

# Alcohol and Young People: Drinking patterns and harms

National guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol recommend that:  
**For under 18s, no alcohol is the safest choice.**

Alcohol-related harm is a whole-of-community problem that impacts on young people in a range of important ways.

91%

of West Australian adults are concerned about alcohol use among young people.<sup>1</sup>

The sales and taxation revenue generated from young people's drinking (aged 12 to 25 years) was estimated at \$4.8 billion in Australia in 2010, including \$2.8 billion in industry revenue and \$2 billion in government tax revenue.<sup>2</sup>

## Young Australians are delaying alcohol use

- › The factors that influence young people's uptake of alcohol are complex, including biological and broader social factors.<sup>5</sup> Researchers have suggested a number of factors that may have contributed to the changes in young people's drinking patterns:
  - › Changes in the cultural makeup of the population;<sup>6</sup>
  - › Decreased parental approval of teenage drinking and supply of alcohol. Secondary supply laws have attracted significant media attention and generated public discussion about the risks of providing alcohol to young people;<sup>7</sup>
  - › Government investment in prevention and health promotion initiatives in schools and communities;<sup>7</sup> and
  - › Changes in the way young people focus their leisure time, including the use of social media.<sup>7</sup>

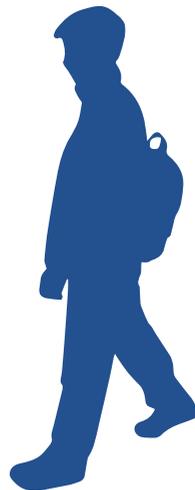
16.1  
years

The average age at which young people aged 14 to 24 years first tried alcohol has steadily risen from 14.4 years in 2008 to 16.1 years in 2016.<sup>4</sup>

Fewer WA school students aged 12 to 17 years were drinking alcohol in 2014 than at any time in the past decade.<sup>3</sup>

## Fewer WA young people are drinking, and they are drinking less than in previous years

- › The proportion of WA school students aged 12 to 17 years choosing not to drink alcohol has more than doubled from 12.3% in 2005 to 31.5% in 2014.<sup>3</sup>
- › WA students who chose to drink in 2014 were doing so less often than in previous years. Between 2005 and 2014, the proportion of students aged 12 to 17 years who reported drinking alcohol in the month prior to the survey had reduced from 43.5% to 23.9%, and in the week before, halved from 29.9% to 13.9%.<sup>3</sup>
- › Of those WA school students aged 12 to 17 years who drank in the previous week in 2014, fewer were drinking at risky levels or with the intent of getting drunk.<sup>3</sup>



## Cause for concern remains about WA young people's drinking patterns

- › Of those WA students aged 12 to 17 years who drank in the past week (13.9%), 1 in 3 (29.8%) drank at a level that put them at risk of injury from a single drinking occasion in 2014.<sup>6</sup>
- › Half of males (48.8%) and a third of females (34.8%) aged 16 to 17 years who drank alcohol in the past week drank at risk of injury from a single drinking occasion.<sup>9</sup>
- › Of WA students aged 16 to 17 who drank alcohol in the past week, boys drank an average of 10 standard drinks; girls drank an average of 6 standard drinks.<sup>9</sup>

## The attitudes of many WA young people towards alcohol are still of concern

Of 16 to 17 year old WA school students who reported drinking in the past week:<sup>9</sup>

**35.8%**

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

**60.6%**

reported *'Occasionally getting very drunk and losing control is good fun'*

Of all 16 to 17 year old WA school students surveyed:<sup>9</sup>

**36.4%**

reported *'Having a drink is one of the best ways of relaxing'*

## Young Australians' drinking patterns are of concern

- ▶ 1 in 7 (14.6%) 16 to 17 year olds, 1 in 3 (36.9%) 18 to 19 year olds and almost half (43.8%) of 20 to 24 year olds drank alcohol in a way that placed them at risk of alcohol-related injury from a single drinking occasion at least once a month in 2016.<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ Almost half of males aged 18 to 24 years (46.3%) and males aged 25 to 29 years (46.0%) drank at levels that placed them at risk of alcohol-related injury at least once a month in 2016.<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ Young people aged 18 to 24 years are more likely than any other age group to exceed single occasion risk guidelines.<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ 3 in 10 young people (28.9%) aged 18 to 24 years drank at very high risk of alcohol-related harm (11+ standard drinks on a single occasion) at least once in the past 12 months; 1 in 6 (15.3%) did so at least monthly.<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ 1 in 3 females (37.1%) aged 18 to 24 years and 27.3% of females aged 25 to 29 years drank at levels that placed them at risk of alcohol-related injury at least once a month in 2016.<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ In a 15-year Australian prospective cohort study, the overwhelming majority of adolescent binge drinkers (90% of males and 70% of females) continued to binge drink in young adulthood.<sup>10</sup>

Almost half (43%) of young, risky drinkers aged 16 to 19 reported pre-drinking on their last "big night out". On average, they consumed 6.5 standard drinks while pre-drinking.<sup>11</sup>

## Many university students drink at risky levels and experience harm from their own and others' drinking



Almost 40% of 18 to 24 year old students from an Australian university who drank in 2013 reported drinking at risky levels. Of these, 85% reported pre-drinking at least once during the last 4 weeks; 56% reported drinking 5+ standard drinks during their last pre-drinking session.<sup>12</sup>

Almost half (44.4%) of 18 to 24 year old students from an Australian university who drank at risky levels reported having to take care of drunk students in 2013; 28.5% had been assaulted or humiliated due to others' drinking; 1 in 5 (22%) reported unwanted sexual advances; and 3% reported being a victim of sexual assault (including date rape).<sup>12</sup>

A 2013 survey found that over 80% of 18 to 24 year old students from a WA university reported having experienced harm as a result of their own alcohol use. Over 70% experienced at least 2 and more than 30% experienced more than 5 harms at least once.<sup>13</sup>

Harms experienced by young university students included: blackouts (71%), vomiting (73%), unprotected sex (35%), emotional outbursts (57%), heated arguments (40%), and being physically aggressive (20%) in 2013.<sup>12</sup>

## Young people experience a range of harms from their own drinking

- › On average, 9 ambulances a week were called to treat West Australians aged 18 years or younger for the primary reason of alcohol intoxication in 2016 (465 ambulance call-outs).<sup>14</sup> This does not include call-outs for other alcohol-related harms such as falls, assaults and road crashes.
- › Ambulance call-outs for alcohol intoxication for WA young people aged 18 years or younger increased by 16% between 2015 and 2016.<sup>14</sup>
- › Between 2012 and 2016, it is estimated that there were 3,100 alcohol-related hospitalisations for 12 to 17 year olds in WA, representing 10,259 bed days.<sup>15</sup>
- › Between 2012 and 2015, it is estimated that there were 25 alcohol-related deaths among 12 to 17 year olds in WA.<sup>15</sup>
- › 41.7% of boating and watercraft drowning deaths of 18 to 24 year old Australians involved alcohol (from 2005/06 to 2014/15); this was the age group most likely to have alcohol recorded of all drowning deaths.<sup>16</sup>
- › Young, less experienced drivers with a BAC level of 0.05% are 2.5 times more likely to crash than older, more experienced, sober drivers.<sup>17</sup>
- › Of fatal crashes attended by WA Police in 2013, the largest group of drivers/riders with an illegal BAC were males in the 25 to 29 age group, followed by males in the 17 to 24 year age group.<sup>18</sup>
- › Young people aged 25 years and under accounted for 30% of all deaths on WA roads where alcohol was suspected to be involved between 2010 and 2016.<sup>19</sup>
- › On average, 10 young drivers aged 25 years and under are involved in fatal crashes on WA roads each year where alcohol is suspected to be involved.<sup>19</sup>
- › The brain continues to develop into the early 20s. Risky drinking can irreparably damage the developing brain leading to problems with memory, planning and organisation, impulse control, and mood regulation.<sup>20</sup>
- › Younger, risky drinkers are most likely to report a loss of memory as a result of alcohol use. Almost two-thirds (63.9%) of risky drinkers aged 12 to 17 years report memory loss at least once a year.<sup>21</sup>
- › 1 in 3 (37.6%) WA school students aged 16 to 17 years who consumed alcohol in the previous week reported being sick or vomiting after drinking in the last 12 months.<sup>9</sup>

- › School leavers' celebrations have been associated with high risk drinking behaviours. Of teenagers at a major WA Leavers celebration in 2009:<sup>22</sup>
  - › Over half consumed more than 10 standard drinks a day;
  - › 87% consumed more than 4 standard drinks a day;
  - › 41% had an accident or injury;
  - › 58% had blackouts;
  - › 21% reported having sex they later regretted; and
  - › 14% had unprotected sex.
- › Many young people think that excessive drinking is a typical and eagerly anticipated aspect of school leaver celebrations.<sup>23</sup> WA school leavers anticipate drinking an average of 8 standard drinks per day during the celebrations<sup>23</sup> and some parents may even help school leavers facilitate the use of alcohol.<sup>23</sup>

## Young people experience a range of harms from others' drinking

- › Alcohol use during pregnancy is a leading cause of preventable birth defects, including Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD).<sup>24</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>25</sup> and almost 1 in 5 (19%) has FASD, one of the highest prevalence rates in the world.<sup>26</sup>
- › Young people aged 18 to 24 years were more likely than other age groups to experience verbal abuse (35%), physical abuse (15.2%) or be put in fear by someone under the influence of alcohol (18.6%) in 2013.<sup>21</sup>
- › 526 WA males aged 15 to 29 years were hospitalised due to alcohol-related assault in 2012-13 – this age group are at the highest risk of alcohol-related assaults. WA males aged 20 to 29 years are hospitalised at a rate that's more than double the state average and triple the national average.<sup>27</sup>
- › Over a million children (22% of all 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>28</sup>

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Curtin University



**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 August 2017