alcohol less available'). In 2013, young-looking 18 and 19-year old WA Police cadets tested compliance with the Australian Liquor Stores Association Social Responsibility Code 'ID under-25', which requires liquor retailers to request identification from anyone who looks under 25 years: 7 out of 10 bottleshops sold alcohol to the cadets without checking their age.³³

Tailored interventions for high-risk groups or communities

Whole of community approaches, including liquor restrictions, can contribute to the comprehensive approach needed to effectively and sustainably reduce alcohol-related harm. All interventions should be comprehensively evaluated.^{34, 35}

What doesn't work?

Weak strategies are often proposed as 'solutions' by those who don't want real action on youth drinking.

Weak education programs

Alcohol industry-supported programs are generally ineffective and may even be counter-productive.^{36, 37}

Any system of self-regulation in the hands of the alcohol industry or advertisers

There is a lack of logic in leaving any form of regulation to the industry that causes the problems, that seeks to sell as much of the product as possible, and whose shareholders would not look kindly on anything that might reduce sales. There is no substantive evidence that self-regulatory or voluntary approaches are effective.²³

Focusing solely on individual responsibility

The public health and law enforcement burdens caused by alcohol are far too great to leave to individual responsibility. Governments have important roles in preventing harm from alcohol, including regulating how alcohol is made available and promoted, and public education. The environment in which individuals operate, the prevailing drinking culture and the way alcohol is made available need to support low risk alcohol use.

Moving towards a 'European style' drinking culture

There is a commonly held (but flawed) belief that in some European countries, alcohol is widely available and children are introduced to alcohol at a young age which helps them learn to drink responsibly and avoid the alcohol-related problems seen in Australia. The myth is used to suggest Australian liquor laws and practices should be 'relaxed' and made more 'European'. This myth is not consistent with the available evidence. Increasing the availability of alcohol is likely to increase, rather than decrease, alcohol-related harms in Australia. European countries including France, Italy and Spain experience higher rates of alcohol-related chronic diseases and road crashes than Australia.³⁸ 'Le binge' drinking or 'beuverie express' is recognised as an increasing problem in France, with particular concerns about drinking by young people.³⁹ A phrase used elsewhere in Europe is 'coma drinking'.⁴⁰



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